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**The Thesis Committee for Agaate Antson
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Transformations of the Contemporary Mystic Discourse in Iran

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Kamran Scot Aghaie

Blake Atwood

Transformations of the Contemporary Mystic Discourse in Iran

by

Agaate Antson, B.A.

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Abstract

Transformations of the Contemporary Mystic Discourse in Iran

Agaate Antson, M.A.

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Supervisor: Kamran Scot Aghaie

This thesis examines the transformations of Iranian mysticism '*erfan* in contemporary Iran. It observes how '*erfan* manifests in society and how religious intellectuals use it to argue for liberal secular values in Iran. This study challenges the common scholarly discourse of mysticism, which focuses solely on either Islamic theology or Sufism. Instead, this thesis suggests that Iranian mysticism '*erfan* is a dynamic concept that goes beyond the limits of the aforementioned discourses. It argues that the mid-20th century Islamic world experienced a rising trend of legalistic Islamism, of which the Iranian revolution was part. Towards the end of the century, esoteric Islam has become increasingly present in the ideologies of religious intellectuals and in the public discourse in the whole Islamic world. Analyzing the ideas of three Iranian thinkers, namely Soroush, Azmayesh and Taheri, this thesis discusses the way '*erfan* has been transformed in order to suit the needs of contemporary Iranian society.

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Introduction

In early 2014, I met with one of my Iranian acquaintances on a bus and we started talking about Islam in Iran. He told me that although he was a devout Muslim, he followed a different kind of Islam than that promoted by the Islamic Republic of Iran. As an undergraduate student of anthropology, I had no background in Islamic Studies and had only tangentially heard about Sufism or Islamic mysticism. He explained that he and his friends follow *'erfan*, based on the equality of all human beings and love towards God. In his interpretation of the faith, laws and strictures were secondary to the spiritual experience of God. This conversation sparked my interest and led me to conduct fieldwork in Iran as part of my school project at Tallinn University.

In the summer of 2014, I traveled to Tehran, where I found Iranians committed to *'erfan*, expressing their faith in poetry groups. I became friends with several people who, although not affiliated with a Sufi order, considered themselves dervishes, lived ascetic lives and participated in mystic practices. One of the dervishes, told me that “no true dervish goes to *khaneqah* any more [Sufi worship house].”¹ I had an opportunity to participate in several ceremonies, which took place in ordinary homes. The addresses were never provided to me in advance. Someone would take me there and return me home; I was not allowed to call a taxi or communicate my whereabouts to any outsider. Some of the ceremonies involved about ten people who played Sufi instruments, recited both Rumi

¹ Aagate Antson, 2014, Field notes.

poetry and the Qur'an with the rhythmic repetition of God's names (*zeker*) and ecstatic whirling (*sama*). Other ceremonies were bigger, with around 50 participants, involving similar activities. In all of these events women and men were in the same room, with no gender segregation. Everyone wore either white or bright colored clothing. The majority of the participants were, in fact, women, whose ecstatic dance filled the whole room. Overwhelmed by the spectacle of a particularly intense ceremony, I spoke about the experience with a dervish friend. He informed me that many of the participants who 'go crazy' are not true believers and know nothing about '*erfan*. Furthermore, he believed that some attended the ceremonies because they could not express themselves freely elsewhere. "If Iran was a free country," he said, "they would go to nightclubs instead." True contemplation and yearning for God were not the main attractions of these events, he admitted.²

In addition to the non-institutional practitioners of Sufi rituals, I met with people who held regular Rumi's *Mathnawi* interpretation sessions and claimed to follow the principles of '*erfan* in their lives. People who participated in these sessions did not think much of the Sufi practitioners and emphasized that the true connection with God is personal and does not require religious ceremony. Furthermore, they approved of neither Sufism (*tasavvof*) nor the Islam of the clergy, claiming that both focus on rules and rituals. Personally held belief took precedence, they argued. One of them even told me, that

Many Iranians do not approve of the clergy's Islam and there are two kinds of them- there are those who have turned towards the West and modernism and who want to copy everything that comes from the West. And then there are

² Agaate Antson, 2014, Field Notes.

those who want to go deeper into our own culture and become more interested in *'erfan* and poetry.³

Distrustful towards the official interpretations of religion, these groups have taken the task of understanding mystical Islam through Persian literary culture.

In discussion with a former professor of Islamic Theology, he told me that none of my contacts were knowledgeable about 'true' *'erfan*. This represented a consistent trend, as each group or individual repudiated their fellow seekers of truth as illegitimate. He gave me a list of books to read about *'erfan* and said, with some condescension, that not only would I be unable to learn about *'erfan* from "these people," but also that "no true dervish would show himself to me."

Upon returning to Estonia, I was left with more questions about *'erfan* and how the people I met perceived it. If the theology professor was right and what I saw in Iran was not "true" *'erfan*, then what was it? If it is not the "true" form, does it mean it does not exist and cannot be studied? It was clear that these people were pious believers, but how could I examine their versions of Islam? Why do they separate themselves from both Sufi orders and clerical Islam? Were they Sufis without a Sufi order? Could they even be Sufis without a spiritual master or a Sufi order? Could their interpretation of Islam represent a protest against the Islamic regime? Or did it represent a continuation of a rich tradition that stretched back for centuries? Inspired by these experiences, and wishing to understand what I had discovered in Iran, I decided to focus further on contemporary Iranian mysticism.

³ Agaate Antson, 2014, Field Notes.

These experiences initiated my research question for this study, which is: how is *'erfan* manifested in contemporary Iranian society and how do these manifestations fit into the larger esoteric trends in the Islamic world? My research in Iran was not sufficient in answering these questions, mainly due to its short span and the logistical complications of returning to Iran for academic study. Therefore, I have resorted to analyzing the work of intellectuals who advocate for mysticism, in order to understand the intellectual underpinnings of this diverse movement.

Contribution to the studies on Islamic mysticism

Historical Shi'i mysticism in Iran has captured the attention of Islamic scholars and Orientalists for nearly a century. Contemporary mystical thought, however, receives comparatively little attention. Many scholars like Annemarie Schimmel, William Chittick, Henry Corbin, Mangol Bayat, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr have written fascinating works on the history of mysticism, including both Sufism and theological *'erfan*. Yet, their studies do not cover contemporary developments in the mystical dimension of Islam, apparent in different spheres in the society.

There are, however, a few pioneering works on contemporary mysticism such as Leonard Lewisohn's and Matthijs van den Bos' studies specializing in 20th century Sufi

orders.⁴ Also, Tina Eftekhar has produced a feminist study on inter-universal mysticism (*'erfan-e halqeh*), a controversial movement of mysticism led by Mohammad Taheri.⁵ Others refer to the manifestations of contemporary mysticism in Iran, like Roxanne Varzi's study of the culture of martyrdom in the Iran-Iraq War or analyses of the philosophy of Abdolkarim Soroush, the influential professor and Rumi scholar. Still, all of these studies focus on specific instances within contemporary mysticism, recognizing neither the extent to which mysticism has penetrated the contemporary Iranian culture nor wider trends in Sufism.

My aim is to demonstrate the contemporary manifestations of mysticism in Iran, how they evolved during 20th century and how a new interpretation of mysticism is used by religious thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Ali Taheri and Seyyed Mostafa Azmayesh. I argue that as a result of the disappointment in the legalistic and literary interpretation of Islam enforced by the Iranian regime since the 1979 revolution, many shifted towards the mystic inner dimension of religion in Iranian public sphere.

Wider Trends

⁴ Leonard Lewisohn, "An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part I: The Ni'matullāhī Order: Persecution, Revival and Schism," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 61 (1998): 437-464.

Matthijs Van den Bos, *Mystic Regimes: Sufim and the State in Iran, from the late Qajar Era to the Islamic Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

⁵ Tina Eftekhar. *The Birth of a Celestial Light: A Feminist Evaluation of an Iranian Spiritual Movement Inter-universal Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

It is important to note that although Iranian mysticism is relatively unique in that orthodox ulama have formally incorporated aspects of mysticism (divorced from Sufism, or *tasavvof*) as a branch of orthodox learning. This is at least nominally different from Sunni Islam, in which mysticism is mostly associated with Sufism, or *tasavvof*. While this distinction is somewhat problematic, it is useful to keep in mind in this study, because for Shi'is the orthodox form of mysticism is usually referred to as *erfan*, whereas Sufism is usually referred to as either *tasavvof* or *Sufigari*, or other related terms. Iran's turn towards the esoteric dimension of Islam is not exceptional. There are wider trends in the Islamic world, of which Iran is only a part. The rivalry between the exoteric, rule-based, and esoteric interpretation of religion has existed since the early days of Islam. Which of these interpretations becomes more dominant depends on the socio-political circumstances of society. In the mid- 20th century, for example, there was a legalistic, often called 'fundamentalist,' Islamic resurgence movement throughout the Islamic world, of which the Islamic revolution in Iran is one example. It appeared as a response to the secular politics espoused by modern nation-states, which proved unable to fulfill the spiritual and economic needs of lower- and middle-classes families. Western intervention caused a deep fear among locals in the region of losing their Islamic identity. Therefore, the emergent needs at a time were liberation from foreign influence and defining a modern Islamic identity. Legalistic Islam appealed to the public during this period. With the dominance of more literal interpretation of Islam, however, the quest for Islamic identity did not end.

In the late 20th century, another approach to Islam became ascendant. Scholars offered different terms for this new movement, including “progressive Islam,”⁶ “reflexive revivalism,”⁷ “Islamic enlightenment,”⁸ or “politics of restoration.”⁹ This movement emphasized pluralism and the needs of individuals. Representatives of this approach dismissed the literalist tradition; the esoteric approach, instead, appears often as a basis from which these “progressive” Muslims operate. The attempts to reform the legalistic approach, or promote the esoteric dimension of Islam has manifested in two ways. In countries such as Lebanon, Morocco and Algeria, there has been a rise in Sufi activities and Sufi orders.¹⁰ Similarly, in Indonesia, “the intellectual basis of Sufism is being discovered by cosmopolitans, and the tradition is being sympathetically reformulated in modern society.”¹¹ In other places, such as Iran, Sudan, and Turkey, intellectuals arguing for liberal values and secular government have led this reform movement; they have focused on the importance of mystical interpretations of Islam. This study explores the Iranian experience but also situates Iran within a wider esoteric trend transforming the whole Islamic world.

⁶ Safdar Ahmed, *Reform and Modernity in Islam: The Philosophical, Cultural and Political Discourses Among Muslim Reformers*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

⁷ Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, introduction to *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, by Abdolkarim Soroush, ed. Mahmoud Sadri & Ahmad Sadri, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xvix.

⁸ Hakan Yavuz, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gulen Movement*. ed by M. Hakan Yavuz, John L. Esposito (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

⁹ Rajae, Farhang. *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Fait Muedini, “The Promotion of Sufism in the Politics of Algeria and Morocco,” *Islamic Africa* 3 (2012): 221.

¹¹ Julia Day Howell, “Sufism and the Indonesian Islamic Revival,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 60 (2001): 722.

Overview of the chapters

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the concept of Islamic mysticism and explains why Shi'is in Iran prefer the theological concept of mystic '*erfan* over Sufism (*tasavvof*), which Iranians widely consider a practical form of '*erfan*. This chapter also examines the emergence of four different manifestations of '*erfan* in Iranian society. It argues that in addition to the two more traditional forms, theoretical and institutional mysticism in Iran, the reform movement of the 1990s gave rise to a more individualistic intellectual and to popular '*erfan*.

Chapter 2 follows the liberal and transformed views of '*erfan* in Iran by studying three intellectual figures: Abdolkarim Soroush, who is an Iranian reformist and one of the most influential religious intellectuals of Iran; Mohammad Ali Taheri, a controversial leader of a mystic institution '*erfan-e halqeh* (Interuniversal Mysticism); and Seyyed Mostafa Azmayesh, who is a representative of Gonabadi Sufi order outside Iran. The common link binding these ideologies is Persian mystical poetry. Their ideas are thus compared using four key concepts found in Rumi's *Mathnawi*.

(Ch.1) Mystical discourses in contemporary Iran

Mystical interpretations of Islam, referred to here as *'erfan*, have always had a place in Shi'i Iran. Mysticism, however, is a dynamic concept, one that various groups have shaped over the course of centuries. From recent history, following the reform movement in Iran in the 1990s, mysticism has become so popular that clerics like Makarem Shirazi, Nouri-Hamedani, and even the current Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have warned the public against false mysticism.¹² In this chapter, I offer an overview of the development of mystical thought, and the multiple discourses of *'erfan*, in contemporary Iran. I contend that, historically, the mystic tradition in Iran has comprised two main branches: theoretical Shi'i esotericism (often called *'erfan-e eslami* by the clergy) and Sufism (*tasavvof*). I argue that during the 20th century, and especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the later reformist period, a new form of “modern” individualism transformed Iranian mysticism, creating a new category outside the traditional *'erfan-e eslami* and *tasavvof*. This chapter aims to map the contemporary discourses on the manifestations of mysticism in 20th-21st century Iran. However, in order to examine contemporary discourses, I will first review the development of Iranian mystical discourse beginning in the Safavid period.

¹² “Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi Warns Against False Mysticism,” Rasa News Agency, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.rasanews.ir/detail/News/191800/14>.
“Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei Warns Against False Mysticism,” Aparat, accessed April 17, 2017, http://www.aparat.com/v/iDFro/مراقب_عرفان_های_کاذب_باشید.
“Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi on False Mysticism,” Makarem Shirazi, accessed April 2017, <http://makarem.ir/main.aspx?lid=0&typeinfo=4&mid=347910>.

