

ORTHODOXY AND  
HETERODOXY IN TWELVER  
SHI'ISM

Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī on Fayḍ Kāshānī  
(the *Risālat al-'Ilmiyya*)

for Norman Calder

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Everyone translates what is transmitted to him into his own language, that is, he makes it into something of the same nature as his person.

(Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī)<sup>1</sup>

The polemical work by Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī<sup>2</sup> known as the *Risālat al-'ilmiyya*<sup>3</sup> is a relatively long and at times repetitive expression of Shī'ī doctrine of much interest to the history of Qajar religious thought because it comprises numerous issues and themes that were bound to be refracted in various manifestations throughout the life of the dynasty. These themes and topics are joined in the service of a single idea, that the knowledge of God, or more precisely, God's knowing, is identical with His essence and as such is completely beyond the ability of human beings to describe or discuss. Or, in the familiar phrase from medieval Ismā'īlī philosophical theology: God is beyond both being and nonbeing.<sup>4</sup> Further, it is important to note that the polemic itself is directed against Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d.1680). It has been suggested that Aḥsā'ī's preoccupation with this topic as a pretext for refuting the ideas of Kāshānī is a natural outcome of his exposure to a strong anti-*Hikmat* mood prevailing in the 'Atabāt during the time that he spent there in study with various senior *mujtahids*.<sup>5</sup> To the extent that this is true, it would tend to present Aḥsā'ī as an ultra-orthodox Twelver Shī'ī – an unlikely identification given the reputation he acquired in later Qajar theological circles, beginning with his excommunication (*takfir*) in 1824 (1239–40AH) by al-Shahīd al-Thālith – 'the Third Martyr', Mullā Muḥammad Taqī Baraghānī (d.1264/1847),<sup>6</sup> and perhaps culminating in his role as the intellectual and spiritual progenitor

of not only the heretical Bābī movement but also the later and in some respects even more scandalous Bahā'ī movement.<sup>7</sup> If the consolidation of the image of Kāshānī as champion of orthodoxy is partly a product of Qajar scholarship, then it may be asked to what degree this may have been an oblique response to Aḥsā'ī's vehement and notorious critique of him? And to the degree that it is, we have yet another example – however multiplex – of 'heresy' producing 'orthodoxy'.

Before turning directly to the *Risāla*, it will be useful to offer a few general words on the biographies of the two 'antagonists'. Mullā Muḥammad ibn Murtaḍā Muḥsin Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (1597–1680) is well known as one of the pillars of post-Safavid Shī'ī religious culture. He produced a number of important books on Twelver doctrine and practice: the Shī'ī version of Ghazālī's *Iḥyā'* known as the *Maḥajjat al-bayḍā'* (in eight volumes), the collection of *ḥadīth* (*akhbār*) known as *al-Wāfi* in (three volumes *in folio*); the *Tafsīr al-ṣāfi*<sup>8</sup> (in five volumes), and, further, he also produced a number of smaller works concerned with right belief, such as '*Ayn al-yaqīn*, the *Ḥaqā'iq* and the *Qurrat al-'uyūn*, all of which more or less presented Kāshānī as an 'orthodox' Shī'ī.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Fayḍ Kāshānī was the most prolific student of the great Mullā Ṣadrā, producing two important and influential works on *Ḥikmat*, the *Kalimāt-i mahnūna* and the *Uṣūl al-mā'arif*. He was also the student of Sayyid Mājīd al-Baḥrānī, the avid Akhbari scholar.<sup>10</sup> Al-Kāshānī's formation combined salient features of the Akhbārī approach<sup>11</sup> to *fiqh* with the Sadrian approach to metaphysics and ontology. This latter also involved a further advance in the Shī'ī domestication of the thought of Ibn 'Arabī, a process that may be seen to have begun as early as Maytham al-Baḥrānī (d. c.1280).<sup>12</sup> These elements, there can be no doubt, also combined with *ṭarīqa*-type Sufi influences, although he did not apparently commit himself to any particular order.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the reality of Mullā Muḥsin's true Sufi allegiances, he has become known in later scholarship as the 'Ghazālī' of post-Safavid Twelver Shī'ism.<sup>14</sup>

The author of the *Risāla* under discussion – the eponymous master of the *Shaykhiyya*, or the *Kashfiyya* as its adherents preferred to be designated – was Shaykh Aḥmad b. Zayn al-dīn b. Ibrāhīm b. Saqr b. Ibrāhīm b. Dāghir al-Aḥsā'ī. He was born in 1166/1753 in al-Muṭayrafī, a small village in Bahrain, apparently of pure Arab lineage. His family had been followers of the Shī'ī version of orthodoxy for five generations. From his early childhood, it was clear that Shaykh Aḥmad was strongly predisposed to the study of religious texts and traditions. By the age of five, he could read the Qur'ān. During the remainder of his primary education, he studied Arabic grammar and became exposed to the mystical and theosophical expressions of Ibn 'Arabī and the less well known Ibn Abī Jumhūr (d. after 906/1501), author of the *Kitāb al-mujlī*.<sup>15</sup> His teachers in his homeland included the Dhahabī Sufi, Quṭb al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī through whom he possibly gained his first exposure to the work of Ibn 'Arabī.<sup>16</sup> In 1186/1772–3, Shaykh Aḥmad left his home to pursue advanced religious studies in

the 'Atabāt shrine cities of Kāzīmāyn, Najaf, and Karbala.<sup>17</sup> In 1209/1794–5, he received his first *ijāza* from the renowned scholar Sayyid Muḥammad Mahdi ibn Murtaḍā' al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī *Baḥr al-Ulūm* (d.1212/1797), and eventually six others from various recognised teachers.<sup>18</sup>

In 1793/1212, at the age of forty-six, Shaykh Aḥmad took up residence in Basra, seeking refuge from the Wahhābī attack on his native al-Aḥsā' (al-Ḥasā). From this time on, Shaykh Aḥmad remained in either the region of 'Atabāt or in Iran. He travelled widely and gained the respect of the Iranian religious and political elite. From 1222/1807 to 1229/1813, he lived mainly in Yazd. It was during this period that he was invited to visit the ruling Qajar monarch, Faṭḥ 'Alī Shāh (r.1212/1797–1250/1834). In 1129/1813 he moved from Yazd to Kermanshah where he lived until 1232/1816. At this time he went to Mecca on pilgrimage after which he returned to the 'Atabāt. He eventually moved back to Kermanshah where he remained, except for a few visits to other Iranian centres, from 1234/1818 until he departed for another pilgrimage to Mecca. It was during this journey that Shaykh Aḥmad died, not far from Mecca, in 1241/1826. He was buried in the Baqī' cemetery in Medina.<sup>19</sup>

While he was highly regarded in many learned circles during his lifetime as the 'Philosopher of the Age' and leading commentator on the works of Mullā Ṣadrā, Aḥsā'ī more and more became the object of scorn as the Qajar period continued to unfold. In addition to the *takfīr* of al-Baraghānī, one of the more frequent disparagements of his work was that he was simply not equipped to understand the challenging philosophical theories of *Hikmat*, for if he had he certainly would not have designated the likes of Ṣadrā and Fayḍ corrupters of religion.<sup>20</sup>

It would appear from everything we know of Aḥsā'ī's thought . . . and it is certainly not enough . . . that what others consider philosophical sophistication our author himself would view as irreligion, an abuse of the holy laws of intelligence. Certainly, this is the conclusion supported in the treatise at hand, the *Risālat al-'ilmiyya*, the 'Treatise on the Problem of God's Knowing'. In contrast to the erroneous method commonly known as *Hikmat*, Shaykh Aḥmad insists that he is teaching only the way of the sinless Imams, and this way is at the same time true philosophy or *ḥikma*. The work was completed on 5 Rabī' al-Thānī 1230 AH (Tuesday 17 March 1815) in Kermanshah, the city in which Aḥsā'ī's most important works were composed. But Aḥsā'ī had first encountered the target of his commentary in the year 1228/1813 while travelling, probably from Yazd, through Isfahan on his way to 'Atabāt to perform *ziyāra*.<sup>21</sup> As an indication of the kind of response Aḥsā'ī's radical vision elicited, the illustrious Mullā Hādī Sabzavārī (d.1878) who was for a short while in 1817 his student in Isfahan,<sup>22</sup> would much later find it necessary to compose a refutation of it.<sup>23</sup>

The *Risāla* was written in response to questions from Mīrzā Bāqir Nawwāb who is directly addressed throughout the text.<sup>24</sup> Many of the

themes and technical terms which would be explained and elaborated three years later in the *Sharḥ al-fawā'id* are present here.<sup>25</sup> The name of Muḥsin Fayḍ is first mentioned by Aḥsā'ī as 'that well known gnostic'.<sup>26</sup> And immediately he is stigmatised as a believer in *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Throughout the text, he is earnestly and energetically presented by Shaykh Aḥmad as one who 'works mischief (*fasād*) in matters of religion' and in one or two places even goes so far as to suggest infidelity (*kufr*).<sup>27</sup> Shaykh Aḥmad's intentions are clearly enunciated. He says that after perusing this essay by Kāshānī: 'I desired to explain its words – to distinguish between the bad and the good – in accordance with the *madhhab* of the Pure Imams, may God bless them all.'<sup>28</sup>

In the process, Aḥsā'ī identifies in no uncertain terms, others whom he similarly indicts: Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, d.728 (pp. 175, 209) Rābī'a al-ʿAdawiyya, d.801 (p. 175), Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī, d.874 (p. 175) al-Ash'arī, d.935 (p. 209) al-Fārābī, d.950 (pp. 173 and 216), Ibn Sīnā, d.1047 (p. 216) al-Ghazālī, d.1111 (pp. 209, 223), Ibn ʿArabī, d. 1240 (generally called 'Mumīt al-Dīn' *passim*), Ibn ʿAṭā Allāh, d.1309 (p. 175), ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī, d.1335 (p. 177), ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī<sup>29</sup> (d. between 1408 and 1427) and his *Kitāb Insān al-Kāmil* (p. 162), and Mullā Ṣadrā, d.1640 (pp. 174 and 181). These figures and 'their partisans' (*aḥzābuhum*): 'the Sufis' (p. 176, p. 189 and *passim*), the *Mutakallimīn*, and the Philosophers, represent for Aḥsā'ī the *ṭarīqa bāṭila* ('the School of Falsehood') and Atheists (*mulḥidūn*) (p. 162) because they either hold or inspired such ideas as *waḥdat al-wujūd* (pp. 152, 162, 235, 236 and *passim*) and *basīṭ ḥaqīqa* (p. 233 and *passim*). Those whom Shaykh Aḥmad approves by name, apart from the Prophet, Fāṭima and the Imams, those who teach the *madhhab al-māṣūmīn*, (p. 151, cf. *madhhab al-ḥaqq*, p. 253) are very few: al-Ṭabrisī (d.1153), 'the Universal Master (p. 247), al-Ṭūsi (p. 247) from whose *Miṣbāḥ al-mutahajjad* he quotes an excerpt from the long daily prayer 'And all things other than You subsist by Your command.'<sup>30</sup>

It is important to ask here whether there may even have been some design on the part of Aḥsā'ī in selecting a culprit from virtually each successive century of Islamic history, perhaps as a kind of negative reflection of a very general and positive *mujaddidī* motif in the broader Islamic culture.<sup>31</sup> Whatever the case, the listing of heroes and their foes connects our author to his community in a way recently identified as a *sine qua non* of Islamic orthodoxy.<sup>32</sup> It also is quite clear from the ideas elaborated in this treatise, that for Shaykh Aḥmad these figures and their erroneous ideas are not part of a history that is in the past, but one that is 'under our feet' and therefore present.<sup>33</sup>

