

Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship
Mir-Dhalali Institute of Iranian Studies
University of Toronto

June 29th, 2025

Dear colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I write to recommend one of my most successful doctoral students – Ashkan Bahrani – for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship. I served as Ashkan's dissertation advisor and taught him in a number of courses. It is with great pride that I watched him move on to successful teaching and research positions at Monash University and Al-Akhawayn. On the personal level, you will find Ashkan unassuming, soft-spoken, and approachable. He is very sharp, witty, and an exciting mind to engage with. I am confident he will become a leading light in the field of Islam and the critical historical study of religion.

Ashkan's dissertation project was ambitious, thoughtful, and well-organized. His research was centered on Persian religious practice in the medieval period, with a keen eye to the complexities of the historiography through which it is known to us. Ashkan's work is sensitive to the modern political factors, both in the West and in Iran, that over the last century have determined much of how this history has been told. His research will reclaim the diversity and lively contestation, essential to evolving Islamic practice, which has been obscured by the colonial politics of knowledge, as well as the emergent nationalism of modern Shia Iran.

The first step of the dissertation consists of a survey of the 20th century scholarship on Sufism and devotional Islam. The initial generation consisting largely of Euro-American Orientalists, established the field of historical and textual studies of Sufism. This research, with all of its assumptions about race and religion, was picked up by Iranian academics in the middle of the century, for whom certain parts of Orientalist perspectives on race were useful in their own articulation of a religious past that neatly reflected the nationalist assumptions behind the modern understanding of Iranian identity. The third generation of scholars, all of them Iranian, would build upon the nationalist identification of an essentially Persian form of Sufism, privileging a quietist and depoliticized Sufism. Their emphasis on an apolitical Sufism, reflects Western discourses on religion, and assumptions about mysticism.

The second section of the dissertation is the heart of the project. It leverages the insights from the first section to retell key parts of the history of Persianate Sufism. I expect

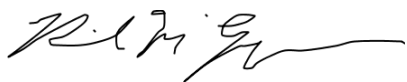
that this recovery will be the most exciting contribution of the dissertation. Important dimensions of the lives of Sufis, such as domestic relations, economics, and relationships to secular powers, will take on new clarity and importance. Rather than following the tidy narratives projected into the past from the 20th century, as well as the premodern voices that claimed a monolithic continuity within Sufism, these chapters focus on the messy differences and diversity of opinion among Sufis. Points of contention, rather than consensus, yield new insights and narratives about this period of Iranian Islam.

This dissertation project illuminates an important chapter in Islamic religious and intellectual history – recovering obscured internal diversity and complexity. Tracing the genealogy of the study of Sufism, with an emphasis on the Iranian experience of Western Orientalism, puts this research into conversation with contemporary scholarship in post-colonial studies. He successfully defended his dissertation and the committee was delighted with the final document.

Ashkan is fully qualified to carry out this research. His language skills, which include working in manuscript materials, are very strong. Additionally, he has developed a clear voice in post-colonial discourse, critical theory of religion, and continental philosophy more widely, all of which make his writing compelling to an audience beyond traditional Islamic studies and religious studies.

Ashkan has a long history of accomplished work in the classroom. He was a successful graduate teaching assistant for four courses at Vanderbilt, including classes in Asian, Islamic, and Christian religions. He also taught his own courses at Sewanee University, at Monash University, and at al-Akhawayn. At Vanderbilt Ashkan served as undergraduate tutor for our Arabic courses and taught a year-long structured graduate tutorial in Persian language. All of the feedback on his performance shows him to be a fine teacher.

Sincerely,



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