

Introduction

In New York City on West Broadway there is a bookstore affiliated with a Turkish Sufi order. In the summer of 1993, I purchased a few books there, and one of the other customers, a black man wearing a small white cap began talking with me. After exchanging *Salams*, and after I told him that I was working in Iran, he asked me whether I had ever seen a book by Imam Khomeini called *Jihad al-Akbar*.

I told him that although I was not familiar with the work, I thought that it had been translated by Hamid Algar, and included in his collection of translations of Imam's speeches, *Islam and Revolution* (Mizan Press). He was not familiar with that work, but insisted that the Muslims in America had a real need for translations of Imam's works, and he was particularly interested in *Jihad al-Akbar*.

When I went home, I found that a couple pages of the speeches of Imam which were given in Najaf and later collected under the title *Jihad al-Akbar* had been translated by Prof. Algar. The following autumn, when I returned to Iran, I found the *Jihad al-Akbar* had recently published as a small booklet. Remembering the American Muslim I met in the Sufi Bookstore, I decided to make a complete translation of it.

Since I lacked the competence in Farsi for such an undertaking, I solicited the assistance of 'Azim Sarvdalir, with whom I was studying Farsi and doing other translations at *Bunyad Baqir al-'Ulum* in Qum. Mr. Sarvdalir was happy to take up the project, which, with the encouragement of the *Bunyad*, was completed the following June; *Al-hamdulillah!*

This is a work in morals, in Farsi and Arabic, *akhlāq*. It is not a philosophical work, but a moral exhortation directed toward the seminary students of Najaf, and toward the institution of the seminary, or *hawzah 'ilmiyyah*, as well. The work reveals the moral sensitivity of Imam Khomeini, his paternal anxiety regarding the seminarians and his dedication to the institution of the seminary.

Upon reading this work one will discover that along the revolutionary fervor and condemnation of foreign imperialism there can be found a mystic's taste for spiritual devotions. The waters of *'irfan* (gnosis) run deep in the thought of Imam Khomeini and nourish his moral outlook. This work is a testimony to the truth of Shahid Mutahhari's¹ remark that *'irfan* and ethics are both concerned with the improvement of

character, but from different perspectives.

In ethical works one finds a description of virtues and vices and moral prescriptions and proscriptions, while in *'irfani* works one finds a description of a process through which the soul moves toward Allah and acquires virtues corresponding to the divine attributes along the way.

The way of moral reform advocated by Imam Khomeini is a process of spiritual development in which the adept learns to conquer and then lose interest in his worldly desires and become totally devoted to God. This process is described as a journey toward Allah, a journey which holds a central place in *'irfan*, which may be considered the kernel of Islam.

This journey is described in different ways and from a variety of viewpoints in the poetry of the Sufis, in the transcendent philosophy of Mulla Sadra, 2 and in the poetry and teachings of Imam Khomeini, as well.

Although the present work consists of speeches delivered to the students at Najaf, the moral advice given is particularly pertinent for all Muslims in the contemporary situation of discord and confusion. Imam Khomeini advises the seminarians to abandon their quarrelling, which only serve as an opportunity for mischief on the part of the enemies of Islam.

In the Islamic world today, we also observe that the opponents of the Islamic movement take advantage of disputes among Muslims. Imam reminds the students that they do not possess sufficient wealth and power to make these things worth fighting over even according to the standards of materialism.

Parallel remarks are appropriate for the Muslim world as a whole, given the poverty and powerlessness which characterized the vast masses of the Islamic *ummah*. Imam sanctions the students that they should take heed of the fact that the major purpose of the prophets and the Imams has been spiritual progress and moral improvement, and that the students must not content themselves with learning a few terms of Islamic jurisprudence.

The same warning should be heeded by contemporary Muslims. We must not content ourselves with a handful of slogans and the performance of a few rituals, but must take steps for spiritual and moral growth. Not merely in the seminary of Najaf, but wherever and to whom ever Islam is taught, this teaching must not confine itself to a rehearsal of basic beliefs and necessary practices, but must be accompanied by the moral and spiritual teachings which were the primary focus of the prophets and the Imams, peace be upon them all.