Aḥsā'ī's critique of *Falsafa* is straightforward and instructive. To begin with, he insists that he is not against philosophy, but rather is an avid student of it. But this is the True Philosophy of the Imams, not the teachings of the so-called *Falāsafa*. He points out that there is a continuing argument between the philosophers – *Hukamā'* – and the Traditionists on

the definition of true philosophy – *Hikmat*. It is acknowledged that *Hikmat* originated from revelation starting with the prophet Seth and was passed on to Idrīs and then from one philosopher to another, presumably in pure form, until it came to Plato. Here, the philosophers split into two groups. One group, the Ishrāqīs, understand Plato in symbols and allusions, the other group is the Peripatetics and they study him from the outward meaning of his words. These latter imagine that they are walking in his footsteps. The first of these was Aristotle, then his student al-Fārābī and after him his student Ibn Sīnā. Another problem complicating the transmission of philosophy from this time forward is the fact that it was in Greek and translated into Arabic, and in the process of translation many errors crept in. He then gives examples of the three types of mistakes made.<sup>34</sup> His counsel to his interlocutor is:

This is the reason you should take [current] *Hikmat* and align it with the *Hikmat* of the People of *Iṣma*. Then, the meaning will be sound. If you would make their words your guide, and become a divinely instructed follower, do not disregard their teaching by turning to the words of the *Hukamā'* and the *Mutakallimūn* and the people of *Taṣawwuf*. Do only what They desire. It is not what the Sufis and the *Hukamā'* want, contrary to what our author (Fayḍ) would have us believe in his books.<sup>35</sup>

The polemical tone of the *Risāla* is of course one of its most striking features. The other is the reliance on the *akhbār* of the Prophet and his family. The major point being, for Shaykh Aḥmad, that one can only say about God that which is stated in the Qur'ān or in the *ḥadīth*. It happens, of course, that both he and Kāshānī rely on similar and in some cases identical traditions to make their respective points.<sup>36</sup> The most prominent tradition, transmitted from the sixth Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d.765), is quoted several times throughout the *Risāla*. Its first few lines are most important:

Our Lord, mighty and glorious, was/is/will be ever a knower, and this knowing is his essence even though there be no object of knowledge. When an object of knowledge comes to exist, then this knowing falls upon it from it [i.e., his essence].

*kāna rabbun 'azza wa jalla 'ālim wa al-ilmu dhātuhu wa lā ma'lūm  
falammā wujida al-ma'lūm waqā'a al-ilm minhu 'alā al-ma'lūm*<sup>37</sup>

For Shaykh Aḥmad, a recurrent, powerful metaphor and heuristic analogy of this particular doctrine of God's knowledge is that of the sun. The sun, in relation to humanity, may certainly be thought ancient and pre-eternal (or sempiternal), serenely disengaged from and unencumbered by such worldly burdens and distractions as 'time' and 'place'. The light of the

sun, thus, has ever been radiating from its essence, even though there were no earth and no humanity upon which these rays might fall. This is exactly the way one should understand God's knowing. God's knowing is the same as his essence. Since this essence has always been (namely is *azalī*), then God's act of knowing has always been, even when<sup>38</sup> there is no object of knowledge external to the divine essence upon which this knowledge might 'fall', to which it might 'occur' (*waqā'a*). This Ismā'īlī-esque analogy runs as follows:

[The sun] is luminous in itself, even if nothing exists to reflect or receive this luminosity. If something exists, then its rays fall upon it, but if it does not exist [the sun] is still luminous. It is not possible to say that the sun has fallen (*waqā'a*) from the fourth heaven to the earth. Rather, we say that the effects of the sun are manifest upon (*waqā'a*) this material object. The meaning of *wuqū'* is the appearance (*ẓuhūr*) of [the sun's] effects which are its rays (*ishrāq*) upon the earth. And its effects are [also] other than it. Its effects are its acting.<sup>39</sup>

Understand what I have said to you, that knowing can exist when there is no object of knowledge, like the parable of the sun which is luminous even if there is nothing for its light to fall upon (as is the case when it continues to exist at night but there is no luminosity because of the things between it and us). This is exactly like you who are hearing, even when there is no object of hearing or no one is speaking. Thus, to be hearing is your essence . . . This is why we say 'you are hearing even when there is no sound'. But, we do not say that you hear [something] at a given moment when there is nothing for you to exercise your power of hearing over. It is the same for the sun when there is no material object to illumine. It is still the Master of Light, but it is illuminating nothing . . . Nonetheless, light is the essence of the sun and therefore one can only say that it shines . . . Briefly, it is not permitted to qualify a thing by its operational reality (*wuqū'*) or its relationality (*iqtirān*), except when these things are in operation. Thus, the sun is only radiant upon a receiver of its radiance.<sup>40</sup>

According to Aḥsā'ī, God is simply and completely unknowable. And while one doubts whether Fayḍ Kāshānī would actually disagree with this statement expressed thus, Shaykh Aḥmad is rankled by several of Kāshānī's formulations which may be interpreted as violating the ever unknowable essence of God. From the very beginning of the treatise, Aḥsā'ī is dogged in his pursuance of Kāshānī's pantheism (or perhaps better, 'theomonism'<sup>41</sup>), even to the extent of castigating him for citing the Qur'an in a corrupt fashion. Kāshānī opens his *Risāla* with the words:

Praise be to God, the knower the wise, he from whose knowledge *not even the weight of an atom is missing in all the heavens or in the earth.* [Q34.3]<sup>42</sup> And praise be upon Muhammad and the people of his house, the Pure Ones, those who inherited authority from each other in unbroken succession.<sup>43</sup>

What might otherwise appear to be a purely unexceptionable statement of belief in doxological form, is seized upon by Aḥsā'ī for the purpose of demonstrating, in no uncertain terms, the corrupt nature of the particular beliefs behind it. Because God's knowing is the same as his inviolable essence, nothing at all can be said about 'It' apart from the assertion that 'It' exists, and even here one must be very careful how one uses the word 'is'.<sup>44</sup> The problem, according to Aḥsā'ī is whether Fayḍ understands this 'falling upon the object of knowledge' to be the actual essence or the divine acting.<sup>45</sup> If he says 'his essence' then he is a *kāfir* (*fā'in qāla dhātuhu kafara*). And if he says 'his acting' he negates everything else he has said. And if he says 'nothing falls' he gainsays the Imam, and gainsays the saying of God.

Shaykh Aḥmad says that the ostensive meaning of 'knower' is an attribute referring to essential knowledge, which is identical to his essence. In Fayḍ's quoting the verse, 'nor fall from his knowledge the weight of an atom', etc., if he means essential knowledge, he is wrong, because if that which is intended in the holy verse is essential knowing then those objects of its knowledge that are in heaven and earth would also be in it.<sup>46</sup> This is unthinkable because there can be no connection between the divine timeless essence and the world of generation.<sup>47</sup> There are only two possibilities: eternity (*azal*) or generation (*ḥadath*):

We hold [for the purpose of argument] that these objects of knowledge are: (1) the same as his essence without change, or (2) the same as his essence with change, or (3) other than his essence . . . It must be though that these objects of knowledge are in time (*ḥudūth*) and contingency (*imkān*) and there is no mediator between the necessary and the generated . . .

The traditions prove this, and it is a correct position, since the objects of knowledge are other than his essence . . . We say: The knowledge of a thing must be commensurate with the object of that knowledge, or incommensurate, or connected to the object of knowledge, or not connected, or happening to it or not happening. It is either known or not known. If it is commensurate and you mean by this that the divine essential knowledge is commensurate with the object of knowledge, then you must also say that the divine essence conforms to you yourself . . . God be exalted above such a thing!

If you say it is not in conformity, then you must say that there is no knowledge of it because it is not permitted that a knowledge be other than in conformity with the object of knowledge. For example, if the object of knowledge is long, then the knowledge is ‘long’ . . . And if you say ‘through *wāqi*’ then it is necessary that the divine essence ‘happen’ to you. And this is also absurd.

The difficulty arises when there is a failure to recognise that there are in reality two types of knowing: God’s essential timeless knowing, and the pale mimesis of this referred to as man’s knowing. That it is so removed is indicated in several traditions, among the most interesting of which is the passage insisting that thinking is really a metaphor for something that has no real cognate or equivalent in the Divine instance.<sup>48</sup> The first type is ‘the knowledge that does not change’, as in the Imam’s statement: ‘His knowledge of a thing before its existence is as His knowledge of the same thing after its existence.’<sup>49</sup>

And while the Mullā himself quotes such a tradition (whose plain meaning refutes his own position) . . . His understanding of ‘and knowledge was/is/will be his essence’ is along the lines of the *waḥdat al-wujūdī* Sufis, namely that ‘all created things’ are in and of the divine essence.<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, Aḥsā’ī calls this knowing *‘ilm rājiḥ al-wujūd*, or ‘*ilm imkānī*’ – a potentially confusing designation. The second type, our author calls *‘ilm akwānī*, or knowledge pertaining to the various existentiated things.<sup>51</sup>

In Western scholarship, it has become customary to yoke the grand intellectual topos of ‘hermeneutics’ with the Shaykhiyya, and while there is no doubt every good reason for this in many cases, one cannot help making the observation in the present context that it is clear that Shaykh Aḥmad esteems himself as performing no act of interpretation at all in his reading of the Qur’ān and the *ḥadīth*. He is simply learning and transmitting the pure unchanging meaning of these texts. One is struck, therefore, by the intensity of Shaykh Aḥmad’s unwavering confidence in his own ‘noninterpretation’ of the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* so crucial and basic to his argument. The source of this certitude is experiential: the ‘*ālam al-mithāl*’, an interworld of dreams and visions with its own time and space, which is paradoxically more real than the world of ‘normal’ experience. The idea of an interworld, while certainly not new with Shaykh Aḥmad, can be considered to have reached a theological and philosophical prominence (if not apotheosis) previously unknown in his writings.<sup>52</sup> It was in this world that Shaykh Aḥmad received his ability to understand directly from the Imams themselves. Therefore, his certitude that he understood the nature of God’s knowledge and knowing as perfectly as possible in

this sub-lunar realm was utterly unshakeable, even though (or perhaps because) such certitude is based ultimately on the aporia of God's absolute unknowable essence.<sup>53</sup>

Corbin translated *ʿālam al-mithāl* by the Latin expression *mundus imaginalis*, emphasising that the realm in question must not be considered as merely imaginary – a 'fantasy world'. Rather, the term denotes a realm which is accessible only by means of the God-given, sacred faculty of imagination: *khayāl*. *Khayāl* may be thought of as a true 'sixth sense', through which this world, 'located' between the world of sense perception and a purely spiritual world, may be encountered. As such, the distinction of the adjective 'imaginal' from 'imaginary' is most appropriate.<sup>54</sup>

We are not dealing here with irreality. The *mundus imaginalis* is a world of autonomous forms and images (*moallaqa*, 'in suspense,' that is, not inherent in a substratum like the color black in a black table, but 'in suspense' in the place of their appearance, in the imagination, for example, like an image 'suspended' in a mirror.) It is a perfectly real world preserving all the richness and diversity of the sensible world but in a spiritual state.<sup>55</sup>

For the Shaykhīs, beginning with Shaykh Aḥmad himself, the *ʿālam al-mithāl*, sometimes referred to as Hūrqalyā, had pre-eminent importance as the abode of the hidden Imam, and as the place of bodily resurrection. The hidden Imam, residing in the *ʿālam al-mithāl*, is accessible through the spiritual imagination of those members of the Shīʿa who are capable of purifying their consciences to a degree that would allow the hidden Imam, or Qāʾim, to appear to (or: rise up from within) them (namely, the Perfect Shīʿa).<sup>56</sup> Shaykh Aḥmad attributed a great deal to several visions he had experienced, beginning at quite an early age. In these visions, either the hidden Imam, or some other member of the *ahl al-bayt* would appear to him. During one such vision, the Imam bestowed upon Shaykh Aḥmad twelve *ijāzāt*, one presumably from each of the Imams.<sup>57</sup> By appealing to such experiences, Shaykh Aḥmad made it clear that the only religious authority he would submit to would be the Imams themselves as opposed, say, to any *marjaʿ al-taqlid* of the Uṣūlīs. *This also implied that his own knowledge, thus derived directly from the Prophet and the Imāms, was qualitatively superior to that of others.* Shaykh Aḥmad was not the only personality to make much of such experiences. The phenomenon was common enough for those who experienced it to be designated by the term *Uwaysī*.<sup>58</sup>

Shaykh Aḥmad was not the only one to uphold the reality of the imaginal realm. Indeed, his opponent Fayḍ Kāshānī has written one of the clearest and most important discussions on the topic.<sup>59</sup> Though both Kāshānī and Aḥsāʾī agree on the value of the *ʿālam al-mithāl*, one assumes that there would be serious disagreements with regard to important details.

