

# Nasir al-Din Tusi and His Socio-Political Role in the Thirteenth Century

Abbas Ali Shameli

## Introduction

In the history of human civilization as a whole and in that of Islamic civilization in particular, there have been outstanding figures who played decisive roles in forming or changing various aspects of human life. Some of them are still surrounded by a mass of historical data containing contradictory judgments about them. Since their activities took place many centuries ago, modern scholars are often short of enough information to judge their real impact.

It is difficult to come to a fair conclusion. In the history of Islamic civilization, Khwaja Nasir al-Din Tusi (597–1201/672–1274) was a unique scholar, in one of the most crucial periods, whose real role and personality are still obscure. His age was full of such harsh socio-political events in all parts of the Islamic world that some regarded it as the worst period in human history.

The intercontinental Mongol invasion and the collapse of all Islamic powers and states at the same time as the abolishment of Ismaili fortresses and the destruction of the Abbasid caliphate created a bloody and unstable condition for all Muslims including Tusi. In this complicated atmosphere, one can hardly rely on historical data which are conflicting and controversial.

Considering these difficulties, this paper attempts to assess Tusi's role as a person who witnessed the situation but stood apart from it, preventing himself from assimilating to his age. Holding the chain of Islamic thought, Tusi played an active role in linking pre-Mongol civilization to the post-Mongol world.

Trying to obtain a better and wider understanding of Islamic knowledge, Tusi left Nishapur, visited Ray, Baghdad and Musil. He witnessed the socio-political situation of the Abbasid caliphate and evaluated the possibilities of being influential in Baghdad.

On his way home, he visited an Ismāʿīlī leader (*dāʿī*) in Isfahān, spent a few months in one of their fortresses, and finally joined their central forts in Qūhistān and Alamūt. He then accompanied Hulūkū, took over the administration of *Awqāf* (endowments), and concentrated his efforts in establishing the observatory of Marāgha.

It is difficult to decide what Tusi's real ideas were and which cause he truly supported. His letter to Ibn al-ʿAlqami the Shīʿī vizier of al-Mustaʿsim, requesting a position that would bring him into contact with the caliph, his long lasting connection with the Ismāʿīlī elite and his supervision of the institute of *Awqāf* to administer the observatory of Marāgha are some aspects which will be dealt with in this paper.

In addition to his significant intellectual influence, did Tusi play an active socio-political role or did he manifest a kind of withdrawal and negative cooperation? A discussion of this question will form the core of this paper.

## Biographical data

Abu Jaʿfar Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Hasan b. Abi Bakr (Khājā Nasir al-Dīn Tusi) was born into a learned family known as Firuz Shāh Jahrudī, the name of one of his ancestors. Jahrud was a city in Sūva, originally a province in Iran, which later became a suburb of Qum. Since he was born in Tus on 11th Jumādī I 597 (Feb. 18, 1201), he is known as Tusi.

He died in Baghdād on the 18th Dhu al-Hijjah 672 (June 26, 1274).<sup>1</sup> As Islamic history indicates, Tusi was one of the most distinguished figures produced by Islamic civilization. Nonetheless, one can hardly form a clear picture regarding his true personality and influence from historical data. Shīʿī and Sunni scholars offered divergent points of view concerning his socio-political impact and his beliefs.

According to G. Sarton, Tusi was one of the greatest scientists of Islam.<sup>2</sup> Ibn Khaldun similarly believes that most Muslim scholars were from Iran, asserting that there were not any important scholars after Ibn al-Khatib Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (544–606 A.H.) and Nasir al-Dīn Tusi.<sup>3</sup>

Imāmī scholars (Twelver Shīʿī scholars) like Muhaqqiq al-Hillī (d. 676) in his introduction on *R. Istishbāb Tayāsūr al-Qiblah li Ahl al-ʿIrāq*<sup>4</sup> and Husayn b. ʿAbd al-Samad in his permission (*ijāzah*) to Sayyid Badr al-Dīn Hasan b. Shadqam considered Tusi to be the greatest Imāmī scholar.<sup>5</sup> He is also entitled “*ustād al-bashar wa al-ʿaql al-hādī ʿashar*” (the Teacher of humanity and the 11th Intellect).<sup>6</sup>

Most Sunni scholars, however, such as Abi al-Fallāh Hanbali, Subki, Yafīʿī, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim, accused him of treachery and infidelity. However, Salāh al-Dīn Safadī<sup>7</sup> and Ibn Shākir al-Kutubī,<sup>8</sup> also Sunni scholars, considered him to be a wise and true Muslim.<sup>9</sup> Tusi's unique significance was due to his wide and profound knowledge on almost all aspects of Islamic learning, including Islamic philosophy, logic, jurisprudence, theology, mysticism, ethics, medicine, astrology and mathematics.

## Tusi's Socio-political role

In the first period of his life, Tusi migrated from Tus to Nishapur where he spent several years. We do not know much about his career as a student. We are also short of accurate information about a sudden circle which Tusi formed by traveling from Nishapur to Ray, Baghdad, Musil, Isfahan, and again to Nishapur. The second phase of Tusi's life can be divided into four main periods.

The first and the second parts were spent among the Ismailis. After he had spent several years with Nasir al-Din Muhtasham (d. 655), the ruler of Quhistan, he was invited to Alamut by Al-Din Muhammad (d. 653) the major leader of the Ismailis.

He stayed for several years in Alamut and witnessed Al-Din's reign and one year of the reign of his son Khurshah (d. 654). Historical sources do not indicate whether Tusi played any major socio-political role among the Ismailis other than his intellectual activities.

Some historical accounts show that the only significant political action of the scholar in this period is a letter and an elegy or *qasida*, to Ibn al-Alqami (d. 656/1258). As a Shi'i chief minister of the caliph of Baghdad al-Mustasim (from 1245–1258), al-Alqami was in a position to present the caliph with Tusi's letter, in which the scholar praised the caliph, wishing to acquire his favor toward the Imami sect.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, in the beginning, Tusi felt a responsibility to spread Shi'i thought. Under the benefit of the patronage of Ibn al-Alqami, he started his missionary activity with the caliph of Baghdad.