The present work may be read in order to gain insight into the thought of the founder of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. It may be read in order to become familiar with the sort of problems which existed in Najaf at the time the lectures were delivered. It can be read as an example of the type of moral preaching which could be expected from among the best of Shi'ite moral teachers of this age.

It is a work which can be read in order to learn something about history, sociology or anthropology, and in all of these areas valuable lessons are to be learned. But more important than any of these is the moral lessons to be drawn for the Islamic community in general. Let us not content ourselves with ritual duties while ignoring the need for moral reform.

Let us appoint moral guides in all of our Islamic educational institutions, so that Islamic education may become more truly a training in submission to Allah, and let us draw upon the example as well as the teachings of the prophets and the Imams so that we may learn to seek to commence the journey of the believer toward Allah, *insha Allah!*

The remainder of this introduction consists of a few biographical remarks with particular reference to the moral and spiritual training of Imam Khomeini, may he rest in peace.

Ruhullah Musawi Khomeini, was born in 1902 in the town of Khomein, which is about half way between Tehran and the southwestern city of Ahwaz. Ruhullah's father and grandfather were religious scholars in Khomein. His father, Ayatullah Mustafa, is said to have been murdered by bandits when Ruhullah was less than six months old. His mother, Hajar, was the daughter of the religious scholar Aqa Mirza Ahmad Mujtahid Khansari.

The boy was raised by his mother and an aunt, both of whom died of cholera when he was six. His education was then supervised by his older brother, Ayatullah Pasandideh. At nineteen, Ruhullah traveled northwest from Khomein to the city of Arak, where he became a student of Shaykh 'Abd al-Karim Ha'eri, a leading religious scholar of his day.

The following year, Shaykh Ha'eri and his student Ruhullah moved to Qum, where the Shaykh reorganized and revitalized the entire institution of religious education in that city, which was already famous as a center of learning. Ruhullah studied in Qum until the death of Shaykh Ha'eri, in 1936 after which he began teaching theology, ethics, philosophy, and mysticism.

It was during his first fourteen years in Qum that Ayatullah Khomeini became familiar with the intertwined traditions of philosophy and mysticism which flourished during Iran's Safawid period (16th and 17th centuries) and which continue to exert an enormous influence on contemporary Shi'ite thought.

When he arrived in Qum, Imam Khomeini began to receive private instruction in ethics with Haj Mirza Jawad Maleki Tabrizi, the author of a book entitled, *The Secrets of Prayer (Asrar as-Salat)*, Imam Khomeini also wrote a book on this topic, called *The Secret of Prayer: Prayers of the Gnostics or Ascension of the Wayfarers (Sirr as-Salat: Salat al-'Arifin ya Mi'raj as-Salikin)*. His instruction under Mirza Jawad continued until the death of the teacher, in 1925.

Imam Khomeini also studied the mystic traditions from Haj Mirza Abu'l-Hasan Rafi'i Qazvini, who was in Qum from 1923 to 1927. Qazvini is known for his commentary on a supplication which is recited daily in the pre-dawn hours during the month of Ramadan. Later, Imam Khomeini would also write a

commentary on this prayer.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly among his spiritual guides, there was Aqa Mirza Muhammad 'Ali Shahabadi, the author of *Spray from the Seas (Rashahat al-Bahar)*, who was in Qum from 1928 to 1935. In the mystic tradition of which Shahabadi was a part, the phrase 'spray from the sea' may be taken as a symbol for inspiration from God.

It was with Shahabadi that Imam Khomeini is reported to have studied the *Fusus al-Hikam* [Bezels of Wisdom] of Ibn al-'Arabi 3 (d. 1240) and the important commentary on that work by Qaysari (d. 1350).

In 1929, Imam Khomeini married, and a year later his first son, Mustafa, was born. Over the course of the years, two other sons and four daughters were born. Mustafa would grow up to be killed in Iraq by agents of the Shah. The youngest son Sayyid Ahmad, would become a secretary to his father, and afterward, a political leader in his own right.

Recalling his years as a student in Qum, Imam Khomeini himself has publicly commented on the hostility toward mysticism and philosophy which was to be found in certain quarters in Qum, feelings which are still harbored by some members of the clergy. The story is often repeated that when Imam had begun teaching philosophy in Qum and his first son was a small child.