Aḥsā'ī does not directly comment on Fayḍ's version here,<sup>60</sup> and, of course, it would be very interesting to study more closely just how the two authors differed in their understanding of the topic. (For example, Fayḍ does not seem to speak of meetings with the Imam in his version of the *mundus imaginalis*.) It would be most instructive to know in which ways Shaykh Aḥmad saw Fayḍ as 'misunderstanding' the ontological nature and function of the Imaginal Realm, even if it seems clear that they both would have to agree on certain of its eschatological *qua* cosmogonic functions.

The *'ālam al-mithāl* is indispensable to Shaykhī eschatology, in which a corporeal resurrection is denied in favour of a complex recourse to this separate reality, where a resurrection of one's spiritual or subtle (*laṭīf*) body, undergoes a process designated by such terminology as *mā'ād* and *qiyāma*. Aḥsā'ī was also a 'scientist' and we may assume that there is an emphasis here on the denial of the scientifically untenable bodily resurrection, which so many Muslim philosophers prior to Shaykh Aḥmad also found impossible to believe.<sup>61</sup> Shaykh Aḥmad's solution is in the form of a sufficiently detailed and therefore appealingly possible alternative: even the most hard-bitten sceptic could never completely deny the logical possibility of the totally spiritual process which Shaykh Aḥmad propounded. Aḥsā'ī refers briefly to the *'ālam al-mithāl* in the *Risāla* in discussing the descent of being as a result of the dynamic between the divine acting and the divinely-acted-upon (cf. *fi'l-maf'ūl* mentioned above). Here absolute being is the acting and delimited being is the acted-upon.<sup>62</sup> This is precisely the kind of discussion that betrays the strong attraction of Aḥsā'ī for the profoundly mystical and unitive visions sometimes associated with Ibn 'Arabī and his school, *modulo* of course certain confessional adjustments. It is doubtful that any otherwise benighted (according to Aḥsā'ī) believer in *wahdat al-wujūd* would or could but recognise their own views in the recent accurate characterization of Aḥsā'ī's ontology, namely: 'As existence unfolds, the acts of becoming constitute the very acts of responding to, yielding to, and riding the flow of existence.'<sup>63</sup>

But, in fact, there may be more profit in comparing Aḥsā'ī's thought with that of 'Alā' al-Dawla Simnānī (d.1336). Over thirty years ago, Landolt observed an intriguing similarity between the influential Iranian Sufi, and Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī: both heavily criticised *wahdat al-wujūd* and sought to replace it with a dynamic view of the divine act (*fi'l*), even as both were accused of having misunderstood *wahdat al-wujūd* in the first place. In some ways, it is even more remarkable that both shared, as Landolt points out, similar views about a 'subtle body'.<sup>64</sup> It may be that Aḥsā'ī was directly influenced by Simnānī on these characteristic subjects, but so far, evidence of such an influence has not been encountered.<sup>65</sup> Is it possible that both authors, one from the fourteenth the other from the nineteenth centuries were ultimately indebted to the Ismā'īlī tradition for their ontological views? It has recently been observed that 'the figures who come closest to refiguring Simnānī's cosmological scheme are the

Ismā'īlī philosophers . . . as-Sijistānī (d. between 386/996 and 393/1003) and . . . al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020).<sup>66</sup> Simnānī's distinctive attachment to the family of the Prophet<sup>67</sup> may represent nothing more than *tashayyūf ḥasan*. But could it be that the same theological 'fragrance' that contributed so much to Simnānī's influential legacy and great popularity, contributed to Aḥsā'ī's fall from grace as the 'philosopher of the age'? It was, after all the threat of Ismā'īlī Islam that was one of the most important formative factors in the birth and development of Twelver Shi'ism. Can there have been an inbuilt genetic resistance in Twelver theology to such stark apophaticism?

Or is it more likely that the identical 'morphology' of the beliefs of the two men functioned in different ways in their respective milieux, namely to safeguard the utter transcendence of God who can only be 'thought of' in terms of a dynamic (yet aniconic) reality as distinct from an ontic reality: in Simnānī's case, from the Buddhists at the Il-khan court<sup>68</sup>; in Aḥsā'ī's case, from the *Hikmat* philosophers Ṣadrā and Kāshānī? This of course raises the question: what was the original 'function' of this same philosophy articulated by the classical Ismā'īlī thinkers?

Here, it is of more than passing interest that it is possibly thanks to Muḥsin Fayḍ that an important source-text of Ismā'īlī philosophical theology<sup>69</sup> was rescued from oblivion. The *Khuṭbat al-tatanjiyya*, which forms much of the lengthy chapter on 'Sublimity' (*uluwiyya*) in his *Kalimāt-i maknūna*,<sup>70</sup> would become one of the more important objects of meditation for Sayyid Kāzīm Raštī, Shaykh Aḥmad's successor, and it would continue to enrich the thought and imagery of both the Bābī and Bahā'ī corpuses. Indeed, the version of this sermon most widely available has enjoyed countless reprintings in Twelver Shi'ī communities in Lebanon,<sup>71</sup> though it tends to be dismissed as *ghuluww* by representatives of the learned classes.<sup>72</sup> And, to add further to the complexity (or perhaps the impertinence) of applying the enduring and somewhat alien conceptual syzygy 'orthodoxy/heterodoxy' to the case of Aḥsā'ī, it should be mentioned that the contemporary editor of the *Risāla* expends a certain amount of serious effort in an attempt to demonstrate that our author's ideas are in perfect harmony with the teachings of the late Ayatollah Ruhullah Khomeini.<sup>73</sup>

The dialogue between Aḥsā'ī and Kāshānī is, of course, a dialogue completely controlled by our Qajar scholar, since Kāshānī is represented only by a text, and this text is mediated through the prism of Aḥsā'ī's concerns and goals. That Aḥsā'ī's general argument was severely condemned fifty or so years later by the most celebrated post-Ṣadrā philosopher, Mullā Hādī Sabzavārī (d. 1872), indicates that it touched an important nerve in the general body of Qajar Shi'ism, in both its philosophical and more purely religious modes.<sup>74</sup> But, it is also true that as a result of Aḥsā'ī's critique of Fayḍ Kāshānī the latter becomes more Uṣūlī, more 'orthodox'. As our author says himself in response to one of Kāshānī's assertions that all of the divine attributes are existent in the essence:

And he calls himself an Akhbārī! – namely, one whose views accord perfectly with tradition, especially those traditions that are agreed upon (*muttafaqa*) and for which there is no contradictory tradition. But all of these are quite clear: the will and the purpose come from God as two generated things (*ḥadīthatān*) because they are active attributes. God does not have a pre-eternal will and purpose. Whoever claims that God, mighty and glorious, has always been willing and purposing is not an affirmer of the divine unity (*falaysa bi-muwahḥid*).<sup>75</sup>

Aḥsā'ī, as we know, was not the only one preoccupied with the identity of the true *muwahḥid* during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Wahhābī threat to Sufism, *ghuluww* Shī'ism and philosophy of all kinds was not only a theological issue, but also a matter of life and death in some regions. The ironic development is, however, that in the process of Shaykh Aḥmad's argument against Fayḍ Kāshānī the Imams become God revealed, taking the place of the God of Fayḍ Kāshānī. The real but starkly apophatic God is removed further from contemplation than one might have thought possible, unless of course one happens to be a classical Ismā'īlī philosopher.

One of the results of this elevation of the Imams, an elevation that automatically raises the divinity incommensurately higher, is that the answer to the question, 'What does it mean to be human?' becomes in some ways more interesting than it was before. The Imams, according to Aḥsā'ī – and Ismā'īlī thought – are neither human nor divine, but a different order of being, a separate and distinct species.<sup>76</sup> The Perfect Man, in Shaykhī thought is not the Prophet, contrary to a traditional Sufi teaching rooted in the teachings of Ibn 'Arabī<sup>77</sup>; nor is the idea represented by the Prophet and the Imams, contrary to the common Twelver Shī'ī adaption of this doctrine.<sup>78</sup> Rather, for Shaykh Aḥmad, the Perfect Man is the one who recognises the spiritual and ontological dignity of these figures. It is Salmān – not Muhammad – who represents the prototype here.<sup>79</sup>

For Shaykh Aḥmad there is absolutely no doubt that Kāshānī's religious vision shares much in common with Ghazālī's, but for Aḥsā'ī, this is no commendation or point of honour. Though perhaps not a 'card carrying' *kāfir*, Kāshānī can hardly be seen as a continuer of the pure teachings of Ithnā 'Asharī Shī'ism. Not only is Kāshānī derided for continuing the Sufi-infected distortions of true religion propagated by his master Mullā Ṣadrā, he is also blamed for having ignored true philosophy, namely the teachings of the Imams. And, on the topic of God's knowing, the true teachings of the Imams are as straightforward and clear as they are uncompromising.

Aḥsā'ī's effort to rescue the unknowable God of Islam from the degeneracies of contamination through Islam's unforgivable sin, *shirk*, may indeed be inspired by contemporary religious developments in Arabia. The

terms of the argument are interchangeable, except, of course, that Aḥsā'ī was an avid Imāmī Shi'ī, and the Wahhābiyya equally avid Sunni Muslims. But the temperament is strikingly similar, however much both Aḥsā'ī and Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328) might be horrified to read this.<sup>80</sup> The main object of their opprobrium was none other than *waḥdat al-wujūd*: existential monism, understood by them to violate the utterly transcendent essence (*dhāt*) of God. Aḥsā'ī quotes as follows against those who profess *waḥdat al-wujūd*: 'It is rather as our Imam, the Commander of the Faithful, has said: "The created thing ends only in its likeness and the resort of the quest is only in its simulacrum. The road [to the essence] is forever blocked, and the search for it is eternally barred."<sup>81</sup> The question, though, is would those who esteem themselves as professing *waḥdat al-wujūd* disagree with this *ḥadīth*?

It should be remembered that Fayḍ Kāshānī is not the first major Ṣafavīd thinker to be pilloried by Aḥsā'ī. Mullā Ṣadrā – Kāshānī's mentor *and* father-in-law – was also the object of his purifying gaze. It was in connection with his critique of the 'Arshiyya, for example, that charges of Aḥsā'ī's lack of philosophical sophistication were perhaps first voiced and recorded.<sup>82</sup> It is obvious that his concern with Kāshānī is an essential part of his programme to purify the true faith from the deleterious effects of an excessive interest in a mysticism (yet he is profoundly mystical) gone overripe and a philosophy (yet he is an avid philosopher) badly construed.