From 654 A.H., when the fortresses of the Ismailis collapsed, Tusi started the third and fourth periods of his life, during which he not only accompanied the Mongols to Baghdad but also remained with them until the end of his life.<sup>11</sup> In the final period of his life, he was appointed supervisor of endowments (*Awqaf*) and chief of the scholars. In this period he managed to establish the observatory at Maragha.<sup>12</sup>

## Tusi and the Shi'i Seveners (Ismailis)

Tusi began his career as an astronomer for the Ismaili ruler Nasir al-Din Abd al-Rahim in Sertakht.<sup>13</sup> He spent over 25 years among the Nazari Ismailis. This Shi'i group was alternatively known as Esoterists, Hermanutists (*Batinīyah wa ahl al-Ta'wil*) or Seveners.

At the same time they were known as Infidels (*Malhida*) by more orthodox Muslims. From Hasan Sabbah, the founder of the Nazari Ismailis, they took two names: Sabba'iyya, as an indication of their allegiance and Ta'limiyya because they followed his instructions: "in addition to reasoning and thinking, people need a teacher and a guide to teach them how to know God." T

They were also known by the names of their more influential leaders; for example, they were called QarimiTa after Ahmad Ibn Ash'ath QarmaTi one of their *daw'i* in the second half of the 3rd century and

Maymuniyya after ʿAbd Allah Ibn Maymun al-Qaddḥ an Ismʿīli supporter between 204–264 A.H.. Their opponents superstitiously called them Hashishiyya from the belief that they used drugs to entice their followers into obeying their orders.<sup>14</sup> Finally, they are known in the west as Assassins.

Why did Tusi, undoubtedly an Imʿami scholar, join the Shiʿi Seveners, and what was the real reason for his connection with the Ismʿīlis? It is difficult to find the real reason or the exact time in which Tusi joined the Seveners. Some believe that Tusi was, in fact, an Ismʿīli Shiʿi who was born into an Ismʿīli family. However, we should note that his father, Muhammad Ibn Hasan, was one of the *zʿhiri* Shiʿi scholars of Tus. We lack any information which indicates that his family had any kind of relationship with the Ismʿīlis.

Tusi himself in his *R. Sayr va Suluk* states that he had been trained among a family who believed in and acted according to the *zʿhir* of *Shariʿa*.<sup>15</sup> Was he really an Ismʿīli Shiʿa? If not, how can we justify those part of his writings which were written to support the Seveners or at least dedicated to the Ismʿīli leaders?

An answer to this question requires a comprehensive look at the roots of his connection to the Seveners. Some scholars held the idea that as a truth-seeking scholar, Tusi wanted to obtain a real picture of the Seveners, not through the assertions of their opponents, but by studying their literature and by discussions with their scholars.

Accordingly, he decided to live among them.<sup>16</sup> This idea is defended by the fact that Tusi's involvement occurred after he had observed a considerable change in Ismʿīli ideas. When he was eleven years old, the Seveners in Iran and Syria returned to the appearance (*zʿhir*) of Islam.<sup>17</sup>

According to Ibn al-Athir, in 608 Jalāl al-Din Hasan send a person to Baghdād announcing to al-Nṣir li Din Allah, the Abbasid caliph, that the Seveners had returned to the *Shariʿa* and conduct acceptable to all Muslims. When Jalāl al-Din's mother entered Baghdād on her way to the *hajj*, she was greatly honored by the Abbasid caliph.<sup>18</sup> This change might have facilitated Tusi's later relations with the Ismʿīlis since they were no longer rejecting the appearance of the *Shariʿa*.

Some historians believe that Tusi's connection with the Seveners was the result of the socio-political atmosphere of the time. The Mongols' continuous invasions in the northern part of Iran, on one hand, and the rigidity of the Sunnis, who formed the majority of the population, on the other hand, forced Tusi to look for a secure and suitable place for his research.

According to the introduction of *Akhlḡq-i Nṣiri*, after the Mongol invasions of Khurṣṣṣ and Nishṣpur, he left his hometown to go to Ray, then to Baghdād and Musil. Finally, on his way home, he visited Isfahṣan and then returned to Khurṣṣṣ.<sup>19</sup> However, his return was unfortunate because he found himself at the center of the war which had covered all the northern parts of Iran.

The Mongol invasions had created a situation of insecurity and massacre. Hence, when he was invited

to Quhastān by the Ismāʿīli leader Nāsir al-Dīn Muhtasham, he accepted the invitation.<sup>20</sup> However, according to Tusi's statement at the end of his commentaries on Ibn Sīnā's *K. al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbihāt*, fleeing to the Seveners did not ease his difficulties; rather, it was the hardest and most difficult period of his life.

Although he received honour and appreciation from them, he could not tolerate many of their ideas and actions. The first evidence of his dissatisfaction among the Seveners is that during his early stay in Quhistān, he communicated with Ibn al-ʿAlqami in an attempt to find a position in Baghdād.<sup>21</sup>

Tusi's intentions became clear to the rulers of the Ismāʿīli forts and they sent him to Alamut where they kept him in a more controlled situation among themselves until the fall of their dominance.<sup>22</sup> In his introduction of *Zij-i Ilkhāni*, Tusi praises Hulūku, describing him as the person who freed him from the infidels. Another piece of evidence of Tusi's disagreement with the Assassins is that, soon after he was out of Alamut, he changed the introduction and afterword of *Akhlaq-i Nāsiri*, which had praised Nāsir al-Dīn Muhtasham and ʿAlī al-Dīn Muhammad Ibn Jalāl al-Dīn, two Ismāʿīli leaders.<sup>23</sup>

J. Humā'i states that a comparison between the first version and the revised version of *Akhlaq-i Nāsiri* shows that after Tusi was accused of being a Sevenser, he omitted the first and the last parts of *Akhlaq-i Nāsiri* and modified those parts of his writings which were compatible with their ideas and were written when he was living among them.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, prior to his death in Baghdād he requested that his body be buried in front of the shrine of Musā al-Kāzim, the other son of Jaʿfar al-Sādiq and the seventh Imām of Twelvers,<sup>25</sup> rather than the tomb of Ismāʿīl, the first hidden Imām of the Seveners.