Esoteric vs exoteric religion

Before focusing on Iranian mysticism more specifically, it is necessary to understand the meaning of mysticism within the Islamic tradition, more generally. While Muslims agree that the Prophet Mohammad presented the Quran to mankind fourteen centuries ago, there are still ongoing attempts to find the true interpretation of his revelation. In broad terms, believers approach the Quran, one of the primary sources of Islamic knowledge, in two ways. There is both an exoteric, or outward dimension to the Qur'an, and an esoteric or inward dimension. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr notes, "in the Qur'an God Himself is called both the Outward (*al-Zahir*) and the Inward (*al-Batin*)."¹³ The exoteric/outward interpretation is based on morals and laws that could be derived from the literal reading of the holy scripture. The exoteric approach, as Victor Danner writes "reaches out to the vast majority of believers, who are not preoccupied with contemplation for many reasons, but who are attentive to the commandments and prohibitions contained in the Law of Islam."¹⁴ The esoteric spiritual interpretation is often presented as being "...addressed to a small mystical minority of the contemplatives."¹⁵ An esoteric approach, therefore, seeks to find the hidden message of God, not only on how to be a good member of Muslim society, but how to reach true unity with God. The mystical esoteric knowledge,

¹³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 105.

¹⁴ Victor Danner, "The Early Development of Sufism," in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*. ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr. (London: Routledge, 1987), 239-240.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 240.

however, is not explicit in the Qur'an and therefore entails a number of interpretative discourses.

Although as Danner suggested, it is commonly believed that the exoteric approach is followed by the majority, it is impossible to explore the actual depth of the individual esoteric beliefs amongst all the Muslims. Yet, in public discourse esoteric views of Islam have been the subject of much criticism by more “legalistically” oriented scholars, at times even being deemed heretical. Furthermore, as esoteric interpretations represent an alternative to the currently more dominant legalistic understanding of Islam, it has caused controversy and conflicts throughout the history of Islamic theosophy. In practice this distinction is much more complex and differs in the Sunni and Shi'i traditions. However, in order to analyze the contemporary developments of mysticism in Iran, it is essential to understanding the gist of this contentious discourse.

Defining Iranian esoteric tradition

The word *'erfan* translates to gnosis, or unity with God, and emphasizes the esoteric side of the Qur'an. It entails an individual journey of removing all the veils of one's ego in the material world in order to find this unity with the Divine Being. Annemarie Schimmel has extensively studied Islamic mysticism and describes it mainly in Sufi terminology. She defines Islamic mysticism as “love of the Absolute—for the power that separates true

mysticism from mere asceticism is love.”¹⁶ The focus on love closely resembles the Sufi interpretation of *‘erfan*, which has commonly defined Islamic mysticism in Western discourses; yet this represents only one dimension of *‘erfan* in Iran. Furthermore, in Iranian understandings of mysticism, being a mystic does not require living an ascetic life, nor does it require Sufi practices as Schimmel has suggested. Schimmel therefore sees *‘erfan* as a device for Sufis in reaching a kind of unity, but not necessarily unity with God himself.¹⁷ If what Schimmel writes about *‘erfan* does not cover the full spectrum of Islamic discourse, looking at it mainly from the perspective of formal Sufi thought, then William Chittick emphasizes *‘erfan* rather as a “metaphysical knowledge.”¹⁸ He notes that “[*‘erfan*] in its original sense and as it related to Sufism means "Wisdom made up of knowledge and sanctity.”¹⁹ However, similarly to Schimmel, he emphasizes the dimension of love in *‘erfan*, which he sees as an addition to Sufi mysticism, as he wrote that “many Sufis speak of gnosis as being synonymous with love, but "love" in their vocabulary excludes the sentimental colorings usually associated with this term in current usage.”²⁰ In the Iranian context, Henry Corbin has explained the relationship between Sufism and *‘erfan* most accurately, by noting that “the notion of *tasavvuf* or Sufism does not cover the phenomenon of mysticism (speculative and experimental) in Islam in its

¹⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 4.

¹⁷ Ibid, 24.

¹⁸ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi*. (Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc, 2005), 10.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

entirety,” because of which the term *‘erfan* is “preferred in Iran today.”²¹ Unlike Schimmel and Chittick who considered *‘erfan* one component of Sufism, Corbin emphasizes Islamic mysticism, and in the Iranian case *‘erfan*, as broader than just Sufism. The speculative and experimental notion of mysticism he examines is theoretical/theosophical and highly intertwined in Shi’i understandings of *‘erfan*. In the Sunni world, theoretical mysticism is also understood to be part of Sufism; however, in Shi’i Iran, Sufism only represents the practical variants of mysticism associated with Sufi orders. Nasr explains that in this practical Sufism, “to seek to follow Sufism requires finding a functioning order and an authentic master.”²² Therefore, while in the Sunni context, Sufism means mysticism, in the case of Iranian Shi’ism, one often finds people admiring *‘erfan* while expressing hostility to Sufism.

In Iran, where the majority of the population are Shi’is, Sufism has come to be seen as only one specific (practical) aspect of *‘erfan*, which is strictly structured within Sufi orders. However, the concept of *‘erfan* is more fluid in the Iranian context, open to various interpretations and approaches. For this reason, the Iranian public is more receptive to *‘erfan* than to Sufism. Thus, *‘erfan* as used in this paper, is gnosis itself while practical Sufism and theoretical Shi’i esotericism represent specific approaches to *‘erfan*, which are meant to help the believer in reaching gnosis.

²¹ Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*. (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 2006), 261.

²² Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 190.

Development of the divide

In drawing a distinction between Iranian mysticism and other forms of mysticism, it is important to highlight the specificities of Shi'ism. Before the 16th century, when the Safavid dynasty made Shi'ism the official religion of their realm, both Sunni and Shi'i beliefs were present, of which neither was homogenous. Since Sunnis considered Shi'i doctrines heretical, Mangol Bayat claims that Shi'i Muslims hid their views through the practice of *taqiyya*, "dissimulation of true beliefs", which the 6th Imam Jafar al-Sadiq advised his followers to practice rather than revolting against a Sunni ruler²³. The usage of *taqiyya* by Shi'i thinkers "increased the aura of mystery and impenetrable secrecy with which medieval Shia Islam wrapped itself."²⁴ In order to keep the Shi'i interpretation alive, mysticism became, and still is, an inseparable part of Islam for Shi'i Muslims. Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains the Shi'i mysticism in comparison with Sufism that:

the esoteric dimension of Islam, which in the Sunni climate is almost totally connected in one way or another with Sufism, colours the whole structure of Shi'ism in both its esoteric and even exoteric aspect. One can say that Islamic esotericism or gnosis crystallised into the form of Sufism in the Sunni world while it poured into the whole structure of Shi'ism especially during its early period²⁵

Therefore, when talking about Shi'i Islam, the above-mentioned separateness of esoteric and exoteric is not so apparent. While in Sunni Islam, esoteric Sufism is relatively distinct

²³ Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious thought in Qajar Iran*. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 4.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Shi'ism and Sufism: Their Relationship in Essence and in History," *Religious Studies* 6 (1970): 230.

from the legalistic approach of clerics, the entirety of Twelver Shi'i doctrine with the centrality of esoteric knowledge of Imams, is intertwined with esoteric dimensions of Islam.

Before the Safavids canonized Shi'ism as the official faith of the empire, the mysticism of Shi'i Muslims was similar to the Sufi interpretation of Sunni Islam, also present at the time. These two mysticisms competed for adherents, both claiming knowledge of the hidden message delivered by the Prophet. However, the main difference between these mysticisms was in the identification of the religious authority who was allowed to interpret this hidden message. Bayat explains that when "Sufis developed their own separate, highly centralized, hierarchically structured, and tightly knit organizations, headed by a spiritual leader who could show 'the way to God,'" the Shi'is similarly believed that "only qualified individuals could interpret the texts" but with the difference that "divine knowledge is directly transmitted through the Prophet's family lineage."²⁶

For Twelver Shi'is, twelve historic Imams, the last of whom, Imam Mahdi, went into occultation in the ninth century, constituted the perfect vessels through whom knowledge of Islam passed. Shi'is believe that the Mahdi, or twelfth imam, was "concealed by God from the eyes of men. His life has been miraculously prolonged until the day when he will manifest himself again by God's permission."²⁷ Regardless of his absence, he is still "in control of the affairs of men and is the Lord of the Age,"²⁸ and therefore nobody

²⁶ Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent*, 11.

²⁷ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 165.

²⁸ Ibid.

else could claim to offer a true interpretation of esoteric Islam. Religious leaders, however, acted as interpreters of the Imam Mahdi's will, as there remained a need for someone who could more legitimately than others interpret the will of the Imam. Therefore, when the Safavids assumed power, "a group of *ulama* emerged who saw themselves as representing the Imams and argued for the primacy of rational jurisprudence determining Shi'i law. Later, they came to be known as Usulis."²⁹ Consequently, because interpreting the Qur'anic messages became a duty of the leading *ulama*, law overshadowed esoteric explorations of faith in the public sphere.

Furthermore, when the Safavids adopted Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion in Iran, they "purge[d]... the dominions of heterodoxy, consisting of the suppression of millenarian 'extremism,' of Sūfism and of Sunnism, [which] preceded and paved the way for the definitive establishment of Twelver Shi'ism."³⁰ Thus, Twelver Shi'i *'erfan* became accepted as orthodoxy, while Sufism and other interpretations of Islam, which may have jeopardized the religious hegemony of the new Usuli elite, were under persecution. Regardless of Safavid attempts to eradicate rival interpretations of Islam, the heterodox views on the faith, including Sufism and other interpretations of mysticism, have remained alive in Iran.

²⁹ Linda S. Walbridge, *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

³⁰ Said Amir Arjomand, "Religious Extremism (Ghuluww), Sufism and Sunnism in Safavid Iran: 1501-1722." *Journal of Asian History* 15 (1981): 3.

The role of mystical poetry in the survival of mystic ideas

Since the Safavid era, then, Twelver Shi'i esotericism became the mainstream religious ideology, with the acceptance of the ideas of mystic theologians such as Ibn Arabi, Mulla Sadra and al-Ghazzali, along with condemnation of Sufi orders. Nader and Feresteh Ahmadi argue that already during Mongol invasion, which was before Safavid rule, mystical poetry had a "consolatory function" for Iranians to hide their true mystic beliefs.³¹ Mystical Persian poetry, which if intended, facilitates *taqiyya* (hiding one's true beliefs via metaphors and symbols), represents a safe sphere where the heterodox mystic ideas of Iranians have been maintained.³² As mystic poetry has multiple ways of interpretation with the aim of talking about God, it is welcomed by even the most strident religious leaders in Iran today.

Poetry, in fact, is the main source of the perception of Islamic mysticism in Iran. '*Erfan*, in today's Iran is built upon a heritage of centuries of mystical poetry traditions and theosophy. More than anything else, all Iranians are exposed to the literary tradition of '*erfan* via mystical Persian poetry, which informs their perception of religion and its applications in everyday life. Iranian scholar Ghomshei argued

poetry in Persian culture is not simply an art: rather it's the very image of life, terrestrial and celestial; the perennial philosophy, the holy scripture, the minstrel, the music and the song, the feast and revelry, the garden, the Rose and Nightingale, and a detailed agenda for daily living.³³

³¹ Nader Ahmadi and Feresteh Ahmadi, *Iranian Islam: The Concept of the Individual*. (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 48.

³² Ibid, 46-47.

³³ "A brief study of the role of poetry in Persian culture" Dr. Ghomshei's Website, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.drelahighomshei.com/e621.aspx>.

The metaphorical mystical poetry of Attar, Nizam, Rumi, Hafez and Sa'di is so embedded in the literary culture of Iran, that in one way or another all Iranians have been introduced to the esoteric side of the Islam via poetry. Although the mysticism represented in Persian literary culture is a common knowledge for all the Iranians, mystical ideology is interpreted and engaged with in a variety of ways. It should be seen as a common point of reference, but not a main source for mystic knowledge for different groups engaging in mysticism in Iran.

Transformative events of 20th century Iran

Two political events of the twentieth century in Iran changed the position of mysticism in the Iranian society. First, the collapse of the Qajar dynasty, and with it the founding of the Pahlavi monarchy. Reza Shah and his successor, Mohammad Reza Shah, reduced the legal reach of the *ulama* by creating secular courts, divesting clerics of some of their traditional influence. In fact, Reza Shah went so far as to forbid the veiling of women, and banned some religious ceremonies.³⁴ Although Reza Shah considered his Turkish neighbor, the secular leader Kemal Atatürk as a role model, in religious affairs Reza Shah was actually less radical.³⁵ While Reza Shah focused on reducing the influence

³⁴ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 250.

³⁵ Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 92.

of religion in society, Atatürk banned Sufi orders and mystic activities, which he perceived as threats to his efforts to modernize Turkey.³⁶

In Iran, as Hamid Algar explains, “the whole Pahlavi enterprise was, ... undergirded with the attempt to create a surrogate, state-sanctioned culture, based on a cult of modernism and ethnic nationalism, that was designed to destroy by attrition the cultural hegemony of Islam in Iran.”³⁷ The Pahlavis attacked the position of Islam in society. From the government’s perspective, both Islamic jurisprudence and mystical Islam were problematic in their perception of modern society. Still, Lewisohn, who specializes in Sufi orders, argues that officially sanctioned Islam enjoyed more support than Sufism:

During the twentieth century, with Shiism dominant in the madrasas, and secular rationalism the idol of the intellectual elite in the universities, Sufism was denigrated by both groups and in the process fell away, ceasing to be part of the mainstream of Persian religious and intellectual life³⁸

Although Mohammad Reza Shah was a less authoritative and charismatic king than his father, little changed for the Sufis; he did, however, reinstate some of the traditional privileges of the *ulama*.³⁹ As a result of the 1953 coup of Mohammad Mossadegh and other unpopular policies, the Iranian public turned against the shah. Soon, Mohammad Reza Shah began to confront more serious political threats from the Left and the clerical

³⁶ Sena Karasipahi, “Comparing Islamic Resurgence Movements in Turkey and Iran,” *Middle East Journal* 63 (2009): 89.