Shaykh Aḥmad was held in high esteem by the clerical and the political communities of Iran: Faṭḥ 'Alī Shāh tried unsuccessfully to persuade al-Aḥsā'ī to live in Tehran nearer the court. And, the story is told of how the governor of Kermanshah felt so honoured by Shaykh Aḥmad's decision to visit his city that he travelled several miles out from Kermanshah for the sole purpose of greeting the famous scholar and escorting him into town. It may be that Shaykh Aḥmad was so warmly welcomed by the political and religious leaders of Iran because his views offered a quasi-populist mystical interpretation of standard Twelver Shi'ism which served as a powerful alternative to what was becoming a disturbing interest in more purely Sufi doctrine, as propagated by the leaders of, for example, the Ni'matullāhī order who in turn had very cordial relations with the Imams of the Qāsimī-Shāhī Nizārī Ismā'īlī community.<sup>83</sup> Shaykh Aḥmad, as an accomplished and renowned Twelver *mujtahid*, would have served as an orthodox guarantor for the type of profoundly mystical religion so at home in Iran. As the creative force behind the distinctive Qajar era religious ramifications associated with the name of the Shaykhiyya, Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī was partly responsible for a number of influential developments of the period. Included here are the several groups that continued to be identified from the outside as Shaykhī. This was, in any case, a term of opprobrium used by opponents to evoke the spectre of the odious and dangerous Sufism whose followers, according to the criticism, gave to a mere shaykh the kind of devotion and obedience properly owed to

none apart from the Prophet and the Imams. The ‘Shaykhīs’ – for obvious reasons – preferred to designate their *madhhab* by the name *Kashfiyya* (‘Intuitionists’). Also included are the various developments associated with the activities of the Bāb, and his so-called Letters of the Living, most of whom had been students of Sayyid Kāzīm Rashtī (d.1844) the successor of Aḥsā’ī.<sup>84</sup> The remarkable interpretation of the role of Fāṭima bint al-Nabī by the prodigiously talented niece of the above-mentioned al-Shāhid al-Thālith, Zarrīn Tāj, Qurrat al-‘Ayn or simply Ṭāhira, on the stage of Qajar religious history has left its indelible and influential traces.<sup>85</sup> The Azalī and Bahā’ī phenomena and the reactions and responses to these from both the clerical and bureaucratic cadres can be traced, without the slightest doubt, back to the work of Aḥsā’ī. How well these later religious developments reflected the intentions of the leaders of the Shaykhī movement is another question, one irrelevant in the present context. What is not irrelevant is that the responses form something of a major motif in Qajar history (1794–1925/1209–1344). The assassination attempt on Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh by Bābīs, the alleged involvement of Azalīs in his eventual assassination, the evolution of a separate and independent religion from Bābī, Ḥusayn ‘Ali Nūrī, Bahā’ allāh, and so on.<sup>86</sup> Afghani and Iqbal – two very different religious types – were also both impressed in their different ways by these developments.<sup>87</sup> So, the influence of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā’ī overflowed the banks of what might otherwise be thought a rather parochial and arcane religious preoccupation to issue in a new religion and a challenge to Qajar religious thought.<sup>88</sup>

The distinguishing features of the Shaykhī school, as is the case with most Muslim religious groups, are related to the manner in which spiritual authority is to be defined and mediated. The active controversy carried on by the partisans of the Uṣūlīs and the Akhbārīs is a case in point. The debate was based on the question of whether *ijtihād*, ‘exerting individual effort to form an opinion’, rather than wholesale acceptance of the guidance contained in the preserved statements of the Prophet and the Imams (pl. *akhbār*), was the best way to resolve the questions of religion, which would of course include questions of law. Finally, the Uṣūlīs, those in favor of *ijtihād*, won the day and for the past two hundred years this basic attitude toward the written sources of the Islamic religion has held sway over most of the Shī’ī world.

In the context of this debate, the teachings of Shaykh Aḥmad offer something of a compromise, or reconciliation. He had grown up in one of the few bastions of the Akhbārī approach, and his synthesis may be seen, in part, as an elaboration of this method. Through propounding a doctrine of the *nāṭiq wāḥid* (a single authoritative voice) and the Perfect Shī’a, perhaps an echo of the Sufī idea of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), Shaykh Aḥmad was able, at least in theory, to circumvent the restrictions imposed by either of the two above methods and arrive at

what he considered a much less fettered and more independent position *vis-à-vis* the reinterpretation of the raw material of the Islamic religion – the Qurʾān and Sunna of the Prophet and the teachings of the Imams which were preserved in the *akhbār*.<sup>89</sup> The freedom I am speaking of is exemplified in Shaykh Aḥmad's response to those who charged him with relying upon strange and unsound *ḥadīth* to support his ideas. Shaykh Aḥmad serenely responded that he could distinguish a sound *ḥadīth* from a weak one through its 'fragrance'.<sup>90</sup> Such a response is, in fact, an adamant critique of *taqlīd* which is here not merely 'imitation' but 'blind imitation', in matters religious.<sup>91</sup>

However much Aḥsāʾī might have been stigmatised by his colleagues for his teachings about the ascension of the Prophet and resurrection of the body, and however much his own gothic and architectonic hypotheses – which betray a kind of philosophical *horror vacui* – might have scandalized his fellow believers, his criticism of Fayḍ Kāshānī on the problem of God's knowledge may be thought to reflect faithfully a strong wariness – perhaps particularly among the Shīʿa of the ʿAtabāt – about common interpretations of *waḥdat al-wujūd* that were seen as tainting the otherwise laudable – if not indispensable *œuvre* of Fayḍ Kāshānī.<sup>92</sup> He just may be cursing Fayḍ for his Sufism and corrupt philosophy to a Wahhābī audience (? back home). Why else would an otherwise devout Shīʿī such as Aḥsāʾī make bold to invoke the *ijmāʿ* of the entire Muslim world against his opponent?<sup>93</sup>

Kāshānī and Aḥsāʾī appear to represent two ends of a spectrum: the one a 'panentheist' or *waḥdat wujūdī*, the other 'perfectly orthodox'. We are, of course, immediately suspicious of such a typology. As every one knows, Shaykh Aḥmad was the heretic and Fayḍ Kāshānī the upholder of orthodoxy. It is doubtful – because of the implications of his staunch Ismāʿīlī-like theology – that Aḥsāʾī would have long remained the 'philosopher of the age' in Qajar times. The allergy to such permutations of *ghuluww* was simply too strong, even if it frequently circulated in the writings of both the orthodox Kāshānī and the heretic Aḥsāʾī.<sup>94</sup> It is almost as if the confession of *waḥdat al-wujūd* functions as an anti-Ismāʿīlī shibboleth in this Twelver Shīʿī context, even as its condemnation functions in this time and place as a philo-Wahhābī shibboleth.<sup>95</sup>

Whatever the relationship of the form and contents of the *Risāla* might be to the *Sitz im Leben*, it is clear that it is also not only a product of its time and place. The discussions of the exact nature of God's knowing are as old as Islamic theology and philosophy. It has been seen that Aḥmad Aḥsāʾī's solution to the problem shares much in common with the teachings of the classical or medieval Ismāʿīlī philosophers and with the later ardent critic of Ibn ʿArabī, the Sunnī Sufi, ʿAlā al-Dawla Simnānī. In this respect, the *Risāla* may be thought a typical example of early Qajar hybrid theological and philosophical discourse.<sup>96</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī, *Sharḥ al-'arshīyya* quoted in Henry Corbin, translated as *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* (N. Pearson (trans.): Princeton, 1977) 211; originally published as *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection: de l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran Shī'ite* (Paris, 1960).
- 2 Several articles by Cole (see note 4) explicate much of the *Gedankenwelt* and the actual thought of Aḥsā'ī who emerges as something of a mystic harbinger of humanism and individualism; this image could also be reflected in the work at hand. See below note 25, but see also A. Bausani *Religion in Iran: from Zoroaster to Bahā'ullah* (New York, 2000) 340–6, excerpted below, note 91: originally published as *Persia religiosa da Zaratustra a Bahā'ullah* (Milan, 1959). Henry Corbin *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, 4 vols (Paris 1971–2) I, 199–211 and IV, 205–300 (and *passim* throughout the entire work), his earlier *L'École shaykhie en théologie shī'ite* (Paris, 1961) together with other works such as Corbin, *Spiritual Body* represent the earliest sustained attempt by a Western scholar to understand the Shaykhī synthesis. Corbin's contribution is invaluable and indispensable, if occasionally vaguely presentist. The most recent detailed general account – frequently expressing a valuable countervailing 'Bahā'ī' interpretation of texts and events – is Vahid Rafati 'The Development of Shaykhī Thought in Shī'ī Islam' (unpublished PhD thesis: University of California Los Angeles, 1979). The most recent sustained discussion of Aḥsā'ī's metaphysics is Idris Samawi Hamid 'The Metaphysics and Cosmology of Process According to Shaykh 'Aḥmad al-'Aḥsā'ī: Critical edition, Translation and Analysis of "Observations in Wisdom"' (unpublished PhD thesis: State University of New York at Buffalo, 1998); Mohammed Ali Amir-Moezzi 'Une absence remplie de présences. Herméneutiques de l'Occultation chez les Shaykhiyya (Aspects de l'Imamologie duodécimaine VII)' *BSOAS* 64.1 (2001) 1–18 (translated into English in R. Brunner and W. Ende (eds) *The Twelver Shī'a in Modern Times* (Leiden, 2001) 38–57), is an illuminating exploration of some post-Aḥsā'ī imamological meditations in the Shaykhī school. The several works on the Shaykhiyya by Denis M. MacEoin are invaluable, beginning with his groundbreaking Cambridge thesis, 'From Shaykhism to Bābism: A Study in Charismatic Renewal in Shī'ī Islam' (unpublished PhD thesis: Cambridge University, 1979). Some of this material has appeared in more recent publications, all of which are highly recommended: Denis M. MacEoin 'Shaykhism' *EP* IX (1996) 403–5; Denis M. MacEoin 'Cosmogony: In Shaikhism', *EIr* VI, 326–8; Denis M. MacEoin 'Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Nineteenth-Century Shi'ism: The Cases of Shaykhism and Babism' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110.2 (1990) 323–9; Denis M. MacEoin 'Baraghānī, Mollā Moḥammad-Taqī' *EIr* III, 740; 'Aḥsā'ī, Shaikh Aḥmad b. Zayn-al-Dīn' *EIr* I, 674–9; 'Bālāsari' *EIr*, II, 583–5; 'Shaykhism', in L. P. Elwell-Sutton (ed.) *Bibliographical Guide to Iran* (Brighton and Totowa, 1983); and, finally, Denis M. MacEoin 'Early Shaykhī Reactions to the Bāb and His Claims' in M. Momen, (ed.) *Studies in Bābī and Bahā'ī History volume 1* (Los Angeles, 1982) 1–47; Abbas Amanat *Resurrection and Renewal: the Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Ithaca, 1989) 33–105, and Todd Lawson 'The Qur'ān Commentary of Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī, the Bab' (unpublished PhD thesis: McGill University, 1987) *passim* (forthcoming in revised form as *Islamic Apocalyptic: the Literary Beginnings of the Babi Movement*) offer various approaches and analyses of the general topic. In addition, see Sa'īd Amir Arjomand *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago, 1984) s.v. index 'Shaykhism';

Mangol Bayat *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse, 1982) 37–58. Although his scholarship is frequently disparaged (e.g. by Bausani, *Religion*, 340 and Corbin, *Islam IV*, 213), one should also mention the even earlier works of Nicolas on the Shaykhī school (see note 3). They are certainly not completely without value.

