

Monograph Synopsis

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Despite decades of scholarly inquiry, the debate on the context within which the conversion to Shī'ism of Persia unfolded remains unsettled. It has been long debated whether or not the Persian Sufi orders' promotion and reinforcement of Shī'ī concepts and sensibilities among the Iranian laity during the late medieval period, had prepared the way for the Shī'itization of Persia under the Safavids. Authorities such as Henry Corbin and Marijan Molé who held this view, argued that the progression towards Shī'ism had already started before the rise of the Safavids and their policies of conversion to Twelver Shī'ism.¹ Against them, however, some scholars suggest that “there is no firm evidence that a pacific evolution towards Shi'ism was underway that sooner or later would have reached its natural conclusion, and that all the Safavids contributed was a coercive acceleration.”² My doctoral thesis, entitled “From 'Alidism to Spiritual Shī'ism: The Kubrawiyya Sufi Order's Creedal Evolution in Late Medieval Persia,” has delved into some important aspects of this matter by having a closer look at the confessional developments of the longest-living Sufi community in the Iranian heartlands, the Kubrawi Sufi order. The Kubrawiyya, named after the Khwārazmshāhid-period Sufi saint Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 618/1221), can be considered as the oldest Sufi community in which distinct pro-'Alid sympathies and crucial Shī'ī ideas have taken root, and for this reason it has been of great interest among modern scholars for the study of Sufi-Shī'ī convergence in Persia.

Through an in-depth analysis of the doctrinal viewpoints and devotional expressions of various generations of Kubrawī saints who lived between the 7th/13th and 11th/17th century, my dissertation has examined the origins of the order's 'Alid sympathies, their engagement with the Shī'ī doctrine, and how in the course of time, their Shī'ī-tinged teachings were developed into what I have termed “spiritual Shī'ism.” In this project, I have closely investigated an old question among scholars of Kubrawī studies as to whether the Shī'ī commitments expressed by a considerable number of the late-medieval Kubrawī Sufis as well as the majority of the order's affiliates in the Safavid period reflected a natural intellectual process, internal to the Kubrawī *ṭarīqa*. My study answers this question affirmatively, noting that the Shī'ī beliefs expressed by the 9th/15th-century Kubrawī saint Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh, rather than being abnormal or exceptional as Devin DeWeese and Shahzad Bashir suggest,³ were the culmination of an incremental progression towards Shī'ism sought by several generations of Kubrawī saints. My

¹ See, Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 1, pp. 1-38; Molé, “Les Kubrawiyya entre sunnisme et shiisme,” pp. 65, 137; Nasr, “Religion in Safavid Persia,” pp. 271-272; Nasr, “Shi'ism and Sufism,” pp. 117-118; Aubin, “La politique religieuse des Safavides,” p. 238.

² Algar, “Naqshbandīs and Safavids,” p. 32. Also see, Algar, “Some Observations on Religion in Safavid Persia,” pp. 287-290.

³ See, DeWeese, “The eclipse of the Kubrawīyah in Central Asia,” pp. 11-12; Bashir, *Messianic Hopes*, p. 72.

study hopes to demonstrate that the theoretical and epistemological grounds connecting Kubrawī Sufism to Shīʿism were more essential and profoundly transformative to the Kubrawiyya than the common “Alid loyalism” or “Imamophilism” which a wide range of Persian Sufis and scholars of the late medieval period shared. Similarly, I argue that the Shīʿī affiliation adopted by the Dhahabiyya—as a major branch of the Kubrawiyya which dominated Iranian Sufism during the Safavid period—was not necessarily a pragmatistic gesture made solely in order to survive the anti-Sufi campaigns of the Sharia-minded jurists. Rather, it was, in its essence, a creedal framework primarily shaped by more than three centuries of assimilating core Shīʿī beliefs into the Kubrawī order. My study, on the other hand, demonstrates that the Kubrawīs’ Shīʿī creed in the pre- to mid-Safavid era was not fully compatible with the normative doctrinal-political entailments of any major Shīʿī sect. In other words, despite the striking affinities which the Kubrawī creed (in its developed form) shared with both Twelver and Zaydī branches of Shīʿism, it continued to maintain its Sufi essence as well as its distinct concepts and epistemology. Thus, contrary to the common and problematic emphasis on “conversion,” I argue that the Iranian faction of the Kubrawiyya did not “convert” to any established sect of Shīʿism. Rather, their Sufi creed retained its mystical core, on the one hand, and exhibited a close affinity with central elements of Shīʿī doctrine, on the other, and hence, appeared as a type of Shīʿism which I have termed “spiritual Shīʿism.”

As such, my study can, in a sense, be considered as a genealogy of the Shīʿism which gradually spread among a large portion of organized Sufi saints during the Safavid period and beyond. This work contributes to a better understanding of how the common investment of both the Sufis and the Shīʿa in the idea of spiritual authority (*walāyat*) led to decisive exchanges between the two traditions during the Ilkhanid and Timurid periods, and significantly influenced several intellectual developments of the subsequent eras. Moreover, my dissertation refines and revisits several major theories brought forth by the historians of Persian Sufism, challenges the problematic usage of *kalāmī* conventions for the study of Sufi creedal commitments, and offers a fresh analysis of the Sufi-Shīʿī confluence by drawing upon several largely unstudied yet crucial manuscripts.

Even though my dissertation reflects a significant portion of the research I have conducted in the past years, some useful parts of my study which due to some limitations were left out of the thesis still need to be integrated in it so it becomes ready for publication as a book. In addition, there are certain parts that can grow stronger with further elaboration. Having this in mind, I believe that the postdoctoral fellowship in Iranian studies at the University of Toronto can give me the wonderful opportunity to realize the fullest potentials of my work. The presence of such distinguished scholars of Iranian studies as Prof. Tavakoli-Targhi, Prof. Subtelny, and Prof. Virani among others, as well as the excellent research resources that are accessible to scholars there makes the University of Toronto the ideal place for the postdoctoral project I have planned to undertake. I thank the members of the committee for taking the time to review my application materials. I would be glad to provide any further details regarding my project if needed.

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