³⁷ Hamid Algar. “Religious Forces in Twentieth Century Iran.” *The Cambridge History of Iran: From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic, vol 7.* ed Avery, P., Hambly, G and Melville C. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 741-742.

³⁸ Leonard Lewisohn, “An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part II: A Socio-Cultural Profile of Sufism, from the Dhahabi Revival to the Present Day,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 62 (1999): 56.

³⁹ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 251-252.

establishment. As Mansur Moaddel explains, the ideologues of the opposition “resort[ed] to Islam in their attempt to address Iran’s problems.”⁴⁰ This gave an incentive for revolutionary Islamic discourse to develop, for which the *ulama*, and especially Khomeini, were the forerunners. Therefore, by political usage and adaptation of Shi’i traditions by the revolutionaries, the popular masses were mobilized into a revolutionary movement, Pahlavi rule ended.

After the 1979 revolution, the second transformative event of 20th century, the clerics and intellectuals of the time examined secular ideas through an Islamist lens. Although the movement “was itself heterogeneous, consisting of various Islamic ideologues with diverse backgrounds, interests and political agendas,”⁴¹ Islamic government came to be formed under the oversight of the *ulama*. The Supreme Leader, a manifestation of Khomeini’s rule of the jurist (*velayat-e faqih*), became the leader of the Iranian state.⁴² This had a fundamental effect on mysticism. As in the Safavid period, the official state orthodoxy became the only acceptable interpretation of Shi’ism. Following the exoteric message of the Qur’an became the state sanctioned perspective while meditating on the Hidden message of the Qur’an could only be suggested as an additional option for the ordinary believer — never as a primary duty.

⁴⁰ Mansoor Moaddel, *Class, Politics, and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 64.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 145.

⁴² Hamid Algar, “Introduction by the translator”, in *Islam and Revolution* by Imam Khomeini, (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 21.

‘Erfan-e eslami

After the revolution, the theoretical *‘erfan* favored by the regime has often come to be referred to as *‘erfan-e eslami* in order to distinguish it from what they deemed to be “false” interpretations of *‘erfan*. The state officially allowed a philosophical approach to *‘erfan* to supplement Islamic state law. Khomeini represents an excellent example to understand the parameters set by the state for theoretical interpretations of *‘erfan*, which is also accepted by the current Supreme Leader Khamenei.⁴³ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s biggest contribution to Iranian history is widely acknowledged to have been his development of the revolutionary Shi’i ideology and implementation of a legalistic or orthodox vision of modern Islam with the guardianship of the jurist (*velayat-e faqih*). Yet, he initially became known for his philosophical teachings of *‘erfan* in the city of Qom.⁴⁴ During his time in Qom, he studied mystical theosophy under the supervision of Shahabadi. Later, he taught classes and wrote several books on the subject of a mystical journey and *‘erfan*. Alexander Knysh demonstrates that Khomeini’s writings are mainly a synthesis of the works of mystics such as “Ibn Arabi, Qunawi, Qaysari, and their later successors within the framework of *wujudi* Sufism who may be regarded as Khomeini's primary masters in esoteric philosophy.”⁴⁵ While Khomeini himself also wrote mystical poetry, he tends to

⁴³ “Imam Khomeini’s Relations with Ayatollah Khamenei,” Khamenei’s Website, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=5484>.

⁴⁴ Shahrough Akhavi, “Islam, Politics and Society in the Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Taliqani and Ali Shariati,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 24 (Oct., 1988): 406.

⁴⁵ Alexander Knysh, “‘Irfan’ Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy.” *Middle East Journal* 46 (1992): 632, footnote nr. 6.

cite more the aforementioned mystics in his own works, and not that much from the mystic poets such as Rumi, Hafez and Attari.

Khomeini was especially fond of Ibn Arabi and his notion of the “perfect man” (*ensan-e kamel*), which, among other things, represents the Prophet Muhammad who had reached unity with God. In one of Khomeini’s famous works *Misbah al-hidaya* he describes four journeys that ultimately could bring one towards unity with God. Although only the Prophet himself should be able to reach this perfectness, Khomeini said that:

Know that perfect friends of God may also experience these four journeys, including the fourth journey, as exercised by our master, the Commander of the Faithful and his infallible descendants—upon whom be peace. However, as the Prophet—upon whom and whose Household be blessings—is the possessor of the station of all-comprehensiveness, there has been no room for lawgiving by any one of the creatures following his death.⁴⁶

Therefore, although he believed that “the perfect friends of God” can follow this journey, nobody could ever reach the same unity with God experienced by the Prophet. In another work *Sirr al-Salat* (*Mystery of a Prayer*), he emphasizes the esoteric dimension in the exoteric practices guided by the Qur’an, and never suggests any rituals that could not be found in the Qur’an or hadiths. He wrote that “for prayer, or rather all acts of worship (*ibadat*), apart from this form, shell, and metaphor, there are other aspects such as the esoteric, the kernel, and a reality.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Misbah al-Hidayah ila al-Khilafah wa al-Wilayah*. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Wafā, 1983), translation: Salam Judy. *The Lamp of Guidance Into Vicegerency and Sanctity*, (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 2010), 118.

⁴⁷ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sirr al-Salat/Mi’raj al-Salikin wa Salah al-Arifin*. (Tehran: Entesharat-e faqih, 1982). Translation: Sayyid Amjad H. Shah Naqavi. *The Mystery of Prayer: The Ascension of the Wayfarers and the Prayer of the Gnostics*. (Brill: Leiden, 2015), 20.

Throughout his works, he expresses very clearly that this mysticism is not Sufism (which he associates with Sufi orders and ascetic practices) and that mystics should not be confused with Sufis. He condemns Sufi practices, in fact, which he believed use religious rituals to reach unity with God and disregard them afterwards:

the notion that is upheld by some of the Sufis — that prayer is a means of ascension and arrival for the wayfarer and that after arrival the wayfarer becomes needless of the rituals- is an absurd matter without foundation and is crude imaginations without reason and is contrary to the way of the folk of God and the lords of the heart and it comes from ignorance of the degrees of the folk of gnosis and the perfections of the ones nearest to God. We seek refuge in God from that⁴⁸

Therefore, although Khomeini appreciated the path of gnosis, he did not approve of Sufi ways of reaching God which often neglect the rules and morals stated in the Qur'an and only focused on the this higher connection with God.

Following the tradition of mystic philosophers, he does not contend that his work should reach the common believer. Elitism pervades his writing on the subject of mysticism, in fact. On the one hand he warns the spiritual reader not to reveal the mysteries of the path “to those unworthy to them, nor to withhold them from other than the worthy”.⁴⁹ On the other hand when writing to a non-spiritual reader in a different book, he warns him to “not deny the degrees of the folk of gnosis, for this is a trait of those who are ignorant.”⁵⁰ Although Khomeini was a popular leader and a prolific writer, producing a number of books for the common reader about Islamic law and government, he remained selective

⁴⁸ Khomeini, *Sirr al-Salat*, 27.

⁴⁹ Khomeini, *Misbah al-Hidayah*, 18.

⁵⁰ Khomeini, *Sirr al-Salat*, 4.

about the audience of his mystic work.⁵¹ Regardless of Khomeini's criticism of Sufis, institutional Sufism did not disappear following the Islamic Revolution, much as the Supreme Leader may have hoped it would.

Institutional Sufism

Contemporary institutional Sufism in Iran has been most thoroughly studied by Leonard Lewisohn and Matthijs van den Bos. While both studied specific Sufi orders, their wider research objective has been to elucidate the continued presence of Sufi orders in post-revolutionary Iran. Lewisohn's mapping of the central Sufi orders in contemporary Iran has shown that in "the history of Sufism (*tasawwuf*) in Iran in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries... two Sufi tariqas, the Ni'matullahiyya and the Dhahabiyya" have dominated."⁵² He not only explains the lineage of the masters of these Sufi orders but also their circumstances after the Islamic Revolution. These masters and their adherents, he assesses, were harassed and persecuted by the new regime. He mentions that, although there are no public denouncements of the orders, "the Islamic Regime's distrust of, and hostility to the dervish orders is reflected in the fact that members of the armed services in Iran are not allowed to belong to any Sufi tariqa nor, indeed, to frequent *khanaqahs*."⁵³ While he expresses uncertainty about the survival of the Sufi orders inside Iran, he implies that as the Munawwar 'Ali Shah branch of the Ni'matullahiyya has successfully established

⁵¹ Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*. (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 1999), 46.

⁵² Lewisohn, "History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part I", 438.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 461.

itself in the West, and that moving the order outside of Iran could be a way for its survival.⁵⁴

Van den Bos also researched the main Sufi orders in Iran and conducted an ethnographic study on two branches of Ni'matullahi order, respectively "modern Safi'alishahi and Soltan'alishahi."⁵⁵ In his examination of their post-revolutionary practices, he argues that "Ni'matullahi Sufis sought to accommodate with the new regime."⁵⁶ One example of this adaptation is the order's relabeling of Sufi mystical spirituality:

In the Sultan'alishahi order, which is in all outward respects a Sufi order, with lodges (*husayniyyas*), a spiritual genealogy (*silsila*) and an ethos of veneration towards the supreme master or 'Pole' (*qutb*), the master denied that one entered the realm of 'Sufism' (*tasawwuf*) through him. Instead, he argued that he and his disciples engaged in *'irfan*, the learned variety of mysticism or gnosis⁵⁷

Probably because of this accommodation, and specifically emphasizing on *'erfan* and not Sufism, the *ulama* allowed for Sufi orders to exist. These studies of Lewisohn's and Van den Bos' therefore prove that Sufi identity was reinvented to suit post-revolutionary Iran's political climate.

Mysticism after the reform movement

For the leading *ulama*, official doctrine takes precedence over non-orthodox interpretations of the faith. However, this has resulted in an ongoing negotiation about

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Van den Bos, *Mystic regimes*, 1.

⁵⁶ Matthijs Van den Bos, "Elements of Neo-traditional Sufism in Iran," *Sufism and Modern in Iran*, ed Bruinessen, M., Howell, J. D. (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 64.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 65.

which aspects of the Shi'i tradition should be applying to governance and politics, which in turn, evolved into a vocal reform movement on late 1980s and 1990s, which is the third and perhaps most important transformative event for the public discourse of mysticism. Arjomand argues that "The Islamic Revolution was undoubtedly a traditionalist revolution. However, the restoration of a tradition in practice always entails its transformation."⁵⁸ As there was no consensus about this tradition, soon after the victorious revolution there was a growing discontent in the society and amongst the *ulama* towards the "regime's monopolization of the 'the religious truth.'"⁵⁹

The reform movement entailed a growing public discourse about the democratization of Iranian politics and religious pluralism, which in 1997 led to a reformist government with Khatami as President. Intellectuals such as Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohammad Shabestari who were among the main ideologues of the reform movement, criticized political Islam as an ideology, while, according to Arjomand, maintaining the belief that "Islam was the Straight Path and could generate the perfect modern social and political system by re-examining its fundamentals."⁶⁰ Soroush went so far as to reject the idea of clerics dictating religious laws and their interpretations of truth to people.⁶¹ Although Soroush believes in Islam being the perfect religion, he has argued for religious pluralism, which means respecting multiple interpretations of religious knowledge (both

⁵⁸ Said Amir Arjomand, "The Reform Movement and the Debate on Modernity and Tradition in Contemporary Iran." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (Nov., 2002): 721.

⁵⁹ Günes Murat Tezcür, Chapter 6: "A Moment of Enthusiasm in Islamic Republic" in *Muslim Reformers in Iran and Turkey: the Paradox of Moderation*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 112.

⁶⁰ Arjomand, "The Reform Movement and the Debate," 723.

⁶¹ Soroush, Abdolkarim. *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 84.

inside Islam, but also understanding that other religions might be on the right path) as the there is no final interpretation of Qur'an, which Muslims consider the last revelation.⁶²

Khatami's reformist government adopted a less adversarial stance toward institutional Sufism. Van den Bos reported that "Sufism - whether Sunni or Shiite - has attained an historical acceptance in the Islamic Republic, which for instance shows in the fact that Khatami's government has allowed the return to Kurdistan of a Qaderiye master, Sheikh Hasan Hashemi, who had fled Iran after the Islamic revolution."⁶³ While clerics expressed greater tolerance for Sufism during the Khatami period, Mahmood Ahmadinejad's presidency, which began in 2005, heralded another crackdown, as conservatives once again dominated the public sphere.⁶⁴ In fact, the website of the Ni'matullahi Gonabadi Sufi order notes that persecution of Sufis increased after Ahmadinejad became president.⁶⁵ One of the website's founders, Farhad Noori, states that the intention of the website was "to shatter the state's boycott of Sufi news, and to report on the gross violations of the community's human rights."⁶⁶ Furthermore, he notes that

Since 2007 Iranian Sufis have faced a lot of repression in recent years, none of which was covered by the national media. The first attacks on the Gonabadi Sufis went unreported, as did the 2006 destruction of the Shariat Qom Hosseinieh (the Sufi place of worship in Qom) by security forces, the arrest of 1500 Sufis, and the trials of several hundred more.⁶⁷

⁶² Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 120.

⁶³ Matthijs Van den Bos, "Sufi Authority in Khatami's Iran. Some Fieldwork Notes." *Oriente Moderno* 21 (2002): 373.

⁶⁴ Majid Mohammadi, *Political Islam in Post-Revolutionary Iran: Shi'i Ideologies in Islamist Discourse*. (London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 2015), 205.

⁶⁵ "Persecution Of Sufis," Majzooban Noor News Agency, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.majzooban.org/en/index.php/news/103-lawyer-for-iranian-sufi-dervishes-detained>.