- 3 This work is most properly entitled *Sharḥ risāla fī ʿilm allāh*. Throughout this chapter it is referred to simply as *Risāla* reflecting the title of the most recent printed version in Muḥammad ʿAlī Isbir (ed.) *al-ʿAllāma al-jalīl Aḥmad bin Zayn al-Dīn al-Aḥsāʾī fī dāʾirat al-ḍawʿ* (Beirut, 1413/1993) 149–278 which is based on the lithograph found in Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī *Jawāmiʿ al-kalim*, 3 vols in 2 (Tabriz, 1856–59) I, 166–200. For a list of various manuscripts of this work see Moojan Momen *The Works of Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī: a bibliography based upon Fihrist [sic] kutub Mashayikh ʿIzm [sic] of Abū al-Qāsim Ibrāhīmī Kirmānī* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1991) 47 where its official title is *Risāla fī Sharḥ Risālat al-ʿIlm*. It has been partly translated in Alphonse L. M. Nicolas *Essai sur le Chéikhisme IV: La Science de Dieu* (Paris, 1911) iii–li corresponding to *Risāla*, 150–70, minus a few omissions and with an addition or two. Nicolas typically gives no information about the text he used. Discussion illustrated with a few translated excerpts may also be found in Hamid, ‘Metaphysics and Cosmology’, 167–75 (cf. portions of *Risāla*, 205–8). In Muḥammad Muḥsin Aghā Buzūrg Ṭīhrānī *al-Dhariʿa ilā taṣānif al-Shīʿa*, 25 vols (Qum, 1341sh) XIII, 287–8 it is listed as #1046 *Sharḥ risālat al-ʿilm* and said to have been completed in Kermanshah on the morning of Friday 8 of Rabīʿ al-Thānī, 1230AH. Ṭīhrānī, *Dhariʿa XV*, 322 #2071 locates Fayḍ’s original, relatively short work of ‘100 verses’ as *Risāla fī ʿilm Allāh tāʿālā*, in the library of al-Khwānsārī and the library of Shaykh ʿAlī Kāshif al-Ghiṭāʾ. Here the author of *Dhariʿa* erroneously says that Shaykh Aḥmad’s commentary on it is named *al-Lubb*. Unfortunately, I have not had access to the original of Kāshānī’s *Risāla* and rely here on quotations from it found in the text of Aḥsāʾī’s commentary. See also the commentary on Shaykh Aḥmad’s treatise listed at Ṭīhrānī, *Dhariʿa II*, 180 #667.
- 4 See, as one example from among many, the edition and translation of Naṣīr Khusraw’s (d. after 1072) *Gushāyish wa Rahāyish*: Faquir M. Hunzai *Knowledge and Liberation: A Treatise in Philosophical Theology* (London, 1998) 41–3. Although it has been mentioned and alluded to in several earlier studies of Shaykhī thought, the fascinating and important question of its exact relationship with classical Ismāʿīlī theology remains to be fully studied and elucidated. See, in addition to Corbin’s observations referred to above, Wilferd Madelung ‘Aspects of Ismāʿīlī Theology: The Prophetic Chain and the God beyond Being’ in S. H. Nasr (ed.) *Ismāʿīlī Contributions to Islamic Culture* (Tehran, 1398/1977) 51–65. It seems clear, at this stage, however, that there are several points of agreement, beyond the above-mentioned correspondence with regard to ontology. Amanat, *Resurrection*, 9, 12–13, 58, 83–4 has drawn attention to the socio-political role of crypto-Ismāʿīlī communities in the rise and development of active Shaykhism and Bābism. However, similarities between Naṣīr Khusraw’s *Vajh-i dīn* and the Bab’s *Qayyūm al-asmāʿ* (Amanat, *Resurrection*, 206) have been quite overstated. The *Risāla* under discussion would be an excellent candidate for a thorough comparison of a more purely philosophical and theological nature. It is not impossible that these Ismāʿīlī resonances – which perhaps enhanced a perceived anti-government attitude discussed in Juan Ricardo Cole ‘Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsāʾī on the Sources of Religious Authority’ in Linda Walbridge (ed.) *The Most Learned of the Shīʿa* (New York, 2001) 82–93, esp. 91 – together with the retrojected damage arising from various post-Shaykhī sectarian, heretical ideas and movements

- that developed under the influence of Shaykhī thought (Hamid, ‘Metaphysics and Cosmology’, notes 5 and 7) are at least partly responsible for Aḥsā’ī’s eventual and perhaps inevitable fall from grace. See also Cole’s other related articles: Juan Ricardo Cole ‘Casting Away the Self: The Mysticism of Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsa’ī’, in Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (eds) *The Twelver Shi’a in Modern Times* (Leiden, 2001) 25–37; Juan Ricardo Cole ‘New Perspectives on Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in Egypt’, in Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron (eds) *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie* (Costa Mesa, 2000) 13–34; and, Juan Ricardo Cole ‘The World as Text: Cosmologies of Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsa’ī’ *Studia Islamica* 80 (1994) 145–63.
- 5 Hamid, ‘Metaphysics and Cosmology’, 22, 30–31, bases this broad characterization on the views of the admittedly influential Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī (d.1772). See the conflicting evidence presented in Hamid, ‘Metaphysics and Cosmology’, 59 and the tantalizing comments at p. 37. He does not mention any specific sources however. Leonard Lewisohn ‘Sufism and the School of Iṣfahān: *Taṣawwuf* and *ʿIrḩān* in Late Safavid Iran’ in L. Lewisohn (ed.) *The Heritage of Sufism, Volume III: Classical Persianate Sufism: the Safavid and Mughal Period* (Oxford, 1999) 63–134 (references here are to a typescript kindly provided by its author) 46ff., maintains just the opposite, that the major thrust of opinion on Fayḏ has been to downplay his interest in esoterica and other ‘extra-orthodox pursuits’ (like *ḩikmat*), to produce a picture of him as the champion of Twelver orthodoxy. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Mullā Muḩammad Muḩsin Fayḏ al-Kāshānī, *Uṣūl al-māʿārif* (J. D. Ashtiyānī (ed.): Mashhad, 1353) 5–6 of the English ‘Preface’, who maintains Kāshānī has been misrepresented by the later Twelver scholastic tradition which saw him as having *not* continued the teaching of his master, Mullā Ṣadrā, but as having been solely concerned with ‘orthodox’ Shi’ism.
  - 6 Rafati, ‘Development of Shaykhī Thought’, 47 and Hamid, ‘Metaphysics and Cosmology’, 34. The general consensus in modern scholarship is that this *takfīr* was the result of a personal animus on the part of Baraghānī who, as a matter of fact, would later be assassinated by either a militant Bābī or Bābī sympathizer (Amanat, *Resurrection*, 322). Note that his honorific places him firmly in the line of Twelver Shīʿī ‘orthodox’ martyrology. The first Shahīd was Shams al-Dīn al-ʿĀmilī al-Jizzīnī (d.1384), the second was Zayn al-Dīn ibn ʿAlī al-ʿĀmilī al-Jubāʿī (d.1558). See also MacEoin, ‘Baraghānī’.
  - 7 Hamid, ‘Metaphysics and Cosmology’, 52–5, is quite certain, building on the theories of Jorje Gracia, specifically his *Texts: Ontological Status, Identity, Author, Audience* (Albany, 1996) that Aḥsā’ī suffered a kind of retroactive condemnation as a result of the Bābī and Bahāʿī ‘audience’. He offers the hypothesis that if it had not been for the Bābīs and Bahāʿīs (? falsely) claiming a relationship to the teachings of the Shaykhiyya, Aḥsā’ī would still be esteemed by the majority of (? Iranian Shīʿī) scholars as one of the greatest philosophers of his time. For a thoughtful and pertinent discussion of the complex relationship between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, particularly in relation to the Shaykhiyya vis-à-vis the later Bahāʿī faith, see MacEoin ‘Orthodoxy’.
  - 8 Todd Lawson ‘Akḩbārī Shīʿī Approaches to *tafsīr*’ in G. Hawting and A. Abdul-Kadir Shareef (eds) *Approaches to the Qurʿan* (London, 1993) 173–210, esp. 180–7.
  - 9 See below, note 60, for these works by Kāshānī.
  - 10 See the biographical sketch in ʿAlī ḩusayn al-Jābirī *al-Fikr al-salafī ʿind al-Shīʿa al-ithna ʿasharī* (Beirut and Paris, 1977) 326–66. See also E. Kohlberg ‘Some Aspects of Akḩbārī Thought’ in N. Levtzion and J. Voll (eds) *Eighteenth*

- Century Renewal and Reform in Islam* (Syracuse, 1987) 133–60 for an important nuancing of Kāshānī's particular version of Akhbarism.
- 11 The complex subject of Kāshānī's Akhbārī allegiance has been most recently broached in Robert Gleave 'Two Classical Shī'ī theories of *qaḍā'*' in G. Hawting *et al.* (eds) *Studies in Islamic and Middle Eastern Texts and Traditions in Memory of Norman Calder* (Oxford, 2000) 105–20, Andrew J. Newman III 'Fayḍ al-Kashani and the Rejection of the Clergy/State Alliance' in L. Walbridge (ed.) *The Most Learned of the Shī'a* (New York, 2001) 34–52 and Todd Lawson 'Akhbārī'.
  - 12 The most recent detailed discussion of this is Ali Oraibi 'Shī'ī Renaissance: A Case Study of the Theosophical School of Bahrain in the 7th/13th century' (unpublished PhD thesis: McGill University, 1992).
  - 13 Lewisohn, 'Sufism', 44–66 is the most thorough inquiry into the Sufism of al-Kāshānī available. See especially Lewisohn, 'Sufism', 48ff. for a discussion of Kāshānī's controversial Nūrbakhshī affiliation, and Fayḍ's reputation in court circles for being an authority on Sufism and *Ḥikmat*, namely: *sālik-i ṭarīqayn va mast-i nashā'atayn*.
  - 14 Lewisohn, 'Sufism' (quoting Zarrinkūb).
  - 15 See Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 226, where Shaykh Aḥmad directly quotes Ibn Abī Jumhūr, specifically from his book *al-Mujlī*, a *ḥadīth* on the authority of the Prophet: 'All existents appeared from the *bā'* of the *basmala* (*zaharat al-mawjūdāt min bā' bismillāh al-rahmān al-rahīm*).' Aḥsā'ī adds that this is a symbol (*ramz*) for the Preserved Tablet, *al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz* (cf. Q85.22). See Todd Lawson 'Ebn Abi Jumhūr' *EIr* VII, 662–3 where this *ḥadīth* is discussed and Todd Lawson, 'The Terms Remembrance (*dhikr*) and Gate (*bāb*) in the Bab's Commentary on the Sura of Joseph', in M. Momen (ed.) *Bābi and Babā'ī Studies in Honour of H.M. Balyuzi* (Los Angeles, 1989) 56 where the influence of this tradition – via the Shaykhiyya – is noted in the Bāb's commentary of Qur'ān 12. See now, Sabine Schmidtke *Theologie, Philosophie und Mystik im zwölfterschiitischen Islam des 9./15. Jahrhunderts: die Gedankenwelten des Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsā'īs (um 838/1434–35-nach 906/1501)* (Leiden and Boston, 2000) 30–1, note 93, for references to other discussions of traces of Ibn Abī Jumhūr's influence on Shaykh Aḥmad in Chahardihī, Corbin, Cole and Hamid. The similarities between several specific formulations in *al-Mujlī* to the language of the writings of both Aḥsā'ī and Rashtī are presented in Lawson, *Qur'ān*, 67, 118–20, 189–91, 205–6, 332. See also Rafati, 'Development of shaykhī Thought', 22 and 40.
  - 16 Rafati, 'Development of Shaykhī Thought', 40, although he could have become acquainted with him through the works of Ibn Abī Jumhūr.
  - 17 MacEoin, 'Charismatic Renewal', 58 citing Sayyid Kāzīm Rashtī, *Dalīl al-mutahayyarīn* (n.p. 1276/1859–60) 12.
  - 18 For the names of those who issued the several *ijāzāt* to Shaykh Aḥmad see Rafati, 'Development of Shaykhī Thought', 41. See also the relevant chapters in Amanat *Resurrection* and MacEoin, 'Charismatic Renewal'.
  - 19 Rafati, 'Development of Shaykhī Thought', 44–5. According to Amanat (*Resurrection*, 67), Aḥsā'ī's departure from Iran and the 'Atabāt was precipitated by the enmity of a growing number of high-ranking Shī'ī '*ulamā'*'.
  - 20 See, for example, the remarks quoted from Mullā 'Alī al-Nūrī in Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amin al-Husaynī al-'Āmilī *A'yān al-Shī'a*, 11 vols (Beirut, 1406/1985) II, 591. Corbin's brief response to such slanders is compelling, if not completely convincing (Corbin, *Islam* IV, 212–13).
  - 21 There may have been other reasons for this visit. Aḥsā'ī says he 'arrived in Isfahan, a city protected from current events, and met with its distinguished '*ulamā'*', may God protect them from the changes and chances of the world

