

granted ejaza or permission to transmit knowledge by each of the twelve Imams.

In 1186/1772-73, at the age of twenty, Shaikh Ahmad left al-Ahsá for the ʿatabat or Shiʿite shrines in Arab Iraq, apparently with the aim of studying there under the ʿolamaʿ who had congregated in the region under the general direction of Aqa-ye Behbahani. Not long after his arrival, however, plague broke out in Iraq, and he was forced to return to al-Ahsa. He married his first wife shortly after this and appears to have abandoned any plans to return to the ʿatabat. The next twenty years or so were spent in al-Ahsá and in Bahrayn proper (where he spent four years), during which period he studied Shiʿite feqh and kalam and read works on “theosophy” or “divine wisdom” (hekma eláhiya), including texts by Molla Sadra and Mohsen Fayz. He received what seems to have been his first formal ejaza in 1205/1790 from Shaikh Ahmad b. Hasan Bahrani Damasani, a pupil of Shaikh Yusof Bahrani. His earliest known works also date from about this time, among them Serat al-yaqin (a commentary on the Tabsera of Helli) and al-Resálat al-qadriya (on the subject of qadr). Now in his late thirties, he had succeeded in attracting some attention in the region, but apparently more as a saint than as a scholar.

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The Wahhabi threat to the Bahrayn region impelled the shaikh to leave al-Ahsa by the early 1790s, again in the direction of the shrines in Iraq. His stay was prolonged this time, and he studied under several Shiʿite ʿolamaʿ, mostly pupils of Aqa-ye Behbahani, who had recently died. Before long he obtained comprehensive ejazat from at least five teachers: Sayyed Mohammad-Mahdi Tabatabaʿi Bahr-al- ʿolum (1209/1794-95), Shaikh Jaʿfar Najafi, Sayyed ʿAli Tabatabaʿi, Aqa Mirza Mohammad-Mahdi b. Abiʿl-Qasem Musawi Šahrestani (1209/1794-95), and Shaikh Hosayn b. Mohammad Darazi Bahrani, a nephew of Shaikh Yusof Bahrani (1214/1799). After the receipt of this last ejaza, Ahsaʿi began a period of shifting from place to place in southern Iraq, including three periods of residence in Basra.

In 1221/1806, he performed a pilgrimage to Mašhad. Returning through Yazd, he was persuaded by the populace to remain there; thus began a stay of almost twenty years in Iran, during which the shaikh’s reputation spread throughout the country and beyond. By 1223/1808, Fath-ʿAli Shah began to correspond with him, probably at the suggestion of Ebrahim Khan Zahir-al-dawla, the governor of Kerman, who had become one of the shaikh’s most devoted admirers. Ahsaʿi spent the winter of 1808-09 as a guest of the king in Tehran, but could not be persuaded to transfer his residence there permanently. Returning to Yazd, he settled down more seriously to write the letters and commentaries on which his growing fame was to be built.

By 1229/1814 tension seems to have developed between Ahsaʿi and some of

the notables of Yazd, probably because of his growing influence in the region. Leaving Yazd, he made for Kermanšah, probably on the invitation of Mohammad-ʿAli Mirza, under whose patronage he remained, with occasional absences, until about one year after the prince's death in 1237/1821. Several of the shaikh's most important works belong to this period, including the Šarh al-ziarat al-jameʿat al-kabira (1230/1815; Tehran, 1267/1850-51), regarded as his magnum opus; a commentary on the Resalat al-ʿelmiya of Mohsen Fayz (1230/1815); the Šarh al-fawaʿid (1233/1818; Tabriz[?], 1272/1856), a commentary on his earlier Fawaʿid; al-Resalat al-soltaniya (1234/1818), in reply to questions from Fath-ʿAli Shah; the lengthy Šarh al-mašaʿer (1234/1818; Tabriz, 1278/1861-62), a commentary on the Mašaʿer of Molla Sadra; and the even lengthier Šarh al-ʿaršiya (1236/1821; Tabriz, 1278/1861-62), on Sadra's ʿAršiya. In 1232/1817 he performed what seems to have been his first pilgrimage to Mecca, following which he stayed for eight months in Najaf and Karbala.