⁶⁶ "Interview With Farhad Nouri," Majzooban Noor News Agency, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.majzooban.org/en/index.php/news/5864-dervishes-online-an-interview-with-farhad-nouri-of-majzooban-noor>.

⁶⁷ Ibid

Although harassment toward the Gonabadi Sufi dervishes seems to have decreased with Rouhani's presidency, persecutions of its members continues until today.⁶⁸ Though this website represents an extremely valuable resource, a more comprehensive understanding of institutional Sufism requires more ethnographic study. Regardless of Ahmadinejad's aim in "rooting out the populist bases of reformism,"⁶⁹ allowing multiple of towards Islam during reform era, to which Soroush contributed the most, has affected the way Iranians perceive Islam.

The '*erfan* of intellectuals

During the early 1990s, mysticism entered into the public discourse. Majid Mohammadi, who studies post-1979 political Islam, describes the Khatami period as a time of "mysticism-oriented Islamism."⁷⁰ He believes reformist ideas of religious plurality opposed the shari'a-minded Islam, thereby continuing an age-old struggle between the *ulama* and mystics. As he notes, "Muslim mystics and Sufis have always presented their own alternative interpretation of Islam that is mostly focused on spiritual aspects of Islamic

⁶⁸ This claim is based on my observations on the amount and content of reports on persecution in the Gonabadi website <http://www.majzooban.org/>. Since 2013 the reports on direct harassment of Sufis have decreased and mainly the years 2007-2010 are marked by the biggest crackdowns on Sufis <http://www.majzooban.org/en/index.php/news/4025-iran-continues-crackdown-on-sufis>

⁶⁹ Ali Ansari, "Iran under Ahmadinejad: Populism and Its Malcontents." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 84 (2008): 696.

⁷⁰ Mohammadi, *Political Islam in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, 121.

teachings.”⁷¹ The rise of mysticism also introduced a new individualistic approach towards religiosity, which has also resulted in the growth of popular mystic groups unique to the modern age.

Abdolkarim Soroush presided over the expansion of the interpretation of *'erfan*. One of the main ideologues of the reform movement, Soroush's work exemplifies the manifestations of *'erfan* in contemporary Iran. His emphasis on religious pluralism is based on stressing a personal relationship with God, moving away from a communal relationship with the divine. He believes that “in the realm of communal religiosity, religion turns into a half-congealed, half-dogmatic ritual,” as the believer becomes attached to rituals without actually reaching God.⁷² He sees both the religiosity as encouraged by the clergy and the practical Sufism as communal religion.⁷³ Therefore, in his estimation, a personal relationship with God represents the highest form of religiosity. He describes this as an “experiential religiosity”:

guardianship-oriented, experiential religiosity is extremely personal in nature, not in the sense of isolation and detachment, but in the sense of falling into a personal relationship with God and the wali, the saint/divine guardian. It is on this basis that the experiential believer moves away from the religion of the common people and towards true religion. He steps into the radiance of God's guardianship and approaches Him singly⁷⁴

Soroush's ideal of individual religion is a synthesis of both theoretical *'erfan* and practical Sufism. It is based on the Prophet's experience of reaching God, while he emphasizes the

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 234.

⁷³ Ibid, 182.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 205.

need for a spiritual guardian. While the mystics who represent the theoretical '*erfan* have tried to keep the esoteric path for the enlightened few, Soroush argues experiential religiosity is available to anyone. As he wrote: "We must revive experiential religiosity. The modern world has politicians, economists, etc. aplenty. It is the Prophet who is no longer at hand and it is him we must bring back."⁷⁵ Soroush's critical views towards the brand of Islam promulgated by the clerical establishment, and encouragement of mysticism, brought him harassment and criticism. As a result, even before the Ahmadinejad's presidency, he emigrated from Iran.⁷⁶ Yet, he has continued his work on '*erfan* in exile, giving lectures and publishing short texts about '*erfan* and Rumi in social media channels to his numerous followers.

Popular '*erfan*

The individualistic and pluralistic approach to Islam that increased in popularity during the reform era, is probably also the reason for the increase of non-institutional and non-theoretic popular mysticism. In June 2000, Hawzah news agency interviewed ayatollahs Makarem Shirazi and Nouri Hamedani about the "increased amount of underground and public activities of mystic groups in recent years."⁷⁷ Hamedani and

⁷⁵ Ibid, 207.

⁷⁶ Jahanbakhsh, Forough, "Introduction" *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* by Soroush, A, x.

⁷⁷ "Hamedani and Makarem Shirazi about Mystic Groups," Hawzah News Agency, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://hawzah.net/fa/News/View/84058/عرفان-مدعی-های-فرقه-دربار-ه-فرقه-استفتائی-در-بار-ه-فرقه-مدعی-عرفان>

Makarem Shirazi regarded these mystic groups, especially the movement of interuniversal mysticism (*'erfan-e halqeh*) as deviations from Islam and suspected them of being tools of the West to destroy the true Islam.⁷⁸ Needless to say, the interpretation of *'erfan* in those groups does not belong to the theological *'erfan* that would be accepted by the orthodox *ulama*.

Although some in Iran have sporadically condemned the mystical movements in the media, there is no available study on popular mysticism in Iran. Several scholars have made references to this phenomenon in their own research, including Lewisohn and Van den Bos who focused on institutional Sufism. They all have recognized a kind of popular mysticism that is neither institutional Sufism nor part of the theosophical *'erfan*. When Lewisohn describes the persecutions of Sufis after the revolution, he indicates that “the dervish ideal remains an indelible trait in the Iranian national character.”⁷⁹ Although he sees the dervish ideal as part of the Iranian identity, he has not observed it outside of the Sufi orders. At the same time, Van den Bos came across an informant who did not belong to any Sufi order:

[he] reflected on how Sufis in Iran had moved back into the social configuration in which Sufism had started: with Sufis practicing as individuals and in small groups without any formal organization (i.e., without religious ‘orders’). He suggested that worldly forms (i.e., the Sufi orders) had polluted an ideal Sufism that was without formal organization⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Leonard Lewisohn, “An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part II: A Socio-Cultural Profile of Sufism, from the Dhahabi Revival to the Present Day,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 62 (1999): 57.

⁸⁰ Matthijs van den Bos, “Elements of Neo-traditional Sufism in Iran,” in *Sufism and ‘Modern’ in Islam*, ed. Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell. (London, New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 67.

But instead of elaborating further on his subject's experience, he merely claims that the subject does not seem to understand the connection of this development to the regime.⁸¹ To fully appreciate the landscape of contemporary mystical practices in Iran today, in addition to already existing studies on institutional Sufism, also non-institutional mysticism as practiced by individuals should be researched.

Anthropologist Roxanne Varzi did not specifically study contemporary Sufism in Iran, but she realized that in order to understand the culture of Iran, she has to observe it through the spectrum of Sufi mysticism. Varzi carried out an anthropological study of the youth, media and martyrdom in post-revolution Iran; in her monograph, she questioned the success of the attempt on behalf of the Iranian regime to create an Islamic reality for its youth. One of her arguments is that Iranian secular youth, who must present themselves as Muslims, feel closer to the mysticism than the Islam of state orthodoxy.⁸² She recognized that “these secular youths were very spiritual people” and that

some young people do not necessarily go to Sufi meetings or even consider themselves Sufi, but rather privately read Hafiz, Mawlana, play the daf (frame drum) or santur (stringed instrument) and wear their hair long, sport prayer beads as bracelets, and participate in a general Sufi cool that has become popular in northern Tehran.⁸³

By “Sufi cool” she means “transcendent mystical practice, both New Age and Islamic”, which may include anything related to mysticism, like poetry reading circles and

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2006), 10.

⁸³ Ibid, 21.

meditation.⁸⁴ Although she did not go into further analysis of the implications of this “Sufi cool,” she has recognized a trend amongst spiritual youngsters, who do not affiliate themselves neither with Sufi orders nor the regime’s interpretation of Islam.

The only study that is specifically focused on non-institutional and also non-theoretical ‘*erfan* is Tina Eftekhar’s feminist study of the inter-universal mysticism movement (‘*erfan-e halqeh*), led by Mohammad Taheri. While this movement has been strongly suppressed by the government as the ultimate form of false mysticism (‘*erfan-e kazeb*)⁸⁵ and its leader Taheri imprisoned, her research suggests the rise of popular mystical practices. She says that “young people are increasingly joining different schools of ‘*erfan*/mysticism, one of which is Inter-universal mysticism, because on such paths they can find a greater freedom to their own way of life and belief.”⁸⁶ However, she also admits that other than her own empirical interactions, there is no official evidence of the existence of these different schools of ‘*erfan* because “mainstream media, both online and in print, such as newspapers, magazines and weblogs, are not allowed to mention this growing movement, because in the government’s view, it constitutes evil thought and is anti-Islamic.”⁸⁷

The various practices of popular ‘*erfan* have not been studied, and due to the hostile attitude of the regime towards “false mysticism” it would be indeed a difficult endeavor. Yet without considering the emergence of popular mysticism, it is important to recognize

⁸⁴ Varzi, *Warring Souls*, 10.

⁸⁵ <http://hawzah.net/fa/News/View/84058/عراق-مدعی-عراق-در-بار-ه-فرقه-های-مدعی-عراق>.

⁸⁶ Eftekhar, *The Birth of a Celestial Light*, xviii.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

the emergence of such a phenomenon. It demonstrates that there are young people in Iran who admire some forms of *'erfan*, but do not want to embark on a mystical journey towards God nor follow the official interpretation of Islam.

Conclusion

This chapter has followed the age-old divide between the legal and spiritual tradition of Islam in contemporary Iran. Since the death of the prophet Muhammad, some Muslims have followed the exoteric law-based Islam while others have been drawn to the spiritual tradition. Yet in Iran, which has accepted the Twelver Shi'i branch of Islam as the official state religion since the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century, even the exoteric law-based Islam has esoteric, or *'erfan*, components. While *'erfan* is a dynamic concept, the meaning of its "true" form has continued to be a source of controversy in various mystic groups until today.

Historically there have been two types of mysticism recognized in Iran: the institutional Sufi order, based on practical *'erfan*, and theological *'erfan*, based on strictly theoretical ideas of the teachings of mystics such as Ibn Arabi, Suhrawardi, Mulla Sadra etc. The orthodox *ulama*, who came to power after the 1979 revolution, only accepted the theoretical approach to *'erfan*, while challenging the practical Sufi order-based *'erfan*. Yet, although Iranian *ulama* accepts the orthodox interpretation of *'erfan* as a complementary aspect to the law-based Islam, the mystical aspect of the religion is only welcomed as long as the laws take precedence.

Adherents of both the theoretical and Sufi order based *'erfan* are elitist in nature, believing that a higher understanding of Islam is meant only for the select few and should be hidden from the masses. Since the reform era, when the relationship between religion and power was re-evaluated in public discourse, there has been a tendency to move away from this form of elitism. This manifests in two forms of *'erfan*: the expansion of *'erfan* by intellectuals; and a popular *'erfan*, which incorporates a mystical approach to one's life without participating in a Sufi order nor going deeper into theological tradition of *'erfan*. While it is impossible to do an analytical study of all the current forms of popular *'erfan* without conducting ethnographic fieldwork, my paper points to the existence of this phenomena. The expansion of *'erfan* by intellectuals can be explored remotely and will be covered in more detail in the next chapter.

(Ch. 2) Mystical discourse of Abdolkarim Soroush and other Iranian thinkers

Introduction

One way to understand the individualized form of mysticism in contemporary Iran is to follow the ideas of Iranian intellectuals who have transformed the usage of '*erfan* in their ideologies. As seen in the previous chapter, 20th century Iranian society experienced rapid changes, from the Pahlavi monarchy's radical secularization and Westernization policy to the re-assertion of Islamic thought, which resulted in the Islamic revolution. The reform movement, which began in the late 1980s after the death of Khomeini and the conclusion of Iran-Iraq War, gave rise to the reevaluation of the role of Islam in politics. This chapter analyzes the discourse of mystical Islamism that began with the reform movement, by focusing on the mystic ideas of Iranian intellectual Abdolkarim Soroush in comparison with the mystic thoughts of the representative of Gonabadi Sufi order Seyed Mostafa Azmayesh, and initiator of controversial movement interuniversal mysticism ('*erfan-e keyhani*) Mohammad Taheri.

Although each of them has their own agenda and multiple sources from which their mystic knowledge originates, they all have in common the familiarity with mystic ideas as found in Persian literary mystic tradition. I argue, that these thinkers followed basic principles of mysticism as found in mystic Persian poetry, in order to transform the meaning of '*erfan* in the contemporary context of Iranian society and advocate for

individualistic religion. The principles that this chapter analyzes are a clear preference for esoteric religion over exoteric; the multiplicity of the paths towards God; the movement toward spiritual perfection; and the notion of spiritual guardianship, which can all be found in Rumi's *Mathnawi*. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, it is through the metaphors and symbols of poetry that the essence of Persian mysticism has survived. Therefore, considering the ideas of these thinkers through the spectrum of principles in Rumi's *Mathnawi*, does not only enlighten their common knowledge of *'erfan*, but also shows how they interpreted and changed existing mystical concepts to fulfill the needs of contemporary society.

In addition to analyzing the mystic thought of three Iranian thinkers, this chapter contends that the liberal thought of the intellectuals, who found the basis of their ideology in esoteric religion, were not unique to Iran. While the Iranian mystic characteristics of these thinkers may be exceptional, the similarities in their valuing of the inner dimensions of religion allows us to observe the move towards the esoteric interpretation of religion as a wider trend amongst intellectuals in the Islamic world.