- (*nawā'ib al-ḥadathān*). Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 150; Aḥsā'ī, *Jawāmi'*, 166. Cf. Nicolas, *Essai*, iv for an alternate reading.
- 22 M. Mohaghegh and I. Izutsu *The Metaphysics of Sabzavāri* (New York, 1977) 14. The main part of this book is a translation of a portion of his *Ghurur al-farā'id* known as the *Sharḥ-i manzūma*, with an Introduction by Izutsu, based on the philosopher's work and his autobiography, from which comes the following comment: '[Aḥsā'ī] was unrivalled in his ascetic ways, however his graces [? = *faḍā'il* = 'intellectual gifts' < 'scholarship'] were not evident to the other scholars of Isfahan.'
- 23 For Sabzavāri's refutation, see note 74.
- 24 'Mīrzā Muḥammad Bāqir ibn Muḥammad al-Lāhijī, resident of Isfahan and later Tehran. He had held the post of *vazīr* to Sultan Ja'far Khān Zand and was held in high esteem by Faṭḥ-'Alī Shāh who asked him to write a *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān in Persian in a manner that had not been done before. He wrote *Tuhfat al-Khāqān*. He also wrote a *sharḥ* of the *Nahj al-Balāgha* in Persian for Faṭḥ-'Alī Shāh. He died in in Tehran 1240.' Momen, *The Works*, 45.
- The introductory exhortation to his questioner is most interesting. Among other things, he tells him (Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 151–2) that the Sufis, the *Ḥukamā'* and the Theologian are not proofs (like the Imams), that they are not his Imams, and that he must imitate the Imams directly. Not, however, the way some do through ignorance and error. Rather, his questioner should practice *taqlīd* of the Imams with reason, so that he does not blindly follow. If the questioner protests that their words do not conform to reason, Shaykh Aḥmad reponds: 'I say to you, their words are a divine binding reality (*ḥaqq*), and your reason is a divine binding reality (as long as you do not corrupt it with mirky knowledge) and the correcting principles are a divine binding reality because they are all of "the divine nature upon which He fashioned mankind (*fiṭrat Allāh al-latī faṭara al-nās 'alayhā*)" [Q30.30]. So, I do not want you to practice "pure *taqlīd*" as some vainly imagine it should be practiced. Rather, read Their words as rational indications [of thought and action] through your own powers of understanding, completely detached from the understanding of others. If you understand my words, and act according to my directions you will find that what I tell you is a useful tool for solving abstruse problems. By God, this is my teaching and that which should [? alone] represent me after I am gone (*khalīfatī*).' Note the error in Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 152: *al-mafṣūd* for Aḥsā'ī, *Jawāmi'*, 167 *al-maqṣūd*.
- 25 Though there seem to be some exceptions, namely his distinctive use of the term '*duf'atan*' ('all at once' '*tout a coup*') to designate the simultaneity and unicity of one aspect of cosmogonic movement (see, e.g., Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 256–8; see also Sabzavāri's critique of this mentioned below, note 74) while a companion technical term *abad<sup>an</sup> tāriyyat<sup>an</sup>* 'perpetual freshness' (Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 268) does occur in the later work (see Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 175). On *duf'atan* (*sic*) *wāḥidatan* as a key technical term in classical Ismā'īlī philosophy, see Madelung, 'Aspects', 56–7. The essentially and deeply mystic view of time and creation issues from and is coordinated with a meditation of such *ḥadīth* as: *kāna Allāh wa lā shay' māahu*; *al-ān kamā kāna* (frequently ascribed to the third Imam, Ḥusayn, but also ascribed to Junayd. See the discussion of this influential *ḥadīth* in Lawson, *Qur'ān*, 194–5): 'God was originally alone, there was no other thing with Him; He is now as He was.' Shaykh Aḥmad offers a correction of 'misinterpretations' of this *ḥadīth* such as those found in Kāshānī (see the discussion of a slight variant in Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 189) which led the latter to what Shaykh Aḥmad deems the pernicious doctrine of *ma'īyya* 'pre-eternal witness' another misunderstanding of the intentions of the Imams (Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 227). Intimately connected with Shaykh Aḥmad's theory of space and time is the highly distinctive, mystical and

- existentially challenging reading of Q7.172 that emerges from it (e.g. Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 214–15, 259, 264). This doctrine of the Covenant, which reflects the preoccupations of an original Shi'ism (Mohammed Ali Amir-Moezzi *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam* (D. Streight (trans.): Albany, 1994) s.v. index 'mīthāq', first published as *Le Guide divin dans le shi'isme originel* (Paris, 1992)) deserves separate treatment. It seems clear that most, if not all, elements of Aḥsā'ī's thought revolve around it, no matter how apparently irrelevant to this theme any given element might otherwise appear. His teaching here emerges from the Akhbārī reading of the verse which sees it as having been corrupted from its original form in which God explicitly designates 'Alī as Guardian (*walī*) of the community. See Todd Lawson 'A 'New Testament' for the Safavids' a paper presented at the Safavid RoundTable, Edinburgh, 1998.
- 26 This reading is supported throughout the text. Cf. Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 151: *al-ʿarīf al-mutqin*, and Aḥsā'ī, *Jawāmiʿ*, 166 *al-ʿarīf al-muttaqan*.
- 27 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 181; *kufr*: Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 274, 275 and 276 respectively.
- 28 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 151. Note that the Arabic: *fa-ahḥabtu an...* evokes (and perhaps identifies, however unwittingly, our author with) the voice in the famous *ḥadīth qudsī*: *kuntu kanzan makbūfī<sup>an</sup>*.
- 29 He is ridiculed by our author for his statement: 'nothing in the East or the West budges even the distance of a finger-tip except through my might and power'. Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 162.
- 30 *wa kullu shay'in siwāka qāma bi-amrika*: Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 247; also noticed in Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 147.
- 31 For evidence of a concern among the masters of the Shaykhī school with the theme of metaphysical (always with historical implications) symmetries of light and dark, good and evil, see Todd Lawson 'Coincidentia Oppositorum in the Qur'ān Commentary of the Bab: the terms 'Point' (*nuqṭa*), 'Pole' (*qutb*), 'Center' (*markaz*) and the *Khuṭbat al-tatanjiya*' *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Studies* V.1 (January, 2001) and references. Available at [www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/bhpapers.htm](http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/bhpapers.htm). See also the brief but highly pertinent remarks in MacEoin, 'Cosmogony', 326b.
- 32 Norman Calder 'The Limits of Islamic Orthodoxy' in F. Daftary (ed.) *Intellectual Traditions in Islam* (London, 2000) 76–8 where the example of the Bāb serves as a proof case for the general thesis that the orthodoxy of a generic work of Islamicate religious discourse (in this instance the genre is *tafsīr*) depends upon the degree to which the historical scholarly experience of the community is acknowledged within it. This nineteen-page essay is itself a typically learned and profound contemplation of a controversial topic in Islamic studies – a choice example from the author's prematurely diminished legacy to his own community.
- 33 The phrase is Corbin's (*Islam* I, xviii–xix). See also Amir-Moezzi, 'Une absence'. Aḥsā'ī's discussion of time here (Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 211, 230, 240–2) is central to the problem of God's knowledge, cosmogony, ontology and eschatology and adumbrates the more systematic treatment in his *Sharḥ al-fawā'id*; see the very useful discussion in Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 244–9, though the author neglects to make the connection that here again there is much that is suggestive of classical Ismā'īlī thought. Cf. e.g. Hunzai, *Knowledge and Liberation*, 30–4. See Corbin, *Islam* IV, 294–9 for a rich discussion of the temporal and spatial in Aḥsā'ī and its homologous relationship with certain classical Ismā'īlī ideas. See also Lawson, *Qur'ān*, 230–40. There is no space here to examine the topic fully. (See the comments above at notes 4 and 25.) While apparently uninterested in this specific problem, the recent study of the Shaykhiyya by Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥasan Āl al-Ṭālaghānī *al-Shaykhiyya*

*nasha'atuhā wa taṭawwuruhā wa maṣādir dirāsahā* (Beirut, 1420/1999) 320–1 does notice ‘*bāṭinī* fragrances’ emanating from the school. See also MacEoin, ‘Cosmogony’, 326b–327a.

- 34 (1) Scholars inventing that which was not in the original teaching (*istinbāt*) because they were not infallible (*laysū bi-maṣṣūmīn*). In the same way doctors of law have erred in inventing erroneous laws for the Shari‘a; (2) errors in translation, deriving from (a) a weak knowledge of Greek, or (b) the translators’ general ignorance; (3) a lack of ability in the art of translation. Aḥsā‘ī, *Risāla*, 172–4.
- 35 Aḥsā‘ī, *Risāla*, 174.
- 36 Aḥsā‘ī, *Risāla*, 271–2.
- 37 Aḥsā‘ī, *Risāla*, 154. Cf. Muḥammad Bāqir ibn Muḥammad Taqī al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, 110 vols (Beirut, 1983) III, 21 (r.18, b. 1) and repeated at Majlisī, *Bihār* LVII, 161 (r. 96, b.1) for the full *ḥadīth*, with a slightly different beginning related as follows from Abū ‘Abd Allāh (Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq):

I heard Abū ‘Abd Allāh say: ‘God, mighty and glorified, has always been our Lord and knowing his essence even though there be no object of knowledge and hearing his essence even though there be no thing to hear, and vision his essence even though there be no thing to see and power his essence though there be no object of power. When he generates (*fa-lammā aḥdatha*) [all] created things (*al-ashyā’*), there is an object of knowledge, and so the act of his knowing happens to the object of knowing, and hearing to the heard and seeing to the seen and power to the *maqḍūr*.’ . . . I said: ‘So has God always been moving?’ . . . Then he said: ‘Exalted be God [above that]. Verily, motion is a quality of the created *in actu*.’ . . . I said: ‘So, has God always been speaking?’ . . . He said: ‘Verily speech is a quality of the created, it is not sempiternal (*azaliyya*). God was/is/will be [eternally in *azaliyya*] but not as a speaker.’