With the death of Mohammad-ʿAli Mirza in 1821, Kermanšah and the surrounding region fell into a rapid decline. In 1238/1822, Shaikh Ahmad left for Mašhad, traveling via Qom and Qazvin. In Qazvin he was called a heretic for the first time, by Molla Mohammad-Taqi Baragani, who condemned certain passages of the shaikh's writings as contrary to orthodox teachings on resurrection (maʿad). Leaving the matter unresolved, Ahsaʿi continued his pilgrimage, after which he visited Yazd and Isfahan. Here he stayed as the guest of ʿAbdallah Khan Amin-al-dawla and was treated by both ʿolamaʿ and civic dignitaries as a visitor of considerable importance. Although several months had elapsed since the pronouncement of takfir or condemnation by Baragani, it is clear from this reception in Isfahan that its effect had not yet made itself felt outside Qazvin.

Returning to Kermanšah in June 1823, Ahsaʿi left after a year to settle in Karbala. Now aged seventy, he probably planned to remain at the ʿatabat for the remainder of his life. But Baragani had by this time gained a number of supporters at the shrines in Iraq, including Aqa Sayyed Mohammad-Mahdi Tabatabaʿi, Shaikh Mohammad-Hasan Najafi, and Aqa Sayyed Ebrahim Qazvini. Although many eminent ʿolamaʿ in Iran and Iraq continued to express open admiration and support for Ahsaʿi, his opponents mounted a successful campaign against him at the ʿatabat. Threatened by these efforts, the shaikh was compelled to leave Karbala for Mecca, traveling via Baghdad and Syria. Some two or three stages from Medina, he died on 21 Duʿl-qaʿda 1241/27 June 1826, aged seventy-three. His grave is in the Baqiʿ cemetery in Medina.

Relationship to Shaikhism. Ahsaʿi is generally regarded today as the founder of the Šayki school of Shiʿism, an essentially orthodox movement which is, nevertheless, still viewed with suspicion by the mass of Shiʿite ʿolamaʿ. In many ways this view is incorrect. There is no reason to believe that the shaikh sought to bring into existence a separate body, an ecclesiola as it were, within the system of Twelver Shiʿism. To the end of his life he

stressed the orthodoxy of his views and saw his own function as essentially that of an 'alem insisting on the revival of the primitive virtues of Shi'ite belief, particularly as expressed in personal devotion to the Imams. Granted that, as we shall note, some of his theories were unusual, there is no reason why they could not, like many of the concepts developed by the Ešraqi school and the school of Isfahan, have been assimilated by the mainstream of Shi'ite thought. This possibility is put forward most strongly by Corbin, who stresses the continuity of Šayki metaphysical teaching with the theosophical tradition of Iranian Shi'ism and sees in Shaikhism a great resurgence of Shi'ite gnosis. It should not be forgotten, however, that the continuity is equally strong in less philosophical and metaphysical areas of belief. Shaikh Ahmad's Hayat al-nafs, for example, is a systematic outline of Shi'ite doctrine entirely consistent with the major tradition.

At the time of Ahsa'i's death in 1241/1826, there was no hint of an attempt to set up a separate school within Shi'ism, to create a division based either on doctrinal differences or on conflicting claims to authority. Despite the takfir campaign originated by Baragani, the shaikh's position was still essentially that of one of the most respected and influential of the Shi'ite 'olama', a mojtahed and marja' al-taqlid to whom a sizeable body of tollab and older clergy gave allegiance. By no means all of his pupils and admirers later became identified as "Šaykis" in the technical sense. Many, such as Molla 'Ali Nuri and Hajj Ebrahim Kalbasi, continued in later years as perfectly respectable 'olama' with no overt connections with the "Šayki school."