Intellectual Movements in 20th century Iran

As masterful conveyance of ideas is a powerful tool, intellectuals have a great role in any social change. But how to define an intellectual? Several scholars have shown that being an intellectual entails an individual's public contribution to society or an ideology. Expanding on Gramsci's analysis of intellectuals, Edward Said emphasizes that "the

intellectual is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her/his business.”⁸⁸ Therefore according to Said, no matter how many great ideas one may have, an audience is crucial for qualifying as an intellectual. Similarly, Forough Jahanbakhsh, who has written on Iranian intellectuals, considers an intellectual “a person who has the ability to recognize/diagnose and articulate the problems/crises of his/her society... he/she creates novel outlooks and discourses that have the power to capture the hearts and minds of his/her audience.”⁸⁹

The Intellectual as discussed in this chapter, then, is a thinker who not only tries to offer new ideas to improve the society he/she lives in, but also has followers who believe in his/her ideas. While both Iranian and Western scholars unanimously see Soroush as one of the most influential Iranian intellectuals today, Azmayesh and Taheri are rarely referred to as intellectuals (*rowshanfekr*). Instead, they are considered spiritual leaders, which is probably because they represent a specific religious group and their vision therefore may not apply for the whole society. Yet, for the purpose of analyzing the mystical discourse of Iranian thinkers today, all these three men are regarded as intellectuals for this study.

The thinkers discussed here are all part of a general trend of religious intellectualism that started during the late 20th century in Iran. Providing an overview of the rich intellectual history of 20th century Iran is beyond the scope of this chapter. Yet, there are a few important points that should be mentioned. It is mainly clerics and religious

⁸⁸ Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 11.

⁸⁹ Forough Jahanbakhsh, "The Emergence and Development of Religious Intellectualism in Iran." *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 30 (2004): 471.

intellectuals, who have shaped the intellectual life of post-revolutionary Iran. However, as Jahanbakhsh reminds us, in Iran “for most of the twentieth century intellectualism and the intellectual were associated with anything but religion; it was as if intellectualism had to be an alien species born in the secular ideological universe of either the West or East.”⁹⁰ With the growing discontent towards the Pahlavi regime, however, intellectuals began to expound the virtues of a religious society.

As Khoshrokhavar notes, during that time there were present both “those who wrote as laymen with reference to the modern world, avoiding any reference to religion but deeply influenced by Marxism or other leftist ideologies” and at the same time “those who worked for the revival of religion and its renewal in order to respond to the double challenge from Marxism and from the technocratic ideology of the Pahlavi monarchy”.⁹¹ The whole revolutionary Islamic discourse was an amalgam of ideas not only of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, but also non-cleric intellectuals such as Ale-Ahmad, Ali Shari’ati, who “were all inspired by the problems of political repression, the state’s policies, and the highly uneven distribution of resources” and saw an “alternative Islamic society” as a solution for the current social problems.⁹²

The religious intellectuals and clerics of the revolutionary period were, however, focusing more on establishing a society based on Islamic morals and exoteric reading of religion. This, as Arjomand notes, resulted in the “official reading of religion” originating

⁹⁰ Ibid, 474.

⁹¹ Farhad Khoshrokhavar, “The New Intellectuals in Iran,” *Social Compass* 51 (2004): 192.

⁹² Mansoor Moaddel. *Class, Politics, and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993),144.

from “jurisprudential Islam (*eslam-e feqahati*).”⁹³ Yet, the Islamic ideology after the revolution was never monolithic and the challenges, that the government faced in implementing their vision of Islamic rule, gave rise to reformist trends of secular-minded but religious intellectuals. The ideologies of these intellectuals are secular only in the political sphere, never questioning the need for religion per se. Their secularism is characterized by “the refusal to justify the intervention of religion into politics on the basis of any kind of Islamic argument.”⁹⁴ Instead, they have tended to argue for the increasing presence of religion in one’s personal life. Jahanbakhsh describes it as

postrevolutionary religious intellectualism emphatically places "religious experience" or inward faith (*imari*) at the core of its definition of religion. Its religiosity is more geared to spiritual experiences of the divine than to ritualism or outward practices (*a'mal*).⁹⁵

While arguing that all post-revolutionary intellectuals focused on inward faith is perhaps too bold a claim, there did exist this tendency, which Ridgeon has also noted as a rise of “more personal religion” amongst intellectuals.⁹⁶ Furthermore, secularism, which at a first sight seems to suggest decrease of religion in society, has become one of the foundational political view of these post-revolutionary religious intellectuals, for whom it helps to facilitate the individual approach to religion without the interference of the state. It can be said therefore, that there is a trend towards inner or esoteric dimension of religion amongst

⁹³ Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 81.

⁹⁴ Khoshrokhavar, *Ibid*, 196.

⁹⁵ Jahanbakhsh, *Ibid* 486.

⁹⁶ Lloyd Ridgeon, “Introduction: Iranian Intellectuals (1997-2007),” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34 (2007): 262.

religious intellectuals, which in Iranian cultural context means drawing knowledge from the esoteric tradition of *'erfan*.

Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Taheri and Seyyed Mostafa Azmayesh

To examine, how exactly the inner dimension of religion is explored by some of the religious intellectuals, this subdivision introduces the background of Soroush, Taheri and Azmayesh. As their ideologies are, naturally, so closely linked to their identities and former activities, their short biographies help to understand their positions in Iran and development of their work. Therefore, before analyzing their more specific ideas on key concepts of mysticism, their background should be considered.

Abdolkarim Soroush (born Hossein Haj Faraj Dabbagh) is a thinker so popular that in Iran his name barely needs an introduction. While he is well-trained in both continental and Islamic philosophy/theosophy, he has masterfully combined ideas from both traditions, which has made him a forerunner of not only the ideas on religious pluralism and the new approach to mysticism, but also on democratization and secularization of Islamic government. Soroush was initially a supporter of the revolutionary regime and was personally appointed to the Advisory Council of the Cultural Revolution by Khomeini. Soon, however, his philosophical thought diverged from the government of post-revolutionary Iran. Since then he has become one of the harshest critics of the current regime and of politicizing Islam; in his view, religion is an entirely individual matter, a yearning that comes from inside, rather than a social matter or compulsion by law. Soroush

believes that religion can only flourish under a secular regime, where religion and state are separated.⁹⁷ Although Soroush argues for democracy and secular government, he does it only to argue for a mystical form of religion, which is free of societal and legal restraints.

As Soroush is one of the main references for research on reformist or post-revolutionary democratic intellectuals in Iran, his ideas are widely studied. Yet, in scholarly work on Soroush, the analyses of his political ideas clearly dominate the studies, overshadowing the strong mystical dimension of his work. The multidimensional character of Soroush's writings has made it possible for scholars to focus on different aspects of his thought, however his own mystic beliefs have yet to receive the attention they deserve.

One of the main scholars on Soroush's work, Forough Jahanbakhsh has focused on the rational dimension of Soroush's thought, in reforming Islamic theology. She recognizes his ideas as "Neo-Rationalism,"⁹⁸ which aim at reforming the foundation of the religious doctrines, in order to build "a cohesive and systematic intellectual edifice more suited to modern times."⁹⁹ Furthermore, she contends that because neo-rationalists reform the Islamic theology from its very foundation, "creating a new theology and new ethical theory is given precedence over legal and jurisprudential reforms."¹⁰⁰ Jahanbakhsh recognizes a wide usage of mysticism in Soroush's work; yet, she considers Soroush's references to mystics not to be a basis of his thought, but rather a point of agreement within those texts.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 267.

⁹⁸ Forough Jahanbakhsh, introduction to *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion* by Abdolkarim Soroush, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), xviii.

⁹⁹ Jahanbakhsh, *Ibid*, xxiii.

¹⁰⁰ Jahanbakhsh, *Ibid*, xxiii.

¹⁰¹ Jahanbakhsh, *Ibid*, xxii.

Some other authors such as Afshin Matin-asgari, Mohammed Hashas and Said Arjomand consider him the representative of a new wave of secular thought in Iran. While they all acknowledge that Soroush's arguments have mystical influences, none have elaborated how Soroush uses 'erfan in his works. Hashas considers historicism the central thought of Soroush's philosophy, as according to Soroush, the Qur'an and Prophet are heavily influenced by the specific time in which they appeared. Hashas summarizes Soroush's theory with words "There is no pure religion, and no pure Islam."¹⁰² However, when reading Soroush's work carefully, this claim proves to be misleading. Although Soroush believes that there is no pure interpretation of religion and that human understanding of religion is fallible, according to him there is an essence of religion which human beings will never be able to reach in its purest form:

When the rain of pure religion falls from the heavens of revelation unto the mud of human understanding, it becomes tainted by mental processes. And the moment minds embark on understanding this pure religion, they dilute and pollute it with their pre-existing data.¹⁰³

Therefore, there is no pure understanding, but the concept of pure religion is prevalent in his thinking. Another author, Matin-asgari recognizes the centrality of mystic thought in Soroush's ideology, but his main interest is in the development of Soroush's ideas and their influence on the Islamic discourse of Iran and not the mysticism of his philosophy.¹⁰⁴

Similarly to Matin-Asgari, Arjomand also argues for the mystical nature of Soroush's

¹⁰² Mohammad Hashas, "Abdolkarim Soroush: The Neo-Mu'tazilite that Buries Classical Islamic Political Theology in Defence of Religious Democracy and Pluralism," *Studia Islamica* 109 (2014): 152.

¹⁰³ Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 144.

¹⁰⁴ Afshin Matin-Asgari. "Abdolkarim Soroush and the secularization of Islamic thought in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 30 (1997): 102.

arguments, but he brings in his use of the “tradition of gnostic mysticism (*irfan*)”¹⁰⁵ and Rumi’s poetry only to claim that as the basis of Soroush’s idea of religious pluralism. All three authors bring out mysticism as an important influence or even basis for Soroush’s thoughts, but how exactly Soroush addresses mystic ideas to prove his arguments remains undiscussed.

As the studies above show, Soroush, is mainly considered as an influential thinker of secularism in Iran. Consequently, the works written on him have focused on his democratic and freedom-related beliefs. The majority of works on Soroush recognize that he draws from mystic sources. However, as this research is going to show, mysticism is the basis of Soroush’s thinking and should not be viewed as a secondary aspect of his ideology, but as the very foundation of his thought.

Mohammad Taheri is the second thinker whose mystic ideas are analyzed in this chapter. Similarly to Soroush, he is widely known in Iran as well, yet, his reputation is mostly negative. A mechanical engineer by training, he found mysticism for himself three decades ago and started sharing his perspective of it with others. He soon established an institution of interuniversal mysticism which sparked a movement that was briefly covered in the previous chapter under the subcategory “Popular *erfan*.” However, for the purpose of studying the ideology behind it and understanding one of the synthesized interpretations towards mysticism in contemporary discourse, Mohammad Taheri’s own thoughts, and not just the movement, will be reviewed here as well.

¹⁰⁵ Said Amir Arjomand. “The Reform Movement and the Debate on Modernity and Tradition in Contemporary Iran,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (2002): 723.

Taheri's Interuniversal Mysticism (*'erfan-e Halqeh/Keyhani*), propagates his own methods and interpretations of *'erfan*. As he has described it himself, "Interuniversal *'erfan* (*Halgheh*) is a mystical outlook and its insights conform to the framework of Iran's native *'erfan*."¹⁰⁶ What he means by "Iran's native *'erfan*," which he refers to throughout his books, remains unclear. Judging from his use of sources in which Iranian mystic poets dominate almost exclusively, one can only assume, that his understanding of "Iran's native *'erfan* means the mystic poetry tradition. Yet, without any analysis on the history or philosophy of Iranian mysticism in his books, he offers his own approach, claiming that "currently, Iran, a formerly well-known base for mysticism, has not thus far been able to present an understandable mystic framework to the world, a framework that everyone can easily understand, obtain, and apply pragmatically."¹⁰⁷

Taheri is perhaps one of the most controversial religious intellectuals/spiritual leaders in Iran today. The Iranian regime sentenced him to prison in 2011 accusing him of "blasphemy," to 74 lashes for "touching the wrists of female patients," and 900 million tumans in fines for "interfering in medical science," "earning illegitimate funds," and "distribution of audio-visual products and use of academic titles."¹⁰⁸ Regardless of his current criminal status in Iran, his ideas still spread domestically and abroad in the larger mystic community.

¹⁰⁶ Mohammad Ali Taheri, *Human from Another Outlook*, (Interuniversal Press, 2013), 19-20.

¹⁰⁷ Mohammad Ali Taheri, *Halqeh Mysticism (Interuniversal Mysticism)*. (Interuniversal Press, 2013), 5.

¹⁰⁸ "Mohammad Ali Taheri Imprisonment," Iran Human Rights, accessed April 17, 2017, <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2015/07/mohammad-ali-taheri-3/>.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there has been only one study discussing this movement and Taheri's thoughts as well, that of his follower Tina Eftekhar's study of Interuniversal mysticism from feminist perspective. Eftekhar's focus, however, is not on Taheri's ideology, but the experiences of the women who are the followers of this movement. She notes that the significance of Taheri's movement relies in presenting "an experience of spirituality in a modern way, rather than the traditional way that [women participating in the movement] know about, uses rational discourse, and also allows them to be spiritual (and if they wish, religious) but to distance themselves from the dominant orthodoxy of present-day Iranian Shi'ism."¹⁰⁹ In Eftekhar's analysis then, the value in Taheri's mysticism is in providing an alternative to the mainstream interpretation of religion in Iran. Her discussion of Taheri's ideology, however, lacks critical analysis of his interpretation of *'erfan*, possibly because of her own adherence to the movement.