See also Aḥsā‘ī, *Risāla*, 165, 273, 275, and *passim*. The tortured translation here reflects an attempt to account for Aḥsā‘ī’s complex and ornate theory of time and the place of what is normally called creation in it. Aḥsā‘ī, *Risāla*, pp. 211, 230, 241, 245–324 (see also above, notes 25 and 33). It should be observed here, that for all of his vast literary output, Shaykh Aḥmad was no poet, unlike Fayḍ. It is suggested that Aḥsā‘ī’s natural ‘poetic’ was expressed in his elaborate and ‘baroque’ theology and that it was of a nature that made it difficult to appreciate the poetry of Kāshānī’s theology.

- 38 Such temporal ‘adverbs’ are especially difficult to render in the context.
- 39 Aḥsā‘ī, *Risāla*, 154, not translated in the corresponding place in Nicolas, *Essai*, xii.
- 40 Aḥsā‘ī, *Risāla*, 156: *wa kadhālika lā takūna maḍīyatan illā ‘alā al-qābil al-mustādī’*. It is not possible to know from the context whether or not our author is influenced in his language here by the Avicennan doctrine of existence ‘occurring’ to an essence.
- 41 As in Oraibi, ‘Shī‘ī Renaissance’.
- 42 The verse from which this excerpt is quoted is replete with messianic and apocalyptic cues:

‘The Unbelievers say ‘Never to us will come The Hour!’ Say: ‘But most surely – by my Lord! – it will come upon you. By him who knows the unseen, from whom is not hidden the least little atom in the heavens or in the earth. Nor is there any thing less than that or greater but is in the record perspicacious.’

- 43 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 152.
- 44 See above, notes 4 and 32 and the references to Ismā'īlī theology.
- 45 For an invaluable discussion of *fi'lma'fūl* in Shaykh Aḥmad as delineated in his critique of the thought of Mullā Ṣadrā, see Henry Corbin *Mollā Ṣadrā Shḥrāzḥ* (980/1572–1050/1640) *Le Livre des Pénétrations métaphysiques (Kitāb al-Mashā'ir) Texte arabe publié avec la version persane de Badḥ'ol-Molk Mīrzā 'Emadoddawleh, traduction française et Annotations* (Tehran and Paris, 1964), reprinted (Lagrasse, France, 1981) without the Arabic and Persian texts. The reference here is to the original edition (hereafter *Pénétrations*), s.v. index *fi'l* and *ma'fūl*; Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 176–84 is useful. See also Lawson, *Qur'ān*, 118–20.
- 46 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 152.
- 47 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 153.
- 48 Based on a *ḥadīth* from al-Bāqir stating that thinking is a quality of creation 'and God is not like that' quoted Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 187.
- 49 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 152.
- 50 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 273.
- 51 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 155; the distinctive terminology does not seem to be derived from Ibn Abī Jumhūr, (see Schmidtke, *Theologie, Philosophie und Mystik*, 37–114) or for that matter Ibn Maytham (see Oraibi, 'Shī'ī Renaissance'). See Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 547–8 for a useful gloss. On the logical problems involved here, see the pertinent discussion of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūṣī's commentary on a *Risālat al-ilm* by one of the teachers of the above-mentioned Maytham al-Baḥrānī, Ibn Sa'āda (d.1274) in Oraibi, 'Shī'ī Renaissance', 36–8 and 64–73. This commentary, together with the original *Risāla*, is published as *Sharḥ maṣālat al-ilm* (Mashhad, 1966) which was unavailable to me.
- 52 For the history of the idea, see Henry Corbin 'Mundus imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal' *Spring* (1972) 1–19. (First published in French in the *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme* 6 (1964) 3–26.); Henry Corbin 'Dream, Imagination and 'Ālam al-Mithāl' and Fazlur Rahman 'The Visionary Dream in Islamic Spirituality' both in G. von Grunebaum and R. Caillois (eds) *The Dream and Human Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966) 381–408 and 410–19 respectively; and Corbin, *Spiritual Body*. Historical precedents are studied in John T. Walbridge III *The Science of Mystic Lights: Qutb al-Dīn Shīrāzī and the Illuminationist Tradition in Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 1992) 126ff. is an important analysis of the idea in the work Shīrāzī (d.710/1311), whom the author describes as possibly the first Islamic philosopher 'to have made a determined effort to work out the philosophical implications of the concept'.
- 53 See, e.g., Henry Corbin *Le Paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris, 1981); Corbin has elsewhere quoted Shaykh Aḥmad's own summation of the existential predicament as follows:
- C'est pourquoi, dit Shaykh Ahmad, c'est bien vers l'Essence inaccessible que l'homme se tourne, bien qu'à tout jamais il ne puisse la trouver; et cependant il ne cesse de la trouver, alors même qu'à tout jamais elle lui reste inaccessible.
- Corbin, *Islam* I, 194
- 54 Corbin, 'Mundus Imaginalis', 1–2. It is also referred to by Shaykhī authors and others as 'the eighth clime' outside and beyond the seven regions or climes of classical geography. See, e.g., Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 246 and Corbin, *Spiritual Body, passim*.
- 55 Corbin, 'Visionary Dream', 406–7.

- 56 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 246. The question remains open whether or not this private appearance, as discussed by the Shaykhīs (especially in the earliest days, just prior to the Shī'ī millennium) was the only one to be expected by the Shī'a, or whether the masters of the Shaykhī school also hoped for an imaginal (as distinct from unreal) *zuhūr* of such intensity that it entailed an actual advent of the Imam on the plane of history. This raises the vexed question of the doctrine of the Fourth Support (*al-rukn al-rābi'*). This term does not occur in the *Risāla* although it does occur in the last major work of Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī, Aḥsā'ī, *Jawāmi'* II, 304. For recent discussions see Amir-Moezzi, 'Une absence *passim*'; Ahmad Kazemi-Moussavi *Religious Authority in Shiite Islam : from the Office of Mufti to the Institution of Marja* (Kuala Lumpur, 1996), s.v. index 'rukn-i rābi'; Lawson, *Qur'ān, passim*.
- 57 MacEoin, 'Orthodoxy', 327 and Cole, 'Sources', 86–7. It may be useful to make the common-sense observation that such profound certitude is susceptible of being mistaken for arrogance and spiritual pride, a factor that might also have contributed to rejection.
- 58 Corbin, *Islam* IV, 221. The term implies 'unlearned knowledge' and derives from the name of an early Muslim, Uways al-Qaranī, who never met the Prophet yet converted to Islam while living in Yemen. It may also apply to a Sufi who has no Shaykh, or an illiterate person with unusual knowledge. See now Julian Baldick *Imaginary Muslims: The Uwaysi Sufis of Central Asia* (New York, 1993) for a general discussion noteworthy for its complete avoidance of any Shī'ī subject-matter, although he does devote a paragraph to Corbin's concern with the *ālam al-mithāl* in the conclusion (Baldick, *Imaginary*, 222).
- 59 Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 176–9 and 180–221. In light of the relentless castigation here of Kāshānī by Aḥsā'ī one is struck by the irony of Corbin's linking them so closely in the same book.
- 60 Mullā Muḥammad Muḥsin Fayḍ al-Kāshānī *Kalimāt-i mahnūna min 'ulūm abl al-ḥikma wa al-mā'rifā* (Tehran, 1383/1342sh/1963) 70–3 (translated in Corbin, *Spiritual Body*, 176–9). The *Kalimāt-i mahnūna* is the subject of recent scholarship: Rasūl Ja'fariyan, *Dīn va siyāsāt dar dawrah-yi Ṣafavī* (Qum, 1370sh/1991) ch. 10; Todd Lawson 'The Hidden Words of Fayz Kāshānī' in M. Szuppe *et al.* (eds) *Actes du 4e Colloque de la Societas Iranologica Europaea, Paris, septembre 1999* in vol. 2, *Cahiers de Studia Islamica* (Leuven, 2002) and Shigeru Kamada 'Walāya in Fayḍ Kāshānī' in T. Lawson (ed.) *Islamic Thought: Papers on Historiography, Sufism and Philosophy in Honor of Hermann Landolt* (forthcoming). Kāshānī's work is quoted and refuted several times here by Aḥsā'ī: *Risāla*, 175–6, 181, 190, 216, 221, 248, 253. Other works of Kāshānī, e.g. *al-Wāfi* and *al-Ṣāfi*, are also frequently cited by Aḥsā'ī throughout the *Risāla*.
- 61 For references to his interest in natural science and experimentation, see Rafati, 'Development of Shaykhī Thought', 41–2 and references and Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 32.
- 62 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 246.
- 63 Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 236.
- 64 Hermann Landolt 'Der Briefwechsel zwischen Kāshānī und Simnānī über Waḥdat al-Wuḡūd' *Der Islam* 50 (1973) 29–81, esp. 62–3. See also Hermann Landolt 'Simnānī on Waḥdat al-Wujūd' in M. Mohaghegh and H. Landolt (eds) *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism* (Tehran, 1971) 91–114, esp. 109–10. In 1985 Josef van Ess ('Alā-al-Dawla Semnānī' *Elr* I, 774b–77a) called attention to the importance of Landolt's suggestive observation but, alas, to an apparently indifferent scholarly public. On the history of the criticism of Ibn 'Arabī, see now Alexander D. Knysh *Ibn Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition : The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam*

- (Albany, 1999). Unfortunately, Knysh seems here completely uninterested in the rich and important Shī'ī dimension of the topic.
- 65 Even though the original sources are now better accessible than they were thirty years ago, no one it seems has taken up Landolt's original suggestion to pursue a comparative study of Simnānī and the Shaykhīs (Landolt, 'Der Briefwechsel', 63).
- 66 Jamal J. Elias *The Throne Carrier of God: the Life and Thought of 'Alā ad-dawla as-Simnānī* (Albany, 1995) 153–4. See also the similar speculation in Hermann Landolt's recent review of Hunzai's above-mentioned translation and edition of Nāṣir Khusraw's *Gushāyish* in *Bulletin critique des Annales islamologiques* 16 *Annales islamologiques* 34 *Institut français d'archéologie orientale* (2000) 75.
- 67 His veneration of the *abl al-kiswa*, his spritual pedigree through the Imams from 'Alī b. Riḍā to the Prophet (skipping al-Hasan ibn 'Alī!), his citation of the *Nahj al-balāgha*, certainly do not need to mean more than this. Cf. Hartwig Cordt *Die sitzungen des 'Alā ad-dawla as-Simnānī* (Zurich, 1977) 232–9. That one of his students was Shaykh Khalīfa Māzandarānī, the founder of the radical Shī'ī Sarbadārī movement may mean nothing in this context. See also Elias, *Throne Carrier*, 51–3. A focussed study on the question of Simnānī's real attitude to Shī'ism is perhaps needed. See the suggestive discussion in Joseph van Ess, 'Semnānī', 75 and 76. An earlier and perhaps under-appreciated discussion is Marijan Molé 'Les Kubrawiya entre sunnisme et shiisme aux huitième et neuvième siècles de l'Hegire' *Revue des Études islamiques* 29 (1961) 61–142.
- 68 van Ess, 'Semnānī', 76.
- 69 Cf. Mu'ayyad fī al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī *Majālis al-mu'ayyadiyya*, 2 vols (M. Ghālib (ed.): Beirut, 1974 and 1984) I, 170ff. See also the references to Lawson and Amir-Moezzi below, note 72.
- 70 Kāshānī, *Kalimāt-maknūna*, 196–205. Note the editorial warnings (on p. 196) on the soundness of the traditions quoted by Kāshānī.
- 71 Rajab al-Bursī *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn fī asrār Amīr al-Mu'minīn* (Beirut, 1978).
- 72 Todd Lawson 'The Dawning Places of the Lights of Certainty in the Divine Secrets Connected with the Commander of the Faithful by Rajab Bursi' in L. Lewisohn (ed.) *The Heritage of Sufism, Volume III, The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism* (Oxford, 1999 (first published London, 1992)) 261–76. Amir-Moezzi, 'Divinité', 194–6 and 206–16. See also Henry Corbin *Rajab Bursi: Les Orient des Lumieres* (Paris, 1995) and Henry Corbin *Itinéraire d'un Enseignement: Résumé des Conférences à l'École Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Section des Sciences Religieuses) 1955–1979* (présentation par Ch. Jambet: Tehran, 1993) 104–4 and 111–8. For the influence of this sermon and Sayyid Kāzīm's commentary on it in Bābī and Bahā'ī thought see Lawson, 'Coincidentia Oppositorum'.
- 73 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 269.
- 74 Mullā Hādī Sabzavārī *al-Muḥākamāt wa al-muqāwamāt: radd bar Sharḥ risālat al-Ilm Baḥraynī* in *Majmū'a rasā'il* (J. D. Ashtiyānī (ed.): Tehran 1360sh) 649–75. Sabzavārī's disagreements with Aḥsā'ī are many and profound and there is no space here to outline his criticism fully. He disparages Aḥsā'ī's theory of time and motion, symbolised by the word '*dufā*' (Sabzavārī, *Muḥākamāt*, 650) saying that it is at complete odds with the teaching of Mullā Ṣadra, namely *ḥarakat-i jawhariyya*. He indicates in several places that Aḥsā'ī's insistence on there being no connection whatever between the divine essence and everything else is wilful, tacitly accusing him of spiritual myopia (Sabzavārī, *Muḥākamāt*, 671 and 677). For it can correctly be said that God's speech is of the divine essence (Sabzavārī, *Muḥākamāt*, 668). It is necessary to judge