Given time and the support of prominent mojtaheds such as Molla Mohammad-Baqer Šafti, who refused to countenance the takfir, it is probable that the heresy campaign would have faded away on the shaikh's death; once it was forgotten, his reputation as a Shi'ite 'alem would have been assured. But the removal of Ahsa'i was, in fact, the trigger for the emergence of a coherent group of 'olama' who sought to defend his teachings against the takfir. Before leaving Karbala, the shaikh had given his leading pupil, Sayyed Kazem Rašti, authority to teach there on his behalf. Remaining permanently in Karbala, Rašti and other pupils of the shaikh set out to demonstrate the orthodoxy of his views, thus providing a focus for continuing attacks by Sayyed Mohammad-Mahdi Tabataba'i, Shaikh 'Ali Najafi, and Sayyed Ebrahim Qazvini. Inevitably, in the course of the polemics which ensued between the two parties, the few relatively minor topics on which the takfir had first been based were multiplied on the slightest pretext until the real issue was lost. Before long political rivalry increased the division between Rašti and his supporters, popularly known as the Šaykiya, and their opponents, who termed themselves Balasariya (because they prayed above the head [sar] of Imam Hosayn, whereas the followers of Rašti prayed at the foot of the tomb). Nevertheless, as late as 1258/1842, Rašti persisted in denying the charge that he had established a new madhab within Islam; he constantly represented himself as simply the expounder and defender of the views and person of his shaikh. The meaning of

the term Šaykiya, used to refer to what he calls in *ferqa* (this sect), is simply “people who are adherents of (mansuband bar) this shaikh” (Dalil al-motahayerin, p. 11).

Rašti not only defended the orthodoxy of Ahsa’i’s views, but also sought to emphasize the positive role of his teacher as an ʾalem endowed with more than usual authority. Significantly, the original takfir made no mention of the role assigned to Ahsa’i either by himself or by his students, but it is here, rather than in any specific doctrinal issue or the interpretation of such issues, that the Šayki school found its true *raison d’être*.

Ahsa’i’s early dreams and visions have been noted above. On another occasion he dreamt that he was taught verses by Imam Hasan, to enable him to call on the Imams whenever he required an answer to any problem. On two occasions, once with Imam Hasan and once with Mohammad, he claimed to have undergone what appears to have been a form of initiatory ritual, involving the drinking of saliva from the mouth of the Imam or Prophet.

This belief that his knowledge was directly granted him by the Prophet and the Imams distinguishes Ahsa’i from contemporary religious leaders. The role of the Imams as spiritual guides is familiar in Shiʾism, but Ahsa’i seems to have taken this concept to an extreme degree. He claimed that since he derived his knowledge directly from the Prophet and the Imams in dreams, error could not find its way into his words and that he could easily answer any criticism leveled against him (Šarh al-fawaʾed, p. 4; *Sira Šayk Ahmad al-Ahsa’i*, pp. 19-20). In one place he describes these dreams as *elham*, but more usually he speaks of *kašf* or *mokašafa*; this last concept was given sufficient prominence to give rise to the use of the term *kašfiya* for the school.

As Ahsa’i’s successor, Rašti saw his shaikh as a possessor of knowledge from the Imams and as the revealer of the inward (*baten*) truth of Islam. In his *Šarh al-qasida*, Rašti refers to two ages of the dispensation of Mohammad—an age of outward observances (*zawaher*) and an age of inward realities (*bawaten*). The former age came to end after twelve centuries, and the second age then commenced. In every century of the first age, there appeared a promulgator (*morawwej*) of the outward laws; at the commencement of the first century of the second age, the first *morawwej* of the inward truth, i.e., Shaikh Ahmad, appeared (quoted in Mirza Abu’l-Fazl Golpayagani, *Ketab al-faraʾed*, Cairo, 1315/1897-98, pp. 575-77). This conception of the role of Ahsa’i was, clearly, current among Rašti’s followers, as appears from an anonymous *resala* written some time after 1261/1845; the author speaks of the beginning of the revelation (of inner truth) in the person of Ahsa’i at the end of 1,200 years, and refers to him as the *morawwej* of the first century of the second age and, indeed, of the 12th century of the first age of outward truth (ms. in Tehran Baha’i Archives, 6003. C, pp. 399, 407). The later Šayki school in Kerman has tended to play down this view of Ahsa’i, who is depicted as little more than an inspired reviver of Shiʾism.

Doctrine. As has been stated above, Shaikh Ahmad did not seek to introduce any innovations within the fundamental doctrinal structure of Twelver Shi'ism. His position on the essential Shi'ite doctrines can not be said to differ radically from that of other 'olama', as is particularly clear from his treatise on the osul of the faith, the Hayat al-nafs. Ahsa'i deals with tawhid, 'adl, nobuwa, emama, and ma'ad in conventional terms, his position being essentially Mu'tazilite on the nature of God, the Koran, the justice of God, and so on.