M. Zanjāni quotes the author of *Durrat al-Akhabār* who believed that Tusi was forced to live among the Seveners. He states that Tusi was captured and was sent first to Quhistān and then to Alamut.<sup>26</sup> It is fairly reasonable to conclude that during the period of Tusi's life among the Seveners, he practiced *taqiyyah*.

## Tusi and the fall of the Abbasid caliphate

A quick glance at Tusi's life reveals that he was simultaneously dissatisfied with the Seveners and their ideas and with the Abbasid caliphs. After Hulūku conquered Alamut in 654 A.H., Tusi accompanied him to Baghdād. According to Rashid al-Dīn Fazl Allah, Manqu Qāʾin, the great khān of Qarā Qurm, ordered Hulūku to force Tusi into his army.

Manqu Qāʾin, familiar with astrology and mathematics, was interested in establishing an observatory in his territory. Aware of Tusi's expertise in this field, he asked Hulūku to send the scholar to his court after he had conquered the Ismāʿīli fortresses.<sup>27</sup>

In discussing Tusi's reasons for traveling with Hulūku's court, Hā'iri notes that the Mongol kings were

extremely interested in history and astronomy. They saw these as the main instruments of their expansion: history to record their expeditions and astrology to predict their chances of success in a new attack. He concludes that they invited Tusi to accompany them as a renowned astrologer.<sup>28</sup>

According to some historical documents, Tusi not only encouraged Hulāku to conquer Alamut but also to attack Baghdad.<sup>29</sup> They claim that Hulāku had originally decided to invade Constantinople,<sup>30</sup> but Tusi encouraged him to attack Baghdad. In contrast to the argument of Husām al-Dīn Munajjim, a Sunni astrologer and consultant in the court of Hulāku, who insisted that invading would cause the corruption of the entire world, Tusi argued that there would not be any problem.

Tusi reminded Hulāku that both Abbasid and non-Abbasid caliphs had been killed in the past without dire results. He added that the Abbasid caliph Ma'mun had killed his brother Amin and Mutawakkil, another caliph, had been assassinated by some of his military commanders and even his own son without upsetting the world order. The killing of Musntasir and Mu'tazz occurred without releasing universal corruption into the world.

Tusi's suggestion to Hulāku was not merely the result of an astrological interpretation of the stars. As an Imāmi scholar he did not accept the legal authority that declared the Abbasid caliphs to be the religious leaders of the Muslim community. His letter to Baghdad, asking Ibn al-ʿAlqami to cooperate with him in converting the Abbasid caliph to the Shi'i doctrine, shows his discontent with caliphal religious authority as early as the first half of the thirteenth century.

After Hulāku conquered Baghdad, he hesitated to kill Mustasim (d. 656) due to Munajjim's prediction that killing the vicegerent of the Prophet Muhammad (S) would result in disaster. Again Tusi promised that nothing would happen if the Abbasid caliph was killed and finally, in 656 A.H., the last Abbasid caliph was executed.

Other sources suggest that Tusi did not encourage the assassination of the caliph; rather, his support of Hulāku was a way to assist scholars and innocent people.<sup>31</sup> By holding an important position in Hulaku's court, he was able to restrain some of the Mongol leader's excesses.

At this time, Mustansir's vizier was a Shi'i named Ibn al-ʿAlqami (d. 656). He had had some covert relations with Tusi while the latter was living among the Seveners. It is believed that Ibn al-ʿAlqami also wrote a letter to Hulāku, telling him he need not be afraid to come to Baghdad.<sup>32</sup> The fact that he was appointed as the ruler of Baghdad by Hulāku after the Mongol leader had left the city lends some support to this idea.

Was Tusi's advice to Hulāku, perhaps aided and abetted by Ibn al-ʿAlqami, the only reason or even the main reason, for the collapse of the Abbasid caliphate? As Hairi mentions in his analysis of Tusi's role in the conquest of Baghdad, contemporary sources make no allusion to any political impact made by Tusi.

Sources such as the *Al-ʿadab al-Sultāniyya*, (*al-Fakhri*) (701/1301) of Ibn TaqTaq or the *Mukhtasar* of

Abu al-Fidā' (d. 732/1331), as well as Tusi's own report about the conquest of Baghdad do not mention anything about Tusi's role. *Tārīkh-i Vassāf* (728/1327) and *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh* (710/1310) only point out that Tusi predicted that the Mongol leader would replace the caliph.<sup>33</sup>

One of the main goals of the Mongols from the early period of their dominance was to open the gates of Baghdad. They attempted to invade Baghdad several times, but they were defeated. Manku Qaghan came to power during the period that the Crusaders were fighting the Mamluks in Egypt and Syria. Having received complaints from both Mongolian commanders and some of the *ʿulamā* who were under the pressure of Ismāʿīli terrors and the ill treatment of the Abbāsids, the great Khān asked his brother Hulūku to invade the Islamic lands. Moreover, an agreement with King Hethum I of Armenia motivated the great Khān to expand his conquest to include Egypt and Syria.<sup>34</sup>

According to Cahen, Hethum I, had acted as the precursor of the Mongols on the shores of the Mediterranean against the Muslims of Syria and Asia Minor. His actions were, in fact, the result of favorable impressions sent to him by his eastern co-religionists.<sup>35</sup>

Hulūku began his mission by attacking the forts of the Assassins. Once he had invaded the Assassins, he moved toward Baghdad with Tusi as his consultant. Whether Tusi himself decided to be in the court of the Mongols or whether the Mongols forced him to do so is still disputable. In addition to the external threats, the Abbāsīd caliphate had its internal problems rooted in the weakness and the corruption of the caliphate.<sup>36</sup>

Although Tusi did not accept the Abbāsīd caliphate as legal authority, why would he prefer the secular authority of the Mongols? Did not Tusi, by encouraging Hulūku, actually participate in killing Muslims and destroying Muslim centers?