The third figure discussed in this chapter is Seyyed Mostafa Azmayesh, who is a researcher in the fields of Islamic law and theology, a Sufi teacher and also "the official representative of the Shah Ni'matullah Wali Gonabadi Order outside of Iran."¹¹⁰ To recall from the previous chapter, Lewisohn suggested a way of survival for institutional Sufism after 1979 revolution, for which Azmayesh represents a perfect example of. Lewisohn wrote about moving Sufi orders outside of Iran. Azmayesh is not only the representative of Gonabadi order outside of Iran, but he has also established a Sufi school in Sorbonne,

¹⁰⁹ Eftekhar, *The Birth of a Celestial Light*, 142.

¹¹⁰ "Short Biography," Seyyed Mostafa Azmayesh's Website, April 17, 2017, <http://seyedazmayesh.com/about/>.

France where he is residing currently. Although he represents the institutional Sufi order, he has also acquired the individualistic approach to religion. Furthermore, his focus is not on barely transmitting esoteric knowledge of the Gonabadi order. Instead, similarly to Taheri, he synthesizes mystical ideas in order to popularize *'erfan* and reach a specifically Western audience. For this reason, he is also considered a “reformer in the history of Sufism” and for the purpose of the comparative analysis of mystical discourses, his perspective should be considered.¹¹¹

Usage of mystic principles

Soroush, Taheri and Azmayesh each argue for esoteric Islam while using mystical poetry as one of the references. Although the other sources that they use vary, such as Soroush referring extensively to philosophical works and Azmayesh to Sufi Shayks, references to mystic poetry and especially that of Rumi’s are common for all of them. Soroush has even said in one of his interviews that “My first and foremost attempt to understand the essence of religion originates in the works of Rumi,”¹¹² exemplifying the significance of Rumi for his mystical views. The fact that all these thinkers refer to Rumi in their writings, allows us to assume that they share the cultural literary knowledge of Islamic mysticism, which they have acquired from the mystical tradition of Persian poetry.

¹¹¹ “Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi School,” Sufi School, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.sufism.ir/sufischool.php>.

¹¹² Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, 17.

It is therefore, a common cultural knowledge, which each of them has used to transform the understanding of *'erfan* and even initiate religious movement like that of Taheri's Interuniversal mysticism. In order to analyze their ideology, then, their take on four mystic principles that are common theme in the works of Rumi's *Mathnawi* (and many other mystic poets respectively), will be reviewed.

The first mystic principle discussed here is the clear preference of esoteric over exoteric religion which Rumi refers to in following verses:

*Do not be intoxicated with these cups, which are (phenomenal) forms,
lest thou become a carver of idols and an idolater.
Abandon the cups, namely, the (phenomenal) forms; do not tarry!
There is wine in the cup, but it is not (derived) from the cup*¹¹³

Soroush's preference for mystical over rational or jurisprudential Islam can be observed in his argument for the existence of three types of religiosity, which he presents as standing in hierarchic order. Starting from the lowest, there is pragmatic or instrumental religiosity which is communal, and focused on religious practices, not religious essentials. Soroush calls it "the religiosity of the clergy"¹¹⁴ and says that "political, social, revolutionary or democratic religions are products of this kind of religiosity."¹¹⁵ The second form is discursive or reflective religiosity which questions all religious dogmas and can be identified by its "rational wonder."¹¹⁶ According to Soroush, supporters of both pragmatic and experiential religiosity criticize this form of 'rational wonder'. This is because, instead

¹¹³ Jalal ad'Din Rumi, *Mathnawi Ma'nawi 6*: transl. and ed. by Abdolkarim Soroush, (Tehran: Intesharat-e 'ilmi va Farhangi, 1996), 3707–3708.

¹¹⁴ Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 183.

¹¹⁵ Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 185.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 186.

of bringing one closer to religion, the hesitant and doubtful nature of discursive religiosity could push one further away from the essence of faith. The third form, experiential religiosity, is what the believer should strive for, as this is the religion of union while “the previous types of religiosities can be described as religiosities of distance.”¹¹⁷ When discussing the highest form of religiosity, Soroush characterizes experiential religiosity with everything he considers the best of religion throughout his writings: “passionate, revelatory, certain, individualistic, deterministic, quintessential, reconciliatory, ecstatic, intimate, visual, saintly, mystical and mysterious.”¹¹⁸ He goes on to argue that “the awesome mystery of the Truth enters the very being of the experiential believer like a mighty guest and renders him so stunned and silent that even his intonations and prayers take on a different form and content.”¹¹⁹ According to Soroush, then, the highest and truest form of religion is through a mystic experience, one wherein an individual yearns for a personal union with God.

Similarly to Soroush, Azmayesh focuses on the superiority of esoteric view by criticizing the exoteric approach. Yet, in comparison to Soroush’s criticism, Azmayesh’s views appear more radical. He argues that there are two versions of Islam, amongst which the spiritual tradition is what the Prophet aimed to convey to people. He writes:

During Mohammad’s lifetime, two religions seemed to have been born, under the same name and in the same time. That’s why in the Quran there are verses that criticize the false Muslims or “Monafeghoun”. These false Muslims were followers of their ancestral tribal traditions which were full of superstitions,

¹¹⁷ Ibid,190

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 192.

and had nothing to do with the spiritual-cultural teachings of Prophet Mohammad.¹²⁰

He believes that “gnostic people” have been the “real Muslims” who have carried on the true interpretation of the Qur’an, while “despotic dark systems” (including the Iranian regime) have misinterpreted Quranic knowledge and use it merely to gain power.¹²¹ Therefore, for Azmayesh, esoteric is not only superior, but the only true approach towards religion.

Like Soroush and Azmayesh, Taheri considers the esoteric approach and higher comprehension of religious knowledge superior. He wrote, “perceiving the insight of rituals and ceremonies is superior to [the outward performance of] rituals and ceremonies. No ceremony is valuable without apprehending its insight.”¹²² Although throughout his writings he focuses on the esoteric side, he tends to take the higher value of esoteric side as granted without further discussion of the difference of these approaches. Yet, it can be clearly seen, that all these thinkers prioritize the mystic and esoteric religion over the rules and rituals of exoteric religion- Azmayesh and Soroush advocating for it more directly and Taheri focusing on it primarily, without even feeling the need to explain why.

The second, and perhaps the most central, idea in mystic poetry is the multiplicity of the paths towards God, which demonstrates the liberal acceptance of the possible truthfulness of different religions and heterodox views within the religion. As Rumi says:

¹²⁰ Seyed Mostafa Azmayesh, *New Researches on the Quran: Why and How Two Versions of Islam Entered the History of Mankind*. (London: Mehraby Publishing, 2015). 244

¹²¹ “About Which Islam is the World Quarrelling,” Majzooban Noor News Agency, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.majzooban.org/en/index.php/news/2648-about-which-islam-is-the-world-quarrelling>.

¹²² Taheri, *Interuniversal Mysticism*, 45.

*From the place of view, O (thou who art the) kernel of Existence, there arises the difference between the true believer and the Zoroastrian and the Jew.*¹²³

Soroush argues for pluralist approach to religion, because he contends that the “religious texts and experiences naturally admit of a multitude of interpretations” and therefore it would be misleading to think that human mind could differentiate the one and perfect interpretation amongst all of them.¹²⁴ This idea, then, implies that Islam is not the only ultimate truth that might lead to God. He writes that “the followers of any path are entitled to persist in and pursue their own way” because as he goes on to explain, “the object is to understand one’s own path better and to digest the idea that plurality and diversity are natural, human, this-worldly and inevitable.”¹²⁵ In order to exemplify the truthfulness of different religions, he engages a story from his favorite mystic Rumi’s Mathnawi, which demonstrates that the pluralistic approach has always existed in the mystical tradition:

At one point, he [Rumi] says clearly and boldly that the difference between the Muslim, the Zoroastrian and the Jew is a matter of perspective [...] He says that the difference between these three does not lie in any disagreement over truth and falsehood, but, precisely, in the difference between their perspectives; and not in the perspectives of the believers at that, but in the perspectives of their prophets. There was only one multidimensional truth and the prophets viewed it from three different angles¹²⁶

¹²³ Jalal ad’Din Rumi, *Mathnawi Ma’nawi 3*: transl. and ed. by Abdolkarim Soroush, (Tehran: Intesharat-e ‘ilmi va Farhangi, 1996), 1256.

¹²⁴ Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 137.

¹²⁵ Ibid 143

¹²⁶ Ibid 127

This means that according to Soroush there is still one truth, which different prophets have referred to, however, there are many possible ways and religious views to reach this truth.

When discussing multiple paths to God, Azmayesh argued that in order to embark in the path of mysticism, one does not need to be a Muslim. While he considers the mystical approach the only true way of reaching God, he even disconnects Sufism from Islam, stating that “Gnosticism predates Islam, so it is therefore a mistake to consider Sufism a mystical branch of Islam, as its true origins also predate Islam.”¹²⁷ Isolating Sufism from Islam, however, contradicts his main argument regarding the two Islams — with gnostics posited as the carriers of the true version. While arguing for the openness of the Sufi path to anyone regardless of their religion, he thus undermines the Islamic-ness of the teachings of mystics, which is perhaps his method to appeal to Western audiences.

Taheri’s take on plurality of paths towards God differs considerably from Soroush’s and Azmayesh’s approaches. He wrote that interuniversal mysticism “includes all human beings, everybody regardless of their race, nationality, religion and personal beliefs, can accept its theoretical part and experience and make use of the practical aspect.”¹²⁸ He therefore, does not suggest that his approach to mysticism is just one of the paths towards getting closed to God. Instead, he proposes that pursuing this path could be for anybody as an additional, but not necessarily primary method for reaching God. These thinkers, then all engage with pluralism in different way, yet they all attempt to keep the path to God

¹²⁷ Seyed Mostafa Azmayesh, *Heart Meditation: An Introduction to Gnostic Heart Meditation*. (London: Mehraby Publishing: 2014), 9.

¹²⁸ Taheri, *Human from another outlook*, 21.

open to anyone, regardless of their religious beliefs. The fact that they are not exclusive to Islam in their rhetoric, shows not only their acceptance of religious freedom, but true appreciation of it.

Third principle analyzed here is moving towards spiritual perfection, which should be the aim of a human being's life:

*Whoever recognizes his own faults
Towards perfection rapidly then vaults,
But if you think you're perfect as you are,
You won't reach God for you have strayed too far*¹²⁹

As Soroush believes that spiritual perfection is reached through religion, he focuses on discussing the perfection on religion and how a believer should approach it. He therefore argued that “although we have a final religion, we cannot have a final understanding of religion. And, although we have a perfect religion, we do not have perfect religious knowledge.”¹³⁰ By claiming that there does not exist perfect religious knowledge, Soroush suggests that all the understandings of religion are potentially fallible. What it means for a believer is that no current doctrine should be taken as true religious knowledge. Soroush contends that pure religion still exists, which is flawless, but the human interpretations of it are inevitably flawed.¹³¹ But how, then, can one reach spiritual perfection? Soroush explained that Muslims should still try to reach the true essence of religion, which would

¹²⁹ Jalal ad'Din Rumi, *Mathnawi Ma'nawi* 1, transl. by Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 3225-3226.

¹³⁰ Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 52.

¹³¹ Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, ed. Sadri, Mahmoud & Sadri, Ahmad, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31.

be through the religious experience similar to that of the Prophet.¹³² That religious experience, however, is almost identical with the experience of mystics, the difference being “an element of mission” in the Prophet’s experience.¹³³ Throughout his work he has considered the experience of mystics closest to that of prophethood, which means that he clearly sets the mystic form of religion above any other approaches or interpretations. Therefore, in his view, to reach the closest to the perfection, the essence of faith (rather than an interpretation of it), he contends that one must follow the path of the mystics.

Taheri does not talk about the perfectness of the religion. Instead, he focuses on the personal journey towards perfection for which, he considers his interpretation of mysticism as a great tool. In his view, the purpose of human beings is to reach a spiritual state of unity with God, or *Kamal*, which means “completeness, and refers to the human’s spiritual growth toward completion (perfection).”¹³⁴ In order to reach the state of *kamal*, however, the interuniversal mysticism (*erfan-e halgheh*) is helpful. He wrote that the whole “purpose of this mystical branch is to help the human being in reaching *Kamal* and exaltation; a movement from the world of multiplicity toward the world of unity.”¹³⁵ The multiplicity that Taheri refers to here is very different from the pluralism that Soroush described before. Taheri’s multiplicity does not refer to the possibility of multiple ways of reaching the divine knowledge. Instead, the multiplicity he talks about has a negative meaning and stands for “division” between people and individuals, who consider their

¹³² Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 199.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 6.

¹³⁴ Taheri, *Human From Another Outlook*, 13.

¹³⁵ Taheri, *Human From Another Outlook*, 21.

worlds separate from each other. This stands in opposition to the unity “in which an individual perceives the Unified Body of the universe and the universe with all its constituents are perceived as divine manifestations. In such a state, individuals consider themselves in connection and unity with all constituents of the universe.”¹³⁶ Therefore, his notion of unity versus multiplicity is a matter of recognition of either a holistic view of the unity of all living beings in the universe and God or the incapability of perceiving this mystical truth, which leaves a person spiritually isolated. According to Taheri, then the perfection towards which a believer should thrive, lies in the (individual) feeling of unity and connection with the universe.

Azmayesh mainly relies on the traditional Sufi path in reaching perfection, however, he also talks about gnostic heart meditation as a method to get closer to God.¹³⁷ While this method is largely a rebranding of Sufi rituals, such as rhythmic repetition of God’s name dhikr, he also uses also mentions the importance of opening one’s third eye, which cannot be reached solely by ascetic practices.¹³⁸ Rather than depend on our five senses, this approach, he argues, allows us to transcend our physical constraints.¹³⁹ He thus engages both Sufi methods and the esoteric Yoga ideologies so popular in West in order to popularize the Sufi mystic approach toward perfection and seeking God. The perfection, that all these intellectuals address seem to have the same goal of reaching God. However,

¹³⁶ Taheri, *Human Worldview*, 64.