Since God has not brought creation into existence for nothing, and since He Himself is not in need of anything, the benefit of creation must return to His creatures. This benefit depends on God's imposing religious obligations (taklif) on men in order to make them worthy of eternal bliss. To show gratitude for God's benefits is impossible without knowing the one Who bestows them. The first duty of the mokallafin is to become detached from creation; the second is to observe it and meditate on it. This will lead to the recognition of God. The meaning of knowledge of God is belief in the existence of an uncreated Creator, recognition of His attributes (both those of the divine essence and those of the divine actions), recognition of God's justice, recognition of the nobuwa of Mohammad and all the prophets, who are the intermediaries between God and man, recognition of the coming to life of the mokallafin on the Day of Judgment.

God exists; He is pre-existent (qadim), eternal, alive, and knowing. His knowledge is of two kinds—eternal ('elm qadim) and created ('elm hadet). He is all-powerful (qader) and a free agent (moktar); He is single in His essence, attributes, acts, and worship. His will (erada) is one of the attributes of his actions (sefat al-af'al), not of His essence (sefat al-dat); similarly, His speech is one of His actions and does not belong to the essence; it is, therefore, created (hadet). He is not a body, an accident, or an essence, and is neither compound, various, or situated in any place or direction, nor does He incarnate Himself. The vision of God is not possible with physical eyes, whether in this world or the next.

Divine justice ('adl) is the opposite of tyranny; God does not impose obligation (taklif) beyond what man can endure, while reward exceeds the degree of taklif in acts of obedience, and punishment exceeds it in acts of disobedience. Man is possessed of free will (ektar) and is the performer of his own actions, but God preserves and provides assistance for these. Whoever says that God is the performer of men's acts, good or bad, attributes injustice to Him in compelling man to do wrong and punishing them for it. But to say (as do the Mu'tazilites) that man has absolute independence is to depose God from His dominion. Both efrat and tafrit are false; the true position is the medial one (i.e., la jabr wa la tafwiz bal amr bayn al-amrayn). Thus, man performs his actions freely and without compulsion, but the power to do so (taqdir) comes from God.

Since God can not be comprehended and men can not derive the teachings of religion directly from Him, He must choose a mediator who knows Him through

revelation (wahy) and conveys to men those matters which conduce to their welfare. It is necessary to send a rasul to each nation, according to their differing needs; this process ended, however, with Mohammad, the seal of the prophets. The prophet ought to be possessed of perfections both physical and moral, he must be free (maʿsum) of great and small sins before and after his calling and to the end of his life, and he must be free of all other defects. The prophet of this people is Mohammad b. ʿAbdallah; after him there will be no prophet, so he must be the rasul for all mankind. He has performed miracles, among which is the Koran, which is inimitable and will never be abrogated.

The condition of men is subject to change. Thus, in the absence of the Prophet, there must be a successor who will stand in his place to execute his laws and preserve his šariʿa. This successor should have all the qualities of the Prophet. The word of the wasi is that of God, his decree that of God and the Prophet, and obedience to him obligatory. No one can be appointed by men to this station; it can only be succeeded to by the decree of God. The Imams were appointed because they possessed the qualities of the Prophet. The Qaʿem is Mohammad b. Hasan ʿAskari; he is at present alive and will appear and fill the earth with justice. It is false to say that he is not in existence and will come into being later, or that he is Jesus.

There must be another world to which all return to receive their reward and punishment. When they leave this world, souls are of three kinds: 1. those of pure belief; 2. those of pure unbelief; 3. those who are weak, neither purely believing nor purely unbelieving. At the resurrection (maʿad) the souls of men will return to their bodies, as in this world. All things will be resurrected, even animals, trees, and stones. It is obligatory to believe in: the speaking of limbs to bear witness to their owners' acts; the book in which each man's deeds are recorded (called ʿIlliyun); the balance; serāt (although it is not necessary to know how it is, the meaning of ascent and descent on it, or its purpose); the pool of Kawtar; the intercession of Mohammad, the Imams, other prophets, and the Šiʿa; the eightfold paradise; the fourteen degrees of hell; the eternity of paradise and hell; the return (rajʿa) of the Prophet and the Imams. The events which will occur during the rajʿa are discussed in detail; the belief that the resurrection is only the return of the authority of the Qaʿem and not the return of individuals after their death is rejected as false (Hayat al-nafs, tr. Sayyed Kazem Rašti, 2nd ed., Kerman, 1353 Š./1974, passim).