Attributing the fall of the caliphate to a single cause or a single person is a simplified interpretation of a complicated situation. Tusi witnessed the pre-Mongol conflicts and realized that the Mongol invasion of the Islamic world was inevitable.

Considering the internal and external situations of the Islamic world, the Mongols had already reached the conclusion that they had to start implementing their policies to conquer the world. The last and the most necessary choice that remained for the scholar was a limited and carefully planned cooperation with the Mongol troops.

Through his association with Hulūku, he could obtain a high position in the Ilkhān's court and play a constructive role in his policies. By using his influence with Hulūku, Tusi hoped to persuade the Mongol leader to act in the interests of the Muslims. Alone among Muslim scholars, Tusi noticed that the Mongol invasion was not ideological.

The Mongols invaded the Islamic lands in order to spread their power over a vast territory. Since their religion, which combined both pagan and shamanistic beliefs, was not likely to be an alternative to Islam,

scholars like Tusi were able to use their presence as an instrument to save Islam. Vladimir Minorsky remarks that since the Mongols' beliefs were vague and primitive, there was no chance for their propagation among the conquered population. Hence they were tolerant toward the other religions.<sup>37</sup> Dawson also maintains that during the reign of Chingiz Khan, it was a part of his law that all religions were to be respected without favoritism.<sup>38</sup>

After the fall of the Isma'ili and the Abbasid caliphate, the flexible atmosphere allowed people a free choice in religion. Tusi's position at the court of Hulaku attracted the Muslim scholars from many places to one center and led to the revival of the Islamic sciences. Although Tusi paid special attention to the Imami sect and immediately after the fall of Baghdad visited Hilla, the very center of Imami scholarship, his main attempts were never limited to a particular group.

He not only invited the scholars of all sects to cooperation together at the school of Maragha, but also spent *Awqaf* (endowments) to sponsor all Muslim scholars.

## Tusi's Cultural influence

In spite of the bitter accusations hurled at Tusi for the role he was believed to have played in the fall of Baghdad and the massacre of Muslims, study of that crucial situation shows that without the support of a strong Muslim state, individuals such as Tusi could do nothing to prevent the Mongols from achieving their destructive goals. However, Tusi's influence on the continuation and revival of Islamic scholarship was more effective than his impact, if any at all, on the fall of Baghdad.

As an outstanding Islamic scholar who may be placed beside distinguished thinkers like al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and al-Biruni, Tusi was an exception in a highly crucial period. His significant role in holding and reviving the Islamic civilization by obtaining the favor of Hulaku should not be ignored.<sup>39</sup> Despite his critical evaluation of Tusi, Arberry gives the following account of Tusi's cultural role:

The Mongols, like their twentieth century disciples, knew how to handle and exploit to their own ends men of that caliber; and in the end, whether out of conviction or statecraft, the Ilkhans accepted Islam and Muslim civilization was revived in Persia and Iraq.

That such a renaissance could take place at all, after the chaos and slaughter of the preceding years, was in large measure due to the collaboration of such as Nasir al-Din Tusi and Shams al-Din Juvaini, brother of the well-known historian and head of the administration of Persia under Mongol rule in the reigns of Hulaku (to 1265), Abak (1265–82) and Ahmad (1282–4).

Apart from numerous writings in various fields of Islamic scholarship, Tusi made unique contributions in astronomy. After the fall of Baghdad, his main concern was to establish the school of Maragha. His scientific center in Maragha was so attractive that scholars, both Muslims and non-Muslims, came from all over the world to study and research there.



In addition to Muslim scholars, philosophers and scientists, Chinese astronomers were invited to work at the school of Marāgha. For the last eighteen years of his life, Tusi was engaged in building this observatory. His contribution in astronomy was so important that even modern scholars have benefited from his findings.<sup>40</sup> In appreciation of his scientific findings, NASA nominated one of the craters on the moon to commemorate him.<sup>41</sup>

### a. Tusi and the school of Marāgha

Despite the socio-political role he was forced to play by circumstances, Tusi's main contributions and interests were intellectual. After Jundi Shāpur with its legacy of a pre-Islamic university and the Nizāmiyya established by Nizām al-Mulk in Baghdad, the school of Marāgha was the most important madrasa in the Islamic world. Although this school was first founded as a center for astronomy and mathematics, it then became an important center for all Islamic sciences. The first observatory in the Islamic world was established at the command of al-Ma'mun, an Abbasid caliph.

By the end of the third century A.H. other observatories had been founded in Syria, Egypt and Baghdad. Tusi's observatory, established at Marāgha in 617/1285, was the most fascinating and advanced.<sup>42</sup> Astronomers were invited to study there from the east and the west while the school of Marāgha incorporated various branches of Islamic sciences.

Students of astronomy were called from as far away as China to study at the school of Marāgha. The observatory of Marāgha was unique for almost three centuries.<sup>43</sup> Tusi actually established in Marāgha the prototype of the modern university. Its library was composed of more than 400,000 volumes, collected from different cities like Transoxiana, Khurāsān, Baghdad, Musil and Damascus which were the victims of the early Mongol invasions.<sup>44</sup>

The school of Marāgha incorporated different sections (*dar al-hikma*) devoted to philosophy, medicine, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and *hadith*. Interestingly, they each had a different priority and received their funding based on this hierarchy. Researchers in *Dar al-Hikma* received three *dirhams* for every 48 hour period, those in *Dar al-Tibb* received two *dirhams*, those in *Dar al-Fiqh* one *dirham*, while those in *Dar al-Hadith* received only half a *dirham*.<sup>45</sup>

The main source of the income to pay these expenses was the *Awqaf* under Tusi's supervision. The distinguishing characteristic of the Marāgha School was its variety of subjects and the priority given to some of the branches of Islamic sciences. These characteristics might explain the accusations which claimed that Tusi was using Muslim endowments not for *fiqh* but for Greek philosophy and other sciences.