¹³⁷ Azmayesh, *Heart Meditation*, 8-9.

¹³⁸ “Part 2 - Introducing Sufism & Gnosticism in a simplified language by Dr Seyed Mostafa Azmayesh,” Youtube, accessed April 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=26kRYQOdxIU>.

¹³⁹ “Part 1 - Introducing Sufism & Gnosticism in a simplified language by Dr Seyed Mostafa Azmayesh,” Youtube, accessed April 17, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPC_Txw1CbA.

their methods have proven to be different, with Soroush advocating for the experience of the Prophet, which he believes was similar to that of mystics, Taheri claiming this knowledge for his own institution, and Azmayesh rebranding Sufi practices, in order to make the path to perfection appealing to more people.

The last principle, which is discussed here, is believer's need for a spiritual guide, as Rumi says:

The shadow (protection) of the (spiritual) Guide is better than praising God (by one's self): a single (feeling of) contentment is better than a hundred viands and trays (of food).¹⁴⁰

The notion of guardianship or *vilaya* is an important concept both for Sufis and in Shi'is.¹⁴¹ In Shi'i Islam, spiritual guide is the last Imam "who guides and initiates mankind into the mystical or inner truth of religion. [...] The Imam is therefore, at one and the same time, master and friend in the journey of the spirit."¹⁴² After the occultation of the last Imam, no human being can take this spiritual guidance role of Imam, however, the hidden Imam continues to guide believers in their thoughts and dreams. For Sufis, it is a living Sufi Shaykh or master who teaches his disciples about the mystic "Path."¹⁴³ As a member of a Sufi order, only Azmayesh approaches this concept in the traditional Sufi way, having

¹⁴⁰ Jalal ad'Din Rumi, *Mathnawi Ma'nawi 6*: transl. and ed. by Abdolkarim Soroush, (Tehran: Intesharat-e 'ilmi va Farhangi, 1996), 3784.

¹⁴¹ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 157.

¹⁴² Momen, *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 101.

written two volumes on the teachings of the Sheikh Kamel and emphasizing on the need of “direction of the master.”¹⁴⁴ Soroush and Taheri, however have extended this notion.

While Soroush clearly identifies himself as a Shi’i Muslim,¹⁴⁵ his understanding of guardian appears as an amalgam of Shi’i and Sufi notions. He believes that “God has many guardians, but each person has their own specific guardian. And this guardian may be alive or dead.”¹⁴⁶ He also argues that for the guardian, there is “no need to seek physical, family links with the Prophet. It is enough for them to be his spiritual descendants.”¹⁴⁷ Therefore, as opposed to Shi’i belief that Imam is the only spiritual guardian of Muslims who also has to have blood lineage with the Prophet, Soroush considers the spiritual connection between the guardian and believer superior. Yet, he emphasizes the individuality of everyone’s guardians, which suggests that the Sufi master of specific Sufi order could not represent the true guardian for all the disciples as well. Therefore, his notion of guardianship transcends both Shi’i and Sufi traditional understandings of the spiritual guardianship, where the believer chooses his/her personal master specific to one’s one spiritual path and abilities.

Taheri never uses the mystic notion of *vilaya* when talking about guidance, instead he talks about *rahnemayi*, which has a similar meaning, but does not have an immediate association with the spiritual guardianship as *vilaya* does. Yet, he argues that in order to reach “*Kamal* and transcendence,” believers need “guidance mediators [...]that assist

¹⁴⁴ Seyyed Mostafa Azmayesh, *The Teachings of a Sufi Master*, (Simorgh Sufi Society, 2016), 22.

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j21bVIndNIQ>

¹⁴⁶ Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 257.

¹⁴⁷ Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 258

human beings in any possible way to identify and perceive the laws governing the universe.”¹⁴⁸ He also recognizes that there are “religious mediators, who due to their unique characteristics (in this arena) have striven to decode awareness, convert it to simple and applied language, and transfer it to others. They are teachers and distinguished models for humanity who point toward unity.”¹⁴⁹ For Taheri, therefore, the charm of the guardian seems to rely in the simplification and ability to transfer knowledge to people. However, he does not talk about personal guardianship like Soroush, but leaves an impression of multiplicity of “mediators” in one’s path towards divine knowledge.

Each of these thinkers have their own agendas, however, they all aim at bringing believers closer to esoteric and not exoteric interpretations of religion. Soroush, as a forerunner of reform movement, has aimed at changing the way Islam is seen in Iran. He emphasizes on the superiority of esoteric approach with the aim to argue for individualistic religion as opposed to the post-revolutionary enforcement of communal religion by Iranian authorities. Soroush’s secular esoteric project was aimed at Iranian policy-makers and wide readership, therefore it is noticeably more comprehensive than any other thinker’s ideas discussed here. Yet, after he left Iran as a result of constant harassments by the conservatives, the span and character of spreading his ideas has changed. Although Soroush’s ideas have been influential in large scale, he no longer tries to change the whole Iranian society. Instead he has founded the School of Rumi, through which he shares his

¹⁴⁸ Taheri, *Interuniversal Mysticism*, 45.

¹⁴⁹ Taheri, *ibid.*

mystic contemplations of Rumi's verses and ideology with his numerous followers in social media channels.

Taheri believes that Iranian mysticism has been too complex and inaccessible for wider audience. He has aimed at establishing a more simplistic, but at the same time systematic interpretation to mystical Islam. Therefore, he wanted to bring his interpretation of *'erfan* to masses and attempted to do it through the institution Interuniversal mysticism, that he established. Unlike Soroush, Taheri has not aimed at changing how religion is perceived in society. The purpose of his work has been spreading his own interpretation of mysticism and trying to reach as many people as he can.

Azmayesh has, similarly to Taheri, aimed at simplifying the mystic knowledge in order to reach wider audience. However, living in France, Azmayesh tries to appeal to foreign audience. In addition to his endeavor to attract more people to Sufism, he has another agenda as well. As a spokesperson of Gonabadi Sufi order outside of Iran, he is vocally fighting for the human rights of Iranian Sufis, while disregarding Iranian regime's interpretation of Islam.

Although each of these thinkers have distinct agendas, their discussion of key principles of mysticism demonstrates their common appreciation of individualistic religion as opposed to Iranian clergy's communal moral and ritual based Islam. They are therefore trying to argue for *'erfan* based Islam, which provides more flexibility of different individual views towards religion. While all of them advocate for religious guidance, this guidance is not based on religious hierarchy and blind obedience of a believer. Instead, they enlighten the ideas of guidance to argue for individuals' own selection for religious

teacher. In arguing for these liberal values of an individual in today's Iran, they have resorted in *'erfan*, which is dynamic enough to include their various interpretations on the matter.

Intellectual reformers elsewhere in the Islamic world

When Arjomand describes “integrative social movements” such as the Islamic Revolution through a “search for cultural authenticity,”¹⁵⁰ the liberal interpretation of Islam by Soroush, Taheri and Azmayesh represent a continuation of the same quest for an indigenous Islamic identity. As Majid Mohammadi argues, with the formation of an Islamic government that enforced religious rules in society, the revival of Islamic ideas did not end, but found a “new beginning.”¹⁵¹

There is no doubt that the scale to which mysticism penetrated the culture and religious views of Iranians is unique to the Shi'i character of Iranian Islam. The liberal secular values of these thinkers and especially of Soroush, who has been the most influential figure of both Iranian reform and mystic Islam, did not emerge in a vacuum. Sunni countries, in fact, have produced likeminded intellectuals who have turned towards esoteric Islam while arguing for liberal secular values. There are intellectuals, such as An-Na'im in Sudan and Fethullah Gülen in Turkey, who also gravitate towards esoteric, rather

¹⁵⁰ Said Amir Arjomand, “Iran's Islamic Revolution in Comparative Perspective,” *World Politics* 38 (Apr., 1986): 402.

¹⁵¹ Majid Mohammadi. *Political Islam in Post-Revolutionary Iran. Shi'ite Ideologies in Islamist Discourse.* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2015), 5.

than exoteric, Islam while espousing liberal values. Although in Shi'i Iran, mysticism is in one way or another an inseparable part of the religious discourse, Sunnis engaging mystic ideology signals their involvement with Sufism.

In Turkey, the most influential reformist is Fethullah Gülen, whose ideology has initiated the popular Gülen movement, which is “deeply influenced by the worldview of Turkish Sufism.”¹⁵² As noted in his personal webpage, he is a “Turkish Muslim scholar, thinker, author, poet, opinion leader and educational activist who supports interfaith and intercultural dialogue, science, democracy and spirituality and opposes violence and turning religion into a political ideology”.¹⁵³ Hakan Yavuz considers both Fethullah Gülen as well as Abdolkarim Soroush as “contemporary generation of modernists” who “sought to free Islamic thought and practice from its rigid and puritanical interpretation and promote revival and reform to meet the modern spiritual and temporal needs of the Muslim world.”¹⁵⁴ Ebaugh notes that in his teenage years, Gülen used to participate in *cemaat* circle of Sufi master Nursi, which is “a specific Turkish form of Islamic self-organization that evolved after the [Atatürk’s] outlawing of the Sufi orders.”¹⁵⁵ As Sufi orders have been a kind of taboo in Turkish society, Gülen never initiated a Sufi order himself. Still, he has published several volumes on the “Key Concepts of the Practice of Sufism.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Hakan Yavuz, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gulen Movement*. ed by M. Hakan Yavuz, John L. Esposito. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003). 10

¹⁵³ “Introducing Fethullah Gulen,” Fethullah Gulen Website, accessed April 17, 2017, <https://www.fgulen.com/en/fethullah-gulens-life/about-fethullah-gulen/introducing-fethullah-gulen>.

¹⁵⁴ Yavuz, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, 4.

¹⁵⁵ Helen Rose Ebaugh, *The Gülen Movement: A Sociological Analysis of a Civic Movement Rooted in Moderate Islam*, (London, New York: Springer, 2010), 25.

¹⁵⁶ In Turkish *Kalbin Zümrüt Tepeleri*, meaning “Emerald Hills of Heart.” Gülen, F. *Kalbin Zümrüt Tepeleri* (New Jersey: Blue Dome Press, 2016).

Gülen, similar to Soroush and other Iranian spiritual intellectuals, primarily describes religion as an “inwardly experienced and felt phenomenon,” while criticizing the political usage of Islam.¹⁵⁷ In the past he has said that “in Turkey, which is a secular state, politicizing religion is treason to the spirit of Islam. Religion should not be a tool of politics.”¹⁵⁸ However, he is not completely impartial to the relationship between religion and politics. He believes that democracy could be the most compatible form of governance for the needs of individuals today. As he argues,

If human beings are considered as a whole, without disregarding the spiritual dimension of their existence and their spiritual needs, and without forgetting that human life is not limited to this mortal life and that all people have a great craving for eternity, democracy could reach the peak of perfection and bring even more happiness to humanity. Islamic principles of equality, tolerance, and justice can help it do just this.¹⁵⁹

In consideration of his ideas and religious background, it is clear that Gülen is arguing for individualistic esoteric Islam, rather than a politicized Islam.

Abdullahi An-Na'im from Sudan is perhaps one of the most vocal advocates for the reform and development of Shari'a law within Islam. As he said himself, “the shari'a is not heavenly-revealed law in every aspect. It is what jurists in the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries

¹⁵⁷“A Comparative Approach to Islam and Democracy,” Fethullah Gulen Website, Accessed April 17, 2017, <https://www.fgulen.com/en/fethullah-gulens-works/thought/recent-articles/24875-a-comparative-approach-to-islam-and-democracy>

¹⁵⁸“Gülen’s Views on Secularism,” Fethullah Gulen Website, Accessed April 17, <https://www.fgulen.com/en/gulen-movement/fethullah-gulen-and-the-gulen-movement-in-100-questions/48023-what-is-the-view-of-fethullah-gulen-on-secularism>.

¹⁵⁹“A Comparative Approach to Islam and Democracy,” Fethullah Gulen Website, Accessed April 17, 2017, <https://www.fgulen.com/en/fethullah-gulens-works/thought/recent-articles/24875-a-comparative-approach-to-islam-and-democracy>

understood God and the Prophet to have meant. Any modern Muslim has the right to interpret the original source.”¹⁶⁰ While criticizing the way Islamic law has been interpreted and implemented, he calls “for the state to be secular, not for secularizing society.”¹⁶¹ Furthermore, he argues “for keeping the influence of the state from corrupting the genuine and independent piety of persons in their communities”.¹⁶² His argument for a secular state therefore, is similar to Soroush’s attempt to prevent politics from polluting religion.

While Soroush and Gülen crafted their ideologies for the Muslims of their own countries,¹⁶³ An-Nai’im aims at a wider movement amongst Muslims around the world. He notes the advocacy of his writings, saying that the draft of his monograph *Islam and the Secular state*, which he considers the “culmination of [his] life work,” was translated to “Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, Bengali, French, Persian, Russian, Turkish, and Urdu” languages and then published in his university’s website, “for the purpose of generating debate among Muslims in their own languages about the ideas presented in this study.”¹⁶⁴ Making it available in languages spoken by most Muslims exemplifies his global aims. Although An-Na’im’s reform project is inspired by his Sufi teacher Mahmoud Mohammad Taha, who was executed for heresy, An-Na’im rarely makes mystic claims like Soroush in

¹⁶⁰ Abdullahi Ahmad An-Na’im and Judith Pierce, “Abdullahi Ahmad an-Na’im: Sudan's Republican Brothers: "An Alternative Islamic Ideology,"" *MERIP Middle East Report*, No. 147 (1987), 41.

¹⁶¹ Abdullahi Ahmad An-Na’im, *Islam and Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari’a*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 8.

¹⁶² An-Na’im, *Ibid*, 8.