- such matters according to perspective. Of course, there is truth to the assertion of the remoteness of the essence, but there is also truth to the assertion of its 'accessibility'. It is important to look at such things with 'two eyes' (Sabzavārī, *Muhākamāt*, 677) and not merely one.
- 75 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 206. Here Aḥsā'ī cites a tradition from Imam al-Riḍā concerning the generation of *al-irāda*: 'It is not knowing (*ilm*), God does not have a pre-existent *irāda* that results in his following it. To God there is neither will nor purpose in a pre-existent state (*qadīma*). Nay, rather these are two generated things.' Al-Riḍā said: 'The will and the purpose are attributes of the acts. Whoever imagines that God has always been purposing and willing is not a believer in the divine unity.' Abū 'Abd Allāh said, in answer to a related question: 'A purposer can only exist when there is also an object of the purpose. God has ever been knowing and powerful, *then* he willed.'
- 76 Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī, *Sharḥ al-fawā'id*, ch. 10 (Hamid edition). It is puzzling why this pivotal discussion receives such scant attention in this recent, and in many respects, very fine study of this important work.
- 77 E.g., Roger Arnaldez, 'al-Insān al-Kāmil', *EI*<sup>2</sup> III, 1239.
- 78 Corbin, *Islam*, s.v. index *l'homme parfait*. See also Todd Lawson 'The Structure of Existence in the Bab's Tafsir and the Perfect Man Motif' in *Studia Iranica: Cahiers 11: Recurrent Patterns in Iranian Religions from Mazdaism to Sufism. Proceedings of the Round Table held in Bamberg (30th September – 4th October 1991)* (Paris, 1992) 81–99.
- 79 Cf. Mohammed Ali Amir-Moezzi 'Aspects de l'Imamologie Duodécimaine I: Rémarques sur la Divinité de l'Imām' *Studia Iranica* 25 (1996) 193–216; Amir-Moezzi *Divine Guide*, 29–59; Corbin, *Islam* IV, 279–83. Cf., incidentally, the continuation of this venerable Ismā'īlī topos in Bahā'ī doctrine, Ḥusayn 'Alī Nūri Bahā'u'llāh *Kitāb mustatāb-i iqān* (Hofheim-Langenhain, 1980) 50–1 (originally published Cairo, 1934). English translation by Shoghi Effendi Rabbani *The Kitāb-i-ḥqān: The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette, 1970) 65–6. But see Bahā'u'llāh, *Īqān*, 77 (English translation, 103) for a somewhat surprising and apparently unequivocal attribution of humanity to the Prophet and Imams 'the most perfect manifestations of divinity'.
- 80 There is, of course, no mention of Ibn Taymiyya in the *Risāla*, although Aḥsā'ī mentions disparagingly one of the several subjects of the spiritual founder of the Wahhābiyya's wrath, Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh (mentioned above). On the dispute between Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh and Ibn Taymiyya see Fritz Meier 'The Cleanest about Predestination: A Bit of Ibn Taymiyya' *Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism* (J. O'Kane with B. Radtke (trans.): Leiden, 1999) 318–19.
- 81 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 217. Incidentally, this happens to be a suggestive and felicitous Arabic paraphrase of the Greek idea contained in the word *aporia* (i.e. 'path strewn with obstacles'). The observation is *not meant* to suggest any kinship, genetic or otherwise, between Shaykh Aḥmad and certain contemporary trends in literary criticism and theory.
- 82 See above, the reference to *Āyān* at note 20 above. For an extensive and invaluable study of this critique see Corbin, *Pénétrations*, s.v. index 'Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī (Shaykh)'. For Corbin, the accusations against Shaykh Aḥmad are beneath contempt. Corbin, *Islam* IV, 212–13.
- 83 See Farhad Daftary *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990) 502–7 and references for a discussion of the dynamics of this relationship and insights into the religious views of Faṭḥ 'Alī Shāh himself. See Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī *Risāla fī kayfiyya al-sulūk ilā Allāh* (Beirut, 1414/1993) for distinctive interpretations of standard Sufi topics and practices such as *dhikr*, *ṣaḥāba*, etc. Shaykh Aḥmad's popularity, as Cole, 'Sources', 91, has recently written, was due in large measure to his remarkable achievement: 'preserving

the warm heart' of Shi'ism amidst a welter of competing scholasticisms. However, the existence of such works as Mullā Muḥammad Taqī al-Majlisī *Risālah tashwīq al-sālikīn* (n.p., n.d.) reminds us to be ever alert to precedents for Aḥsā'ī's synthesis.

- 84 Peter Smith and Moojan Momen 'The Bābī Movement: A Mobilization Perspective' in P. Smith (ed.) *In Iran: Studies in Bābī and Bahā'ī History* vol. 3 (Los Angeles, 1986) 33–93.
- 85 Todd Lawson 'The Authority of the Feminine and Fatima's Place in an Early Work by the Bab' in L. Walbridge (ed.) *The Most Learned of the Shia* (New York, 2001) 94–127. See also Negar Mottahedeḥ 'Ruptured Spaces and Effective Histories: The Unveiling of the Babi Poetess Qurrat al-'Ayn-Tahirih in the Gardens of Badashṭ' *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Studies* 2.2 (February, 1998), available at: [www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/bhpapers/vol2/ruptured.htm](http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/bhpapers/vol2/ruptured.htm).
- 86 Pace Corbin, *Islam* IV, 213. He just seems to protest too much the irrefutable historical and doctrinal connection with and derivation from Shaykhi teachings of the Bābī and Bahā'ī phenomena. Cf. e.g., the nearly phobic: '[I]ls ne peuvent absolument pas être considérés comme des 'rejetons' de l'école shaykhié . . . Quant au bābisme et au bahā'isme . . . se sont mis *ipso facto* hors du shī'isme. Lorsque les bahā'īs affirment leur admiration pour Shaykh Ahmad Aḥsā'ī, on ne peut que les approuver. Mais lorsqu'ils le revendiquent comme leur ancêtre spirituel on ne peut que dénoncer cette prétention abusive.'

Perhaps Corbin was so adamant about this because of the *post facto* (i.e. post Bahā'ī) nature of much of the dismissal of Shaykhism by the *'ulamā'* of Iran who took seriously the claim of the Bahā'ī's genetic relationship to the teachings of Shaykh Aḥmad. Recently, this idea has been stressed again; see above note 7. It is a topic for further discussion; see MacEoin, 'Orthodoxy'. Corbin seems to have never referred to an actual work of Bābī or Bahā'ī authorship in his numerous writings. It is one thing to deny that Bābī and Bahā'ī thought is an accurate reflection of the teachings of Shaykh Aḥmad, it is quite another to presume to know more about the spiritual and intellectual genealogy of a family than the actual members of the family one is studying without providing convincing evidence.

- 87 On the former see Bayat, *Mysticism* and Cole 'New'.
- 88 See, for example, the many works of refutation, published and unpublished, listed in Tīhrānī, *Dharī'a*.
- 89 It may be that Shaykh Aḥmad's exposure to the ideas of the Dhahabī Sufi order is perhaps in part responsible for his elaboration of the idea of the Perfect Shī'a as suggested in Cole 'Sources'. Much work remains to be done on the Sufism of Shaykh Aḥmad. See also MacEoin, 'Charismatic Renewal', 4–5.
- 90 Corbin, *Islam* IV, 259.
- 91 So vehement was his repudiation of *taqlīd* that several scholars have seen him as a democrat, hardly beyond the domain of 'secular humanism'. Bausani, *Religion*, 340–44 offers an alternate characterization:

Generally speaking, Shaikhism contains a stronger Shi'ite theological 'impetus' and is more purely 'religious' than philosophers such as Mullā Sadrā were. Iqbāl's statement . . . that shaikh Ahmad was an enthusiastic reader of Mullā Sadrā's works is based on a misunderstanding; the Shaikhḥs studied Mullā Sadrā but did not always approve of what he said; in fact, on some points (for example questions concerning the knowledge of God) they returned to less philosophical and more religious positions . . . If the complex theological position of the Shaikhḥs could be summed up in a few words I would say that it is based on two points, one deeply religious and the other with rational tendencies . . . to symbolic explanations (which sometimes go beyond the realistic symbolism

of Sadrâ) to enter into a truly rationalist allegory of the miraculous aspect of traditional theological legends . . . Everything is easily resolved by transposing the historical reality of the facts of revelation onto metahistorical planes (Muhammad, 'Alī, etc. = First Creature): it is here, and not in a humanistic rationalism, that the secret of Shaikhī symbolism lies.

92 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 278.

93 Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla*, 191.

94 A recent important discussion of *ghuluww* elements in Kāshānī's religiosity and intellectual culture is in Kathryn Babayan 'Sufis, Dervishes and Mullahs: The Controversies over Spiritual and Temporal Dominion in Seventeenth-Century Iran' in C. Melville (ed.) *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society* (Cambridge, 1996) 117–38.

95 See the explicit condemnation of Ismā'īlīs by none other than the influential formulator of 'orthodox' Shī'ī *waḥdat al-wujūd*, Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī *La Philosophie Shi'ite: 1. Somme des doctrines ésoteriques (Jâmi'al-asrâr) 2. Traité de la connaissance de l'être* (2nd edn: Tehran, 1989) 47, 217, 221, 238, 388 (*textes publiés avec une double introduction et un index par H. Corbin et O. Yahia, introduction traduit en persan par Seyyed Javâd Ṭabâṭabâi, Centre de Publications Scientifiques et Culturelles et Institut Français de Recherche en Iran* (vol. 16 of *Bibliothèque Iranienne, dirigée par H. Corbin (1905–1978)* first published in 1968)). The main criticism is against their tendency to consider the *batīn* (ie *walāya*, ie 'Alī) greater than the *ẓāhir* (i.e. *nubuwwa*, i.e. Muḥammad).

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