One of Tusi's outstanding characteristics was that although most of his life was spent among either Assassins or Mongols, surrounded by wars, attacks and retaliations, all of which were conditions unsuitable for study and research, he had an effective influence on intellectual development. This

influence was most prominent in astrology, mathematics, philosophy and theology.

According to Strothmann, Tusi's fame outside Shi'i circles was due to his books and research in the exact sciences, namely medicine, physics, mathematics and particularly astrology and astronomy. Another important aspect of Tusi was his flexibility and openness in his intellectual relations with all Muslim scholars even non-Shi'a.

He did not allow his devotion to his own sect to cut him off from scholarly connections with non-Imami *ʿulamā*.<sup>46</sup> This unique characteristic enabled him to influence and be influenced by many contemporary scholars.

## **b. Reviving the Imami theology (particularly the issue of the Imamate)**

One of the most important aspects of Tusi's intellectual career was his significant role in reformulating the Shi'i theology, combining the Peripatetic style with what he had grasped from his Shi'i ideology to give new understanding to the issue of the Imamate. For example, *Tajrid al-ʿAqʿid*, commented on by several Shi'i scholars, and *Qawāʿid al-ʿAqʿid* were written based on an Imami point of view.

In *Fusul Nasiriyya* he explicitly disagreed with the philosophic and determinative Ashʿarite point of view while in *Talkhis al-Muhassal* he critiqued the *K. al-Muhassal* of Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzi. His *Masʿuriyya al-Masʿuriyya* was a critical commentary on *K. al-Musʿuriyya* of M. ʿAbd al-Karim al-Shahrastāni which refuted Ibn Sin's ideas. Several other treatises were written based on either the Imami or the Ismāʿīli points of view.<sup>47</sup>

More important is a treatise on the issue of the Imamate republished on the occasion of the commemoration of his 7th anniversary. His main goal in these works was to rationalize what previously had been presented by other Imami scholars in a more or less traditionalist point of view. This characteristic will be clearer if his method is compared with that of Nawbakhti in *K. al-Yaqut* and those of Shaykh al-Mufid (336–413) and Seyyed Murtazā (355–436) against Bāqilāni.<sup>48</sup>

In the history of Imami theology, Tusi reformulated this branch of thought from traditionalism to rationalism. His doctrines put him in a position distinct from both Ismāʿīlis and Sunnis. *Tajrid al-ʿItiqād*, *Fusul Nasiriyya* and the *Treatise on the Imamate* were written using an Imami methodology. In his *Qawāʿid*, particularly on the issue of the Imamate, he tried to present various ideas according to Imamis, Zaydis, *Extremists (Ghulāt)*, Kaysānis and Sunnis without insisting on any particular idea.<sup>49</sup>

## **c. Tusi and philosophy, mysticism and ethics**

As a philosopher, Tusi was greatly influenced by Ibn Sin (980–1037). He supported Ibn Sin's ideas by refuting critiques written against him.<sup>50</sup> He spent about twenty years writing a commentary on the *Al-Ishʿarāt wa al-Tanbihāt* (Safadi, *Al-Wāfi bi al-Wafayāt*).

However, he disagreed with Ibn Sinā on the issue of God's knowledge and approached it from an illuminationist (*ishraqi*) point of view. Like Suhrawardi al-Maqtul (d. 587/1191), he believed that God's knowledge is a kind of illuminational relation (*izāfa ishraqiyya*).<sup>51</sup>

Tusi's mystical background goes back to his early learning period in Nishapur when he first visited Farid al-Din Sa'id Ibn Yusuf Ibn 'Ali 'Attar (513–617A.H) and was attracted to his ideas.<sup>52</sup> He treated mystics with respect and honor. At the time of the conquest of Baghdad, he and Hulaku visited Abū al-Fuqār Muhammad b. 'Abd al-'Aziz, one of the greatest mystics of the time, at his *zawia* (private place for the Sufi's practices and contemplation).

When Abū al-Fazl Ja'far b. 'Ali, known as al-Mu'taman al-Sufi al-Baghdadi, went to Maragha to visit Tusi, Tusi assigned 100 *dinars* to him each year from the *awqaf* of Baghdad.<sup>53</sup> In addition, Tusi had a warm relationship with Sadr al-Din Qunyawī (d. 673) and Jamāl al-din 'Ayn al-Zamān Jili (d. 651) – two of the great mystics of the time – through various letters.<sup>54</sup>

In the meantime, Tusi himself wrote mystical treatises. His *Awṣaf al-Ashraf* written at the request of Hulaku's vizier Shams al-Din Muhammad Juvayni (d. 681) is a written price with a mystical methodology about the spiritual journey (*Sayr wa Suluk*).<sup>55</sup>

In spite of his considerable devotion to the twelve Imams, his deep respect for Hallāj distinguished him from most of the other Shi'a.<sup>56</sup> *R. Ghaz va Anjām*, also entitled as *Tadhkira*, has an Ismā'īli basis and deals with demonstrating the principles of beliefs in a mystical way.<sup>57</sup>

Why was the intellectual atmosphere of Tusi's time dominated by mystical thought and the Ismā'īli esoteric understanding of Islamic belief? Although this current of mystical thought was mainly centered at the court of the Saljuks of Rum, other parts of the Islamic world were not totally exempt from this trend.