Some seminarians felt it necessary to perform a ritual cleansing of a cup from which the child had drunk water because of his impurity as the son of a teacher of philosophy! Imam reports that his teacher, Shahabadi, sought to oppose this hostility by making people familiar with the doctrines of the mystics so they could see for themselves that there was nothing inimical to Islam in the teachings of the Gnostics.

Once a group of merchants came to see the late Shahabadi (may God have mercy on him), and he began to speak to them on the same mystical topics that he taught to everyone. I asked him whether it was appropriate to speak to them of such matters and he replied: "Let them be exposed just once to these heretical teachings! I too now find it incorrect to divide people into categories and pronounce some incapable of understanding these matters."

One of the most dramatic efforts of Imam Khomeini to bring mysticism to the people occurred after the Islamic Revolution with his Lectures on *Surah al-Fatihah* from which the above report has been quoted. After the Revolution, there were televised lessons on the interpretation of the Qur'an by Ayatullah Taleqani.⁴

When Ayatullah Taleqani died on September 10, 1979, about a half year after the victory of the revolution, the televised commentary on the Qur'an was taken up by a younger scholar. Imam Khomeini suggested that a more senior authority might be sought for the program. After consulting among themselves, those responsible for the broadcast decided to request that Imam himself provide the commentary.

Imam responded that if the cameras could be brought to his residence he would comply with the request. The result was the Lectures on *Surah al-Fatihah*, a stunning mystical interpretation of the opening verses of the Qur'an, in which one of the dominant themes was the claim that the whole world is a name of God.

In these lectures Imam also contends that the philosophers of Islam, the mystics and the poets have used different terminologies to express the same insights, and he urges his viewers not to reject what is taught by members of these groups until they understand what is being expressed, even if the language used raises suspicions of heterodoxy. Thus, Imam's preaching in this area was very much a plea for tolerance.

Imam Khomeini's emphasis on tolerance was not limited to mysticism and poetry. Imam Khomeini's teacher in Islamic jurisprudence, Shaykh Ha'eri, was succeeded in Qum by Ayatullah Burujerdi, who came to be recognized as the supreme authority on the subject. After the death of Ayatullah Burujerdi, in 1961, Imam Khomeini came to be recognized as one of several supreme experts in Islamic jurisprudence, a *marja'-e taqlid*.

In this role, Imam Khomeini issued a number of decrees which were looked upon with suspicion by more conservative clerics. Many of the religious scholars in both Sunni and Shi'ite legal schools have ruled that music and chess are forbidden activities. Imam Khomeini ruled that some forms of music are permissible and that playing chess is not contrary to Islamic law. As a result, interest in traditional Iranian music has thrived since the Revolution.

Imam Khomeini has also encouraged women to play an expanded role in society, to the chagrin of more conservative interpreters of Islamic law.

To Western observers it may seem paradoxical that the very same man who preached tolerance with respect to the perceived challenges to orthodoxy posed by philosophy, mysticism, poetry, and music, should also have been so intolerant toward the proponents of Westernization, toward the form of Marxism propagated in the name of Islam by the People's Mojahiden Organization (PMOI), and toward those who, like Salman Rushdie, would insult the Prophet of Islam or his family.

The apparent contradiction is removed once it is recognized that Imam Khomeini did not value tolerance for its own sake, but for the sake of Islam. Central to Imam Khomeini's understanding of Islam is gnosis, *'irfan*. In Sunni Islam, the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of religion have been kept largely distinct, with the esoteric mostly confined to the Sufi orders.

In Shi'ite Islam, there has been a long tradition in which many of the practices and teachings of the Sufis have been integrated into the religious life and thought of an important segment of the official clergy. Those form of mysticism, or gnosis, draws upon the Sufi theory of Ibn al-'Arabi, the philosophical mysticism of Sadr ad-Din Shirazi⁵ (d. 1640) and Hadi Sabzewari⁶ (d. 1878), both of whom were Shi'ite clerics, and the poetic expression of mysticism by Mawlawi Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi⁷ (d. 1273) and Hafiz

8(d. 1391).