According to Tonokaboni, the reasons for the declaration of takfir were three: Ahsaʿi's views on maʿad, meʿraj, and the nature of the Imams (Qesas al-ʿolamaʿ, pp. 44-48). Although Baragani seems not to have referred to it, the shaikh had already been involved in discussions on the nature of the divine knowledge in Isfahan as early as 1228/1813 (Šarh al-resalat al-ʿelmiya, tr. Nicolas, Essai sur le Chéikhisme IV, p. iv). As the takfir was taken up by other ʿolamaʿ, the charges came to include further points. Rašti mentions some of these in his Dalil

al-motahayerin: It was claimed that Ahsa'i had said all the ?olama? from Shaikh Mofid to his own contemporaries were in error and that the Mojtabedi (Osuli) school was false; that he regarded ?Ali as the Creator; that he held all Koranic phrases referring to God as really being references to ?Ali; that he spoke of God as uninformed of particulars and maintained that He had two forms of knowledge, one created and one eternal; and that he did not believe the Imam Hosayn to have been killed (p. 40). Rašti refers to these charges as absurdities and cites a sermon attributed to the shaikh in which they are severally refuted. He also mentions as elements of the takfir Ahsa'i's supposed denial of physical resurrection and the physical ascension of Mohammad and states that the four main points of disagreement concerned me?raj, ma?ad, ?elm, and the belief in the Imams as the causes of creation (ibid., pp. 57-58). The accusation of tafwiz is the principal argument of an orthodox attack on Ahsa'i, al-Bareqat al-Haydariya by Haydar b. Ebrahim b. Mohammad Hosayni. After the death of Ahsa'i, however, an even greater number of heretical and quasi-heretical views were attributed to him. Mohammad Hosayn Šahrestani's Teryaq-e faruq contains no fewer than forty points of disagreement, many of them extremely factitious.

It is not easy to summarize Ahsa'i's views on these and other topics, particularly where the question is one involving complex philosophical argument and where much depends on individual interpretation. Some of the major points should be briefly presented, however. We have noted that, in the Hayat al-nafs, Shaikh Ahmad discusses ma?ad in traditional terms, without any heterodox elements. Elsewhere, however—notably in the Šarh al-ziara—he presents an original doctrine of resurrection based on the theory that man is possessed of four bodies, two jasad and two jesm. The first jasad (al-jasad al-?onsori) is the body of flesh, made up of terrestrial elements subject to the ravages of time. It resembles a garment put on and later cast off, and in itself it knows neither enjoyment nor suffering, fidelity nor rebellion. It is not, in reality, part of man at all. After death it returns to the elements from which it is composed and will not be recombined. The second jasad (al-jasad al-baqi) is a spiritual body and is the reality of man; it is composed of the elements of Hurqalya, the interworld or barzak between the material world and the realm of malakut, and survives the dissolution of the body of flesh and the separation from it of all accidental matter. It can not be seen by men because of the opacity of their physical eyes. In this body men are returned to life in the resurrection and enter paradise or hell. When Esrafil blows the trumpet at the resurrection, the spirits of men will return to the second jasad, which will then rise from the tomb.

The first jesm is the body in which the human spirit leaves the physical body (the first jasad). The spirit remains with this astral body after death, being separated from the second jasad. The first jesm and the spirit remain in Hurqalya, in the earthly paradise (jannat al-donya) or the earthly hell until the first blast of the trumpet, at which the spirits themselves are annihilated. At this blast the first jesm loses all opacity and is abandoned

(since it, like the first jasad, is accidental, not essential). On the second blast, the spirits are resuscitated in their second jasm (al-jesm al-asli, al-haqiqi), a celestial and archetypal body, in which they descend to the tomb, penetrate into the second jasad, and are resurrected (Šarh al-ziara, pp. 364-66; “al-Resalat al-kaqaniya” in Jawame’ al-kalem I/1, pp. 122-24; Šarh al-’aršiya, pp. 179-80; see also Corbin, Terre céleste, pp. 146-74).