The esoteric doctrines of the Ismā'īlis might have been a reaction against Sunni orthodox Islam, first formed by the Fatimids of Egypt and then by the Nazari Ismā'īlis of Iran and Syria. They were the opposite side to the extreme traditionalism held by the Abbasid caliphs and their political supporters such as the Saljuks.

Nonetheless, this pole of esoteric thought collapsed officially upon the destruction of the Ismā'īli fortresses. As far as an extension of pure mystical thought is concerned, one can find various interpretations. Some believe that mystical tendencies are rooted in a weakness of the political authority or material disadvantages.

When the people are deprived of worldly advantages, they tend to focus on the afterlife. However, the very core of mystical thought and its flourishing took place at the powerful and wealthy court of the Saljuks of Rum. By the time of the Mongol invasion, the Saljuks of Rum were the only shelter for Muslim scholars under the pressure of Mongol attacks. Since the most dominant figure at this court was Sadr

al-Din Qunyawi, the immediate disciple of Ibn ʿArabi, his colleagues were mostly mystics.

Undoubtedly, one main reason for the spread of mystical thought at this time was the immigration of Ibn ʿArabi from Andalusia to Anatolia. His school of thought was so influential that for several centuries, it remained active throughout the Islamic world. The reasons for Ibn ʿArabi's departure from Andalusia remain unclear. His migration may have been the result of a dream which inspired him to leave Andalusia.

On the other hand, he may have wanted to leave Islamic lands dominated by Mālikī ideas and the Peripatetic philosophy which denied an esoteric interpretation of Islamic knowledge. What was it about the eastern part of the Islamic world which attracted Ibn ʿArabi and encouraged him to establish his own school of thought there? What was the real background in the eastern part of the Islamic lands which caused the development of mystical thought? Can we find any socio-political reason for this flourishing mysticism? These questions remain unanswered.

Tusi's writings in ethics were written mainly while he was living among the Ismāʿīlīs. At the request of Nasir al-Din ʿAbd al-Rahim Ibn Abi Mansur, the ruler (*muhtasham*) of Qūhistān, he rewrote and corrected *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq wa Tathir al-Aʿrāq* by Abu ʿAli Miskawayh (d.421/1029) and called it as *Akhlaq-i Nasiri*.<sup>58</sup> Then he translated the *K. Adab al-Saghir* of Ibn al-Muqaffa into Persian.<sup>59</sup>

## A Comparison between Tusi and Nizām al-Mulk

Since Nizām al-Mulk and Nasir al-Din Tusi were both viziers in very different Iranian Empires, it is interesting to compare their decisive roles in different aspects. In addition to their political role, they both played a constructive role in reviving the intellectual atmosphere by re-establishing madrasas.

They both used *waqf* as the main source to sponsor these madrasas. However, they were also dissimilar. For example, Tusi wrote more than 56 different books and treatises.<sup>60</sup> Nizām al-Mulk, however, published few writings. Tusi's political attitude derived from his Shiʿī ideas while that of Nizām al-Mulk was rooted in Sunni Islam.

The difference appeared in supporting or abolishing the idea of the caliphate in both theory and practice. While Nizām al-Mulk believed in the legitimacy of the Abbasid's authority and motivated the Saljuks to support the Abbasid caliphs, Tusi accompanied Hulūku to invade Baghdād and destroy the caliphate.<sup>61</sup>

In spite of their emphasis on reviving intellectual and religious thought, the Nizāmiyya of Baghdād was explicitly a center of Shāfiʿī *fiqh* and Ashʿrite theology whereas the Nasiriyya of Marāgha incorporated a wider field of Islamic sciences. Moreover, Tusi did not announce that the orthodox *fiqh* and theology must be Imāmī.

The library of Marāgha was more important than that of the Nizāmiyya; it contained a considerable number of books since it was a collection of the writings from Baghdād, Syria, and the Arabian

Peninsula. In addition, those books which were gathered from the eastern parts of the Mongol Empire were added to the collection.

Another important difference between the two Muslim viziers was their political involvement. After the collapse of the Abbasid caliphate, Tusi addressed only two important political letters to the rulers of Shām and Halab, – al-Malik al-Nāsir, Sayf al-Din b. Yaghmur and ‘Alī al-Din al-Qushaymuri, respectively<sup>62</sup> – and devoted most of his concerns to intellectual affairs, particularly the establishment of the observatory of Marāgha.<sup>63</sup>

He traveled to Baghdad and other cities with Hulāku and his successor Abūqākhān only to visit *‘ulamā* and raise the *awqāf* which he then spent on the school of Marāgha.<sup>64</sup> The main feature of Nizām al-Mulk’s career, on the other hand, was his involvement with socio-political affairs, as he was one of the most important political figure of his time.

## Concluding Remarks

Living in one of the most difficult periods of Islamic history, Nasir al-Din Tusi was able to play a decisive role in maintaining and even developing the stream of Islamic civilization in its various aspects. The variety of his writings, his openness toward Muslim scholars from different schools of thought, and his willingness to examine Islamic knowledge through both its esoteric and exoteric ways are some characteristics that distinguished Tusi not only from other scholars of his generation but also among Muslim thinkers throughout the history of Islamic civilization.

His most positive contributions were probably the establishment of the school of Marāgha, supervising the *Awqāf* property of the vast portion of the Muslim world and spending a considerable amount of it in administrating the school of Marāgha. His long-lasting stay among the Seveners, and his involvement in the court of the Mongols could never extinguish the light of Tusi’s enlightenment. Yet he was able to revise his Imāmi ideology while reviving Islamic knowledge in its comprehensive form.

Although the school of Marāgha concentrated on astrology and astronomy as the fields which interested the Mongols, it also covered different aspects of Islamic knowledge. It can even be considered as the prototype of a modern university. In addition to his unique expertise in astrology, Tusi was a distinguished scholar in other fields of Islamic knowledge.