The poetry is often set to music. Because of political and religious repression, those involved in *'irfan* often had to keep their teachings underground. Imam Khomeini, in line with sentiments his reports having been expressed by his teacher Shahabadi, sought to initiate a process through which *'irfan* could become public.

This process was not to be a sudden revolution. His own works on *'irfan* were not very widely distributed during his lifetime, but a persistent emphasis on the mystical elements of Shi'ite thought were interspersed among the more popular political declaration, and may be found in *The Greatest Jihad*, as well.

The revolutionary Islamic movement led by Imam Khomeini may even be viewed as the exoteric dimension of the impetus to reveal Islamic mysticism to the public. The Islamic revolution was a means to bring Islam into public life, from which it was being marginalized during the reign of the Shah. The process of making Islam central to public life was also resisted by conservative religious groups, who saw in this movement a departure from tradition.

Imam Khomeini argued that the guardian jurist of Islamic law had the authority to modify the traditional understanding of the law in order to protect the Islamic order. Conservatives would argue that any break from tradition could only bring deviation from Islamic order.

The kind of judgment required by Imam Khomeini's vision of Islamic government is one which goes beyond what is provided for in traditional discussions of Islamic jurisprudence. It is a kind of wisdom, however, which can be expected of the 'perfect man', the *insan kamil*, the goal of personal development in the mystic tradition.

An example of the way in which his political awareness demanded a tolerance not found among more conservative clerics may be found in his attitudes toward Sunni Islam. In traditional Shi'ite circles it would not be considered permissible for a Shi'ite to stand behind a Sunni prayer leader. Imam Khomeini ruled that such prayer was valid, and even himself publicly participated in ritual prayer behind a Sunni cleric.

Thus, the flexibility and tolerance which characterized Imam Khomeini's thought do not stem from the libertarian element in Islamic thought, but from a commitment to a movement from the esoteric to exoteric dimensions of Islamic life, a movement which demanded the implementation of Islamic law as well as the propagation of mystical ideas.

Imam Khomeini's attitudes toward mysticism and politics are especially well illustrated by his invitation to President Gorbachev to embrace Islam. On January 7, 1989, Imam Khomeini sent a delegation to Moscow led by Ayatullah Jawad Amuli who presented Imam's letter of invitation to President Gorbachev.

In the letter, Imam Khomeini congratulated Gorbachev for his admission of the failures of communism, and he suggested that the Soviet leader consider the alternative to communist ideology posed by Islam.

In order to acquaint the Russian leader with Islam, Imam Khomeini recommended the works of the philosophers Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and the mystic, Ibn al-‘Arabi. Conservative clerics were incensed that Imam should choose to represent Islamic thought through the works of philosophers and a Sufi, instead of works of jurisprudence and traditional devotional literature.

President Gorbachev politely declined the invitation to convert, although he said that he would consider the importance of spiritual values in society. Imam Khomeini appears to have been genuinely disappointed that the response was not affirmative, and when a Soviet delegate read Gorbachev’s reply to Imam Khomeini in Tehran.

Imam repeatedly interrupted with criticism of the views expressed in the letter. Such unconventional diplomacy demonstrates Imam’s propagation, despite criticism from the clergy which he championed. It also provides an indication of the unusual way in which mysticism and politics were combined in the thinking of Imam Khomeini.

Imam wrote several works which treated mystical topics, or which treated topics in a way characteristic of the mystical tradition. Their titles are suggestive: *Commentary on the Supplication before Dawn (Sharh ad-Du’a as-Sahar)*, *The Lamp of Guidance to Vicegerency and Guardianship (Misbah al-Hidayat ala’l-Khilafat wal-Wilayah)*, *The Countenance of Allah (Liqat Allah)*, *The Secret of Prayer: Prayers of the Gnostics or Ascension of the Wayfarers (Sirr as-Salat: Salat al-‘Arifin ya Mi’raj as-Salikin)*

Annotation to the Commentary on ‘Bezels of Wisdom’ (Ta’liqat ala Sharh al-Fusus al-Hikam),
Annotation to the Commentary on ‘The Lamp of Intimacy’ (Ta’liqat ala Sharh al-Misbah al-Uns),

Two books of commentaries and annotations to another commentary on a collection of reports regarding the Prophet and Imams called *Ras al-Jalut*, *Lectures on Surah al-Fatihah*, *Marginalia to ‘The Journeys’ (Hashiyeh ala’l-Asfar)*, *Disciplines of the Prayer (Adab as-Salat)*, *Commentary on Forty Sayings of the Prophet and Imams (Chehel Hadith)*.