¹⁶³ Before both emigrated to United States (Gülen in 1999 and Soroush in 2000), they never wrote in a language other than Turkish or Persian respectively.

¹⁶⁴ The website where the book was uploaded was (www.law.emory.edu/fs). See: An-Na’im, *Islam and the Secular State*, ix-x.

Iran or Gülen in Turkey.¹⁶⁵ His main concern is to convince Muslims around the world to think beyond a marriage of state and faith. Although he believes religion flourishes most in secular societies, he does not explore how one may achieve divine knowledge. Therefore, similar to Soroush and Gülen, he argues for higher religious freedom through reducing the influence of Islamic jurisprudence. One may only speculate his appreciation for esoteric Islam.

Global Characteristics of Local Reforms

These intellectuals are not in conversation with each other, nor do the reformists outside Iran engage the same mystic sources. Their shared liberalism, emphasis on inward religious reflection, and appreciation of democracy prove they belong to a wider Islamic movement. They argue against the politicization of religion while engaging with politics to advocate for their own interpretation of the faith. All of the intellectuals mentioned in this chapter live in exile (except Taheri who is in prison) and were harassed by their countries' regimes before moving abroad.¹⁶⁶ Not only do their ideologies represent a criticism of the current regimes of their countries, but some (like Soroush and Azmayesh) have even directly attacked their governments. During the Green Movement in 2009,

¹⁶⁵ Stephen Howard, "Mahmoud Mohammed Taha: A Remarkable Teacher in Sudan," *Northeast African Studies* 10 (1988), 91.

¹⁶⁶ On Soroush see: Jahanbakhsh, "Introduction," in *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* by Soroush, Abdolkarim, x., Taheri: <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2016/05/mohammad-ali-taheri-7/>, Gülen: Yavuz, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State* 43., an-Na'im: <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/aannaim/about/>.

Soroush said in one of his letters to Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, that “we will see religious tyranny crumble and we will rejoice.”¹⁶⁷ Similarly, Azmayesh has called Iranians to unite against the Islamic Republic in the United Nations Human Rights Council. “We shouldn’t just complain,” he said, “we have to stand up to the regime, and in order to do this we need united action between all Iranians.”¹⁶⁸ They are in opposition to the current governments, which also makes it impossible for them to make any political change from within their countries. Therefore, they have all resorted to spreading their ideas through the Internet and social media channels. The tremendous use of technology and access to the Internet thus facilitate the spread of ideas.

While in Iran, Turkey and Sudan these mystical thinkers are often political dissidents, the esoteric movements in countries like Morocco and Algeria have enjoyed governmental support.¹⁶⁹ Muedini notes that the regimes of these countries “use Sufism in attempts to influence individuals on Islam, while aiming to challenge other Islamist organizations.”¹⁷⁰ Therefore, the esoteric movements of Islam are not by default in opposition to ruling regimes of the countries they appear. Instead, their position and the level of their political activism depends on the political ideology of the country, and either it is a secular state feeling threatened by legalistic Islamist movements such as Morocco

¹⁶⁷ “Soroush’s Letter to Khamenei,” Abdolkarim Soroush Website, Accessed April 17, 2017, <http://drsoroush.com/en/religious-tyranny-is-crumbing-rejoice/>.

¹⁶⁸ “United Nation Human Right Council in Geneva, 17th Session 30th May to 17th June 2011,” Youtube, Accessed April 17, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQkr_ozFI0w.

¹⁶⁹ Fait Muedini, “The Promotion of Sufism in the Politics of Algeria and Morocco,” *Islamic Africa* 3 (2012): 221.

¹⁷⁰ Muedini, *Ibid.*

and Algeria or legalist Islamic regime in fear of the popularity of esoteric movements such as Iran and Sudan.

The legalistic approach to Islam, implemented by Iranian authorities after the Islamic revolution, used more rigid and well-established methods of learned Islamic scholars interpreting Islam. Interpreting *'erfan*, which has regained popularity during the reform era, however, does not have a clear method or approach outside of Sufi orders. It is therefore more dynamic and open to interpretation. None of the intellectuals discussed here are Islamic scholars (Taheri does not even have a background in philosophy). Yet, they contribute to the interpretation of Islam by positing a role for mysticism in Iranian society.

Although Soroush, Azmayesh and Taheri have distinct agendas, they all believe, like the intellectuals before the revolution, that Islam is the solution for the problems in the society. However, they address the religiosity of individual, and not how religion should be implemented in society as a whole. They criticize the legalistic and ritual approach to Islam while emphasizing the multiple paths towards reaching God, using the mystic concepts found in literary mystical tradition. When Azmayesh and Taheri mainly aim at making mysticism accessible for wider audience, then Soroush has tried to change the way religion is thought of in the society and argue for the focus of mystical approach. Although these mystical tendencies of Iranian thinkers are specific to Iranian mystical culture and Shi'i tradition, there are similar tendencies taking place elsewhere in the Islamic world, which suggests that the rise of liberal esoteric Islam is a wider trend, of which Iran is a part of.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the characteristics of contemporary Iranian mysticism and followed its growing popularity as a wider trend in late 20th century Islamic world. It argued that as a result of the disappointment in the legalistic and literary interpretation of Islam enforced by Khomeini in Iran after the 1979 revolution, there has been move towards the mystic inner dimension of religion in the Iranian public sphere. This move towards mystic Islam, however, has not entailed a mere strengthening of already present mysticism such as the theological '*erfan* accepted by the clergy or institutional Sufi orders. Instead, '*erfan* has come to be re-interpreted in non-hierarchic terms by religious intellectuals, who prioritize the inner dimension of religion and individual religiosity over the rule-based communal religion of the regime.

The first chapter of this thesis was concerned with the historic developments of Iranian Shi'i mysticism that Iranians prefer to call '*erfan* in order to explain the current manifestations of mysticism in Iran. It argued that the turbulent events of the 20th century, especially the 1979 revolution and the reform movement that began in late 1980s, have not only changed the role of Islam in the Iranian political sphere, but transformed the usage of mystical Islam in Iran. In order to understand the current mystic trends in Iran, this chapter focused on two main themes: mystical theology and its developments; and 20th century political changes and four manifestations of '*erfan* in Iran. It demonstrated that in addition to the two main instances of '*erfan*, which are the theoretical '*erfan-e eslami* and the

institutional, Sufi order based mysticism, during the reform movement a more individualistic *'erfan* emerged amongst intellectuals and in the popular culture.

Although there are some scholars who have studied the theoretical mysticism and Sufi order based *'erfan* in contemporary Iran, the variations and transformations of *'erfan* that have appeared in late 20th century have rarely received scholarly attention. Possible reasons for this low interest are the priority of other burning matters (such as the political revolutionary history), or transformations having gone unnoticed. There is also a chance that some Islamic scholars hold similar views to that of the theology professor whom I met in Iran, who contended that these different approaches are not “true” *'erfan*, and therefore not worthy of study. Yet, I have contended in this study, that just because these newer tendencies do not fit into the traditional categories does not mean they should be ignored. They should be observed as a part of the contemporary discourse of Iranian mysticism, for which purpose, the specific ideologies of three intellectuals were considered in second chapter.

As intellectuals are often the initiators and developers of new ideologies and even social movements, chapter two engages with the mystic ideas of three Iranian intellectuals, namely Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Taheri and Seyyed Mostafa Azmayesh. I argued that all these intellectuals advocate for *'erfan* in individual's life and transform the meaning of it to suit the contemporary Iranian society. While their approach to *'erfan* varies, they all share the literary knowledge of Persian mystic poetry, which has informed their opinion, but does not represent the only source of their mystic knowledge. They have used the key concepts of mysticism as found in mystic poetry and all of them cite Rumi's teachings

throughout their work. Mystical Persian poetry is a literary tradition, with which all Iranians grow up and are exposed to. Therefore, the fact that these intellectuals use it extensively to convey their ideas makes their work appeal to many Iranians who share the admiration towards Persian mystic poetry.

This chapter followed four key concepts. The first is the clear preference of esoteric religion over exoteric. While Taheri takes the superiority of the inner dimension of religion as granted, then Soroush and Azmayesh present it in opposition to the legalistic religion that the Iranian *ulama* represents. Therefore, they talk about mysticism not only as a higher form of religion, but they use it also to criticize the regime's interpretation and application of Islam.

The second concept is multiplicity of paths towards God. This principle, which Soroush himself calls pluralism, has become the foundation of his ideology. Soroush argues that while there exists one religious truth and one God, multiple religious traditions can take one to God. He contends that everyone should remain on their own religious path and perfect it in attempts of reaching God. Therefore, when Soroush argues for the multiplicity of paths towards God, he means the possible truthfulness of different religious traditions for a believer. Azmayesh and Taheri, however interpret it differently. Neither of them are willing to consider any other path than their own as possibly true, yet, they believe in multiplicity of paths towards their version of Islam. Azmayesh therefore argues that people from any religious background can take up Sufi path and Taheri talks about the *erfan-e halgheh* respectively.

The third concept is moving towards spiritual perfection, where Soroush's approach stands out once again. He talks about the perfectness of religion, claiming that all the religious knowledge is human interpretation and therefore fallible. However, perfect religion can be reached by experiencing God as the Prophet did. This experience, he contends, is closest to the experience of mystics. In matters of perfection, Taheri resorts to the need of reaching unity (*kamal*), which his institution helps the believer with. Azmayesh, focuses on taking the Sufi path, but transforms some of the concepts like calling *dhikr* a heart meditation and mentions opening one's third eye.

The last key concept that was discussed is the idea of guardianship (*vilaya*). Here Soroush extends both the Sufi interpretation of the guardianship of the Sufi Shaykh and the Shi'i concept of the twelfth Imam as the spiritual guardian of Muslims, by saying that everyone should have their own individual guardian, who does not need to have blood lineage (instead a spiritual one) with the Prophet. As a member of Sufi order, Azmayesh's vision of spiritual guardian is Sufi order based, seeing the Sufi Shaykh as a guardian of his disciples. Taheri, however, talks about many guardians in one's path towards God, and by doing so, neglects the individual relationship between the disciple and his/her guardian.

The diversity with which Soroush, Azmayesh and Taheri approach these key concepts exemplifies the fluidity of *'erfan* in talking about religious matters. Soroush and Taheri do not belong to any Sufi order and are also not members of the Iranian *ulama*, which means that their ideas are not limited by the ideologies of these groups. Although Azmayesh is a member of Sufi order, he has not fully adopted the more rigid institutional treatment of mysticism, which may be because Sufi orders adapted to the post-

revolutionary Iranian religious atmosphere. While they all advocate for the mystic form of Islam, *'erfan*, they do not use it the way Sufis and some members of the *ulama* (such as Khomeini when he was alive) have done. The *'erfan* of these thinkers is not limited to a selected few and does not approve of religious hierarchy. Instead of keeping it in closed circles, they aim to bring it to a wider public. Yet, in bringing it to a larger audience, they in no way mean to implement it on a political level, like the legalists have done. They aim to promote the rise of a more individual religion, which focuses solely on one's own religiosity and connection to God, where following the level of engagement with religious morals and rituals is an individual duty. This approach to Islam would remove religion inevitably from the political sphere, as religiosity cannot be a matter of the government or in fact, any institution. Therefore, by using *'erfan* as the interpretation to Islam, these thinkers stand for a secular state, decreasing religious hierarchy, liberal values and religious freedom.

By exploring the ideas of intellectuals elsewhere in Islamic world such as Fethullah Gülen in Turkey and An-Na'im in Sudan, it becomes evident that the liberal secular values towards Islam and using an esoteric approach is a wider trend in the Islamic world. However, all the thinkers discussed in this thesis are in opposition to their governments. This shows not only that their ideas have emerged as a response to the dissatisfaction with the exoteric Islam that these regimes encourage, but also that this movement only operates on the level of ordinary people and not politicians who could make social changes more easily. How the liberal esoteric Islam will change and which forms it will take in the Islamic world will be only seen in the future.

As it was mentioned before, there has been a lack of studies in the field of contemporary Iranian mysticism. This thesis has contributed to filling this gap, yet, there is an abundance of material which should be studied further, but went beyond the scope of this project. Although the main focus here was on the mystical discourse of intellectuals, the other three manifestations of mysticism that were listed in the first chapter, deserve more attention as well. When discussing the *'erfan*, which is acceptable for Iranian regime, this thesis only looked at Khomeini's views with which the current supreme leader Khamenei has also agreed with. However, Iranian *ulama* is not a uniform group with identic ideology. It is very likely that within 30 years of Islamic rule in Iran, the ideas of *ulama* on mysticism have changed as well. And even if for some reason they have not, there is a need for a more comprehensive study on leading ayatollahs' views, to be able to make such a claim.

Similarly, institutional Sufism has not been studied since 2007, which was the year that the most influential Sufi order Nematollahi Gonabadi opened their own news agency to report news on Sufis. According to their website, founding this news agency has brought Gonabadi Sufis further disapproval and harassment from the regime. At the same time, the page has also managed to make the voice of Sufis heard outside of Iran. There is a high chance that the Gonabadi Sufis' situation and perhaps even mystical views have transformed after becoming more vocal through their website. In order to study the inner dynamics of Gonabadi Sufi order and not just their own media reports, however, an ethnographic study becomes crucial.

Ethnographic study would be necessary also for further research on popular '*erfan* in Iran. In my travels to Iran I came across people who claim to be Sufis without adhering to any Sufi order, or also just people highly appreciating '*erfan* and living according to their interpretation of it. Although meeting with these people sparked my interest for research, I did not carry out an ethnographic study amongst these groups and instead focused on ideology of intellectuals. This thesis has only noted an existence of such a phenomenon, while studying the extent of this movement and the leading ideologies within it would require an ethnographic fieldwork.

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