Philosophy, theology, ethics, mysticism, medicine and pure sciences are fields that were creatively touched by this medieval thinker. Interestingly, in theology he focused on the issue of the Imamate, as the main concern of the Ismā‘īlis and an alternative for the institution of the Abbasid caliphate. He may have had a socio-political concern which led him to deal with this issue in his theological writings. Both in theory and practice, Tusi was positively involved with mysticism.

This involvement indicates the dominance of mystical thought at that period. His numerous writings in

this field, his written relationships with his contemporary mystics, and his respectful treatment of the true mystics of his time are clues to the characteristics which created a unique personality out of an individual born into a *zāhiri* Imāmi family. Tusi was, clearly, a unique Muslim scholar rather than a mere politician.

## Bibliography

Amid Musavi (1957), *Yādbud-i Haftasadumin Sa'al-i Khwāja Nasir-i Tusi*, (Tehran University).

Anas Khān, Muhammad (1957). "Naqsh-i Tusi dar Waqfiya, Tanzim va Ta'lim-i Riyaziyat va Nujum". Art in: *Yad namah-i Khwaja Nasir al-Din Tusi*. Vol. 1. Lectures. Tehran University, 1336s/1957. pp. 76–85.

Al-Qasari, al-Karim Mahmud b. Muhammad. *Musamara al-Akhar wa Musayara al-Akhyar* (1943), Ed. Uthman Turan. Ankara: Chakhnah'-i Anjuman-i Tarikh-i Turk.

Arberry, A.J. (1958), *Classical Persian Literature*. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd).

Brown, Edward G. (1956), *A Literary History of Persian*. Vol. 2. (Cambridge: At the University Press).

Burhan, Muhammad Husayn b. Khalaf-i Tabrizi (1952), *Burhan-i Qati*, Ed. Muhammad Mu'in. Vol. 2, (Tehran: Kitabkhanah-i Zavvar)

Cahen, CL. (1960) "Armenia", Art In: *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Vol. 1.

Danish Pazhuh, Muhammad Taqi (1956), *Majma' Ras'il-i Khwaja Nasir*. (Tehran University)

Dawson, Christopher (1955), *The Mongol Mission*. (London & New York: Sheed Ward)

Faz'i, Yusif (1984), *Ismiliyya va Nihzat-i Hasan-i 'abbh* (Tehran: Mu'assasah '-i Matbu'ati-i AT'i)

Hairi, Abdulhadi (1968), *Nasir al-Din al-Tusi: His Supposed Political Role in the Mongol Invasion of Baghdad*. M.A thesis. Institute of Islamic Studies (Montreal: McGill University)

Hum'i, Jalal al-Din (1335s), "Muqaddamah-i Qadim-i Akhlag-i Nisiri", *Majmu'a Ras'il Khwaja Nasir* (Tehran University)

Huart, C.L. "Khwādjā", *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. 1st ed. Vol. 2, 865.

Ibn al-Athir (1987), *al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh*. Vol. 10. Ed. M. Y. al-Duqq (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya)

Ibn Kathir (1987), Abu al-Fid' al-Hafiz. *al-Bidayya wa al-Nihaya*. Vol. 13. (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya)

Ibn Khaldun (1958), *The Muqaddima, An Introduction to History*. Trans. Franz Rosenthal (London:

Routledge & Kegan Paul)

Ibn Taymiyya, Shaykh Taqi al-Din (1903), *Minhaj al-Sunan al-Nabawiyya fi Naqd Kalim al-Shi'a waal-Qadariyya*. Vol. 2. (Cairo: MaTbaqa al-Kubr al-Amiriyya)

Jawid Mandub, Mustaf (1957), "Ihtimam Nasir al-in al-Tusi bi lhy' al-Thiqafa al-Islamiyya Ayyam al-Mughul". Art in: *Yad Namah-i Khaja Nasir al-Din Tusi*. Vol. 1. Lectures. (Tehran University) pp. 86-115.

Khwandamir, Ghiyath al-Din b. Humam al-Din al-Husayni (1954), *Tarikh-i Habib al-Siyar fi Akhbār-i Afrad al-Bashar*. Vol. 3 (Tehran: Kitabkhanah Khayyam)

Al-Kutubi, Muhammad b. al-Shakir (1973), *Fawat al-Wafayt*. Vol. 3. Ed. I. (Abbas. Beirut: Dar Sadiq)

Minorsky, V (1955), "*Iran: Opposition, Martyrdom and Revolt*", *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization*. Ed. G. E. Van Grunbaum (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press)

Mudarrisi Razavi Muhammad Taqi (1957), *Yadbud-i Haftsadumin Sa'i-i Khwaja Nasir-i Tusi* (Tehran University)

----- (1335s), *Majmu'a Ras'il*. Tehran University.

-----, (1354s), *Ahvaf va Asar-i Nasir al-Din*. (Tehran: Intisharati Bunyad-i Farhang-i Iran).

Mudarrisi Zanjani, Muhammad (1956)., *Sargudhasht va Aq'id-i Falsafi-i Khaja Nasir al-Din Tusi* (Tehran University)

Rashid al-Din Fazl Allah (1959), *Jami al-Tawarikh*. Vol. 2. Ed. B. Karimi (Tehran: Intisharati Shirkat-i Nisbiy-i Iqbal va Shurak')

Safadi, Salih al-Din Khalil b. Ibak (1931), *Kitab al-Wafi bi al-Wafayt*. Vol. 1. Ed. Hellmut Ritter (Istanbul: MaTbaqa al-Dawla)

Sarton, George (1951), *Introduction to the History of Science*. Vol. 2. (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington)

Scott, Richard J. *Mamluk-Arminian Relations During the Bar Period 1250-1375* (1981). Montreal: Institute of Islamic Studies (thesis) (McGill University)

Shushtari, Qazi Nur Allah (1950), *Majalis al-Mu'minin* (Tehran: Kitabfurushi-i Islamiyya)

Strothmann, R. "al-Tusi", Art in: *Encyclopedia of Islam*. 1st Ed. Vol. 4. pp. 980-81.