After he became a *marja’-e taqlid*, political events dominated the life of Imam Khomeini. In 1963, the Shah’s forces massacred thousands who protested against the dictatorship. Imam Khomeini was arrested for his inflammatory speeches and was taken to Tehran. Later he was released with the announcement that he had agreed to refrain from further political activity. He denied that he had made any such agreement and was picked up again.

He was taken to an unknown destination by car. When the car turned off the main highway, it is reported that Imam imagined that he would be assassinated in a remote quarter of the desert. He felt his heart to see if it was racing, but found out that it was calm. He narrated that he was never afraid. He was taken

to a small airstrip where a plane waited to take him to exile in Turkey.

The following year his place of exile was changed to the shrine city of Najaf in southern Iraq. Imam Khomeini remained in Najaf for fourteen years, and it was during these years that the lectures collected under the title, *Jihad al-Akbar* were delivered. In 1978, the Shah put pressure on the Ba'athist government in Iraq to expel Ayatullah Khomeini.

After being refused asylum at the airport in Kuwait, Imam commented that he would spend his life traveling from one airport to another, but that he would not keep silence. Finally, he was admitted to France, where he resided at Neauphle-le-Château, outside Paris. In February 1979, he returned triumphantly to Iran and the Islamic Republic was launched.

Imam Khomeini was revered for the simplicity of his life-style and for his rigorous attention to even supererogatory details of Islamic ritual. He is said to have always faced Mecca when he performed ablutions. He preferred to purchase the less expensive shoes. If he drank half a glass of water, he would put a piece of paper over it to keep the dust out and save the rest for later.

Some claim that he had a special relation with the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, peace be upon him, the awaited one who will defeat injustice prior to the final judgment. Such claims are also part of the mystical tradition of Shi'ite Islam.

Yet another year of our lives has passed. You young people are advancing toward old age, and we old people toward death. During this academic year you have become aware of the extent of your learning and study. You know how much you have acquired and how high the edifice of your education has been raised.

However, with respect to the refinement of virtue, the acquisition of religious manners, divine learning and purification of the soul, what have you done? What positive steps have you taken? Have you had any thought of refinement or self-reformation? Have you had any program in this field? Unfortunately, I must submit that you have not done anything striking, and that with regard to the reformation and refinement of the self you have not taken any great steps.

1. Professor Ayatullah Murtada Mutahhari (1298–1358 AHS) was born on Bahman 13, 1298 AHS in the village of Fariman near Mashhad to a family of clergy. At the age of 12, he went to Mashhad where he learned the basics of Islamic sciences and then moved to Qum where he attended the class sessions conducted by the great authorities of the theological center. From 1319 AHS Mutahhari had taken part in the sessions led by His Eminence Imam Khomeini (r) and other famous teachers of the time. Moreover, he himself conducted lessons in subjects like Arabic literature, logic, kalam (scholasticism), jurisprudence, and philosophy. In 1331 AHS Mutahhari was transferred from Qum to Tehran and in 1334 AHS he was invited to teach Islamic sciences at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, Tehran University. He was arrested at the midnight of Khordad 15, 1342 AHS and spent 43 days in prison. After Imam Khomeini's migration to Paris in France, Mutahhari went to meet him and His Eminence assigned him the responsibility of organizing the Council of the Islamic Revolution. On the night of Ordibehesht 11, 1358 AHS [May 2, 1979] Mutahhari was martyred by an agent of the Furqan terrorist group. He

wrote more than 50 books and tens of articles, and delivered scores of speeches. His Eminence Imam Khomeini (r) said of Mutahhari: “His written and spoken words are, without exception, educational and enlivening... I recommend the students and intellectual group not to let Mutahhari’s words be forgotten by un-Islamic tricks...” (Pub.)