According to Ahsa’i, the term Hurqalya, which he uses for the interworld between earth and malakut, is a Syriac term in use among the Sabeans of Iraq. Hurqalya is situated in the eighth clime; its lower regions are the cities of Jabalqa and Jabarsa, and it is, in its entirety, the world of images and forms. The Qa’em dwells in Hurqalya and will return from there (“Resala Molla Mohammad-Hosayn An s ari” in Jawame’ al-kalem I/3, pp. 8-10 [153-54]; “Resala-ye Rašiya,” ibid., I/2, pp. 68-114, question 28).

With regard to the me’raj of the Prophet, Ahsa’i argued that, although this occurred in his physical body, in each sphere his body abandoned the accidental elements (a’raz) of that sphere. As a result, tearing and repairing (karq wa eltiyam) of the spheres was not necessary. On his return, Mohammad reassumed the elements he had left behind. He stresses that this is not to be taken as meaning that the Prophet ascended in the spirit alone, since this would involve his physical death; it is simply that he cast aside his purely elemental body and ascended in his subtle form (“al-Resala al-Qatifiya” in Jawame’ al-kalem I/2, pp. 144-66, question 26).

The concept of non-elementary bodies and its application to ma’ad and me’raj is probably the most original contribution made by Ahsa’i to Shi’ite metaphysics, and it is clear from both Tonokaboni and the Shaikh himself that it was precisely this doctrine which caused the original break with Baragani.

Much attention has been drawn to the shaikh’s view of the Imams, which has been somewhat unfairly criticized as resembling that of the golat (extremist Shi’ites). There is no doubt that the Imams are of singular importance for Ahsa’i, but his arguments regarding their station and attributes are generally based on Hadith and the type of Imamology which Corbin has discussed in several places. He himself explicitly rejects the position of the golat (Šarh al-ziara, pp. 11, 76). For Ahsa’i, the Imams are the four causes of creation: active (fa’eliya), in that they are the locations (mahall) of the divine will (al-mašiya); material (maddiya), in that all things have been created from the rays of their lights; formal (suriya), in that God created the forms of all creatures from the lights of their forms; and final (ga’iyya), in that God created all things for them (Šarh al-ziara, p. 64).

Objections were also raised, as we have noted, to the shaikh’s views on the knowledge of God. Quite simply, he argued that God possesses two kinds of knowledge: eternal (qadim) knowledge, which is the divine essence, and which

could not be separate from it, since that would mean the existence of more than one eternal entity; and created (hadet) knowledge, which comes into being when its object (al-maʿlum) comes into existence. If this knowledge existed before its object, it would not be knowledge, since created knowledge depends on its being in conformity with its object, which could not be the case if the object were non-existent. This created knowledge is an act of God and may be regarded as one of His creatures named “knowledge” (Hayat al-nafs, pp. 27-28).

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A comprehensive and detailed bibliography of Ahsa'i's writings may be found in Kermani, Fehrest, pp. 219-88 (131 titles; note also information on pp. 44-48). Many works by the shaikh have been printed, especially in the compilation Jawame? al-kalem, 2 vols., Tabriz, 1273/1856-57, 1276/1860 (ninety-four rasa?el, including the Hayat al-nafs, ?Esmā wa raf?a, al-Resalat al-kaqaniya, al-Resalat al-soltaniya, Šarh al-resalat al-?elmiya, Šarh al-tabsera [al-serat al-yaqin], al-Resalat al-qadriya, and the Moktasar al-Haydariya). Virtually no translations into European languages are available, with the exception of passages printed in the second part of Corbin's Terre céleste (tr., Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran, Princeton, 1977) and part of the Šarh al-resalat al-?elmiya (Nicolas, Essai sur le Chéikhisme IV: La Science de Dieu, Paris, 1911, pp. iii-li). Manuscript copies of the works of Ahsa'i, widely scattered in Iran and Iraq, with a small number in Europe, have not yet been catalogued.

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