Subki, Abd al-Wahhab b. Taqi . *Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya al-Kubr*. Vol. 5. Cairo: MaTbaqa al-Husayniyya al-Misriyya, n.d.

Tusirkani, Qasim (1957), “Kerhiy-i Siyasi Khwaja Nasir al-Din va Hadaf-i Vei”. Art in: : *Yad namah-i Khwaja Nasir al-Din Tusi*. Vol. 1. Lectures (Tehran University) pp. 204–219.

Tusi Khwaja Nasir al-Din, Muhammad (1966), *Musannafat I: Sharh Mas'alat al-Ilm*. Ed. Nurani Abd Allah (Mashad University)

-----,(1335s), “R. Sayr va Suluk”. in: *Majmu'a Ras'il-i Khwaja Nasir*. Compiled by Mudarrisi Razavi Muhammad Taqi. On the occasion of the seventh anniversary of Khwaja Nasir al-Din Tusi (Tehran University)

-----, *Akhlaq-i Nesiri*. Tehran: Kitabfurushi-i Ilmi'-i Islamiya, no date.

Vassaf, Fazl Allh b. Abd Allh Shirazi (1959), *Tajziya al-Amsar va Tazjiya al-Aसर*, also known as: *Tarikh-i Vassaf al-Hazra*. Vol. 1 (Tehran: Ibn Sin)

Wilson, Mount. Et. Al (1960), *Photographic Lunar Atlas* (The University of Chicago Press)

- 
1. Strothmann 1913, p. 980.
  2. Sarton 1951, p. 1001.
  3. Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddamah*, pp. 311, 315.
  4. Nurani, 1345s., p. 7.
  5. M. Zanjani 1335s., p. 54.
  6. M. Rasavi, *Ahvai va Sar*, p. 1.
  7. Safadi, *al-Wafi* 1931, pp. 179, 182.
  8. Ibn Shkir, *Fawat al-Wafayat* 1973, vol. 3, pp. 247, 250.
  9. M. Zanjani 1335s., p. 55.
  10. *Tarikh-i Vassaf*, 1, pp. 29–30.
  11. Strothmann 1913, p. 981.
  12. M. Razavi 1354s., *Ahvai va Sar*, p. 82.
  13. Strothmann 1913, p. 980.
  14. Fas'i, 1984, pp. 22, 25.
  15. M. Razavi 1335s., “Introduction”, *Majmu'a Ras'il*, and *R. Sayr wa Suluk* p. 38.
  16. Tusi, “R. Sayr va Suluk”, *Majmu'a Ras'il*, p. 41.
  17. Mandub 1335s., p. 88.
  18. Ibn al-Athir, *al-Kamil*, vol., 10, p. 357.
  19. M. Razavi 1335s., *Yadbud-i Hafsadumin*, p. 3.
  20. Tusi, “Introduction”, *Akhlaq-i Nesiri*, p. 3.
  21. *Tarikh-i Vassaf al-Hazra*, 1, pp. 29–30.
  22. *Khwandamir*, *Habib al-Siyar*, 3, pp. 105–106.
  23. M. Zanjani 1335s., p. 126.
  24. Hum'i, “*Muqaddamah-i Qadim-i Akhlaq-i Nesiri*”, *Majmu'a Ras'il*, pp. 6–7.
  25. Rashidi, *Jami*, 2, 558 & Shushtari, *Majlis*, 2, p. 206.
  26. M. Zanjani 1335s., p. 28.
  27. Rashid al-Din, *Jami*, 2, p. 718.
  28. H'iri 1968, p. 37.



29. ʿIqṣarī 1943, Musṭamara al-Akḥbar, pp. 47–48.
30. M. Zanjāni 1335s., p. 35.
31. M. Razavi, Yʿdbud-i Haftsadumin, p. 16.
32. Kutubi, Fawāʾit 1973, p. 252.
33. Hairi 1968, pp. 42, 95.
34. M. Zanjāni 1335s., p. 43.
35. Cahen, Ency. of Islam, Vol. 1, p. 639.
36. M. Zanjāni 1335s., pp. 41–45.
37. Minorsky 1959, p. 191.
38. Dawson 1955, pp. 23–24.
39. Hairi 1968, pp. 72, 73.
40. Hairi 1968, pp. 72–75.
41. M. Zanjāni 1335s., p. 93.
42. M. Zanjāni 1335s., p. 70.
43. Anas Khān 1335s., p. 81.
44. Safadi, al-Wafī, vol. II, p. 179.
45. Ibn Kathir, al-Bidʿya wa al-Nihāya, vol. 13, p. 228.
46. Strothmann 1913, p. 981.
47. M. Zanjāni 1335s., pp. 182–195.
48. Dīnīsh Pazhuh 1335s., p. 4.
49. Dīnīsh Pazhuh 1335s., p. 5.
50. M. Razavi, Ahvāl va ʿAsr 1354s., pp. 111–113.
51. M. Zanjāni 1335s., pp. 166–67.
52. M. Zanjāni 1335s., p. 3.
53. Mandub 1335s., p. 109.
54. M. Razavi, Ahvāl va ʿAsr 1354s., p. 94.
55. M. Razavi Ahvāl va ʿAsr 1354s., p. 457 & Brown 1956, p. 486.
56. Strothmann 1913, p. 981.
57. Afshār 1335s., p. 1.
58. Strothmann 1913, p. 981.
59. M. Zanjāni 1335s., p. 195.
60. Brockelmann, vol. 2, pp. 508–12.
61. Strothmann 1913, p. 981.
62. M. Razavi, Ahvāl va ʿAsr 1354s., pp. 28–36.
63. M. Razavi, Ahvāl va ʿAsr, p. 82.
64. Tusirkāni 1335s., p. 215.

---

**Source URL:**

<https://www.al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol11-n2-2010/nasir-al-din-tusi-and-his-socio-political-role-thirteenth-century-0>