2. Mulla Sadra (d. 1050 AH/1640), also called Sadr ad-Din Shirazi, was a philosopher who led the Iranian cultural renaissance in the 17th century. The foremost representative of Ishraqi [Illuminationist] School of philosopher-mystics, he is commonly regarded by Iranians as the greatest philosopher of Iran. A scion of a notable Shirazi family, Mulla Sadra completed his education in Isfahan, then the leading cultural and intellectual center of Iran. After his studies with scholars there, he produced several works, the most famous of which was his *Asfar* (Journeys). *Asfar* contains the bulk of his philosophy, which was influenced by a personal mysticism bordering on the ascetic that he experienced during a 15-year retreat at Kahak, a village near Qum in Iran.

Toward the end of his life, Mulla Sadra returned to Shiraz to teach. His teachings, however, were considered heretical by the orthodox Shi’ite theologians, who persecuted him, though his powerful family connections permitted him to continue to write. He died on a pilgrimage to Mecca. (Pub.)

3. Muhyi ad-Din ibn al-‘Arabi, the celebrated Muslim mystic whose influence came to permeate the intellectual and spiritual life of virtually the entire Muslim world, was born at Murcia in Southern Spain in 1165. Much of his youth was spent in Seville, where he devoted himself to literary, theological and mystical studies. After visiting Granada and other Spanish towns, as well as Tunis, Fez, and Morocco, he set out in 1202 for the East by way of Egypt, whence he made the pilgrimage to Mecca. He did not return to Spain. Many of the remaining years of his life were passed in the neighborhood of Mecca, but he also traveled extensively to Babylonia, Asia Minor, and Syria, everywhere gaining disciples and spreading his doctrines through dialogues with scientists and scholars.

Whether we regard the extent of his theological writings or their influence on the subsequent development of Islamic mysticism, Ibn al-‘Arabi can justly claim the supreme position among Sufi authors which posterity has accorded him, and which is attested by the title, *Ash-Shaykh al-Akbar*, conferred on him by the almost unanimous voice of those who are best qualified to judge. The list of his works drawn up by himself contains 289 titles, and some of them are of enormous length. The most famous and important is the *Futuhat al-Makkiyah*. In this, as in many of his works, Ibn al-‘Arabi professes to communicate mysteries revealed to him in ecstatic vision by prophets, angels, and even God Himself. (Pub.)

4. Ayatullah Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani (1289–1358 AHS / 1910–1979) was a highly learned and dedicated clergyman who played a pivotal role the struggle against dictatorial regime of the Shah. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatullah Taleqani was appointed as the Chairman of the Revolutionary Council and was an elected member of the Council of Experts. In Mordad 1358 AHS [August 1979], Imam Khomeini designated him as his representative to lead the first Friday congregational prayers at the Tehran University campus. Ayatullah Taleqani had many written works on the exegesis of the Qur’an, Islamic education, and socio-political issues. (Pub.)

5. See ft. 2, p. VIII–IX. (Pub.)

6. Hajji Hadi Sabzewari (1797–1878) was the philosopher and poet noted for disseminating and clarifying the doctrines of Mulla Sadra. The Qajar Shah Nasir ad-Din ordered a mausoleum to be built for him at Mashhad. (Pub.)

7. Mawlavi Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi (1207–1273) was the greatest mystic poet in the Farsi language and founder of the Mawlawiyyah order of dervishes (“The Whirling Dervishes”). He is famous for his lyrics and for his didactic epic, *Spiritual Couplets*. (Pub.)

8. Khwajah Shams ad-Din Muhammad Hafiz Shirazi (ca. 1325–1391) was the fourteenth century Persian lyric bard and panegyrist, and commonly considered as the preeminent master of the ghazal form. (Pub.)

9. The text of the said letter of Imam Khomeini to Mikhail Gorbachev along with explanatory notes is published by this Institute under the title, *A Call to Divine Unity*. Its second edition is forthcoming. (Pub.)

<https://www.al-islam.org/jihad-al-akbar-the-greatest-jihad-combat-with-the-self-imam-khomeini/introduction>