

Y. A. Ioannesyan

**THE SHAYKHI  
RELIGIOUS SCHOOL:  
HISTORICAL SUBJECTS, TEACHINGS**

*(Including publication of manuscript samples)*

RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES  
INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL MANUSCRIPTS

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The monograph is an academic study on Shaykhism that uses primary sources to systematically present the teachings of this mystical school of Shi'ism. The school originated and developed rapidly at the end of the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries in the Near and Middle East. The book contains biographies of the founders of Shaykhism and issues relating to their sharp polemics with their opponents. It examines the fundamental principles of Shaykhi teaching with a special focus on its “four pillars”, and introduces important works of the school's theorists.

The monograph is supplemented with an extensive set of scanned pages of Shaykhi manuscripts from the collection of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IOM RAS).

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*Dedicated to Bill and Judy Hatcher*



## Introduction

This book is dedicated to Shaykhism — an extremely interesting and significant phenomenon of religious-philosophical thought that emerged at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the territory of present-day Iran and Iraq. Shaykhism emerged within the framework of Shi'ite Islam and is considered to have been founded by two individuals: Shaykh<sup>1</sup> Ahmad Ahsa'i and his closest disciple Sayyid Kazim Rashti.

The author undertook this study with the original intent of treating Shaykhism as a holistic and unified phenomenon and teaching. However, in the process, he had to abandon this approach as untenable, because Shaykhism is not a “single” phenomenon. It consists of two relatively distinct components, linked to two phases in its history. The earlier phase coincided with the birth of the Babi Faith in 1844, and is dominated by the activities of the founders of Shaykhism: Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i and Sayyid Kazim Rashti. The later phase begins with the death of Sayyid Kazim Rashti, which was followed soon after by the emergence of the Babi Faith. The transition of many prominent Shaykhis to the Babi Faith led to a split within the ranks of those who did not recognize the founder of the Babi Faith — the Bab — and who stood in strong opposition to him. This split was characterized by the establishment of two major centers of Shaykhism in Iran: in Kerman [Kirman] (the followers of Karim-Khan Kirmani, see further in this book) and in Tabriz. In its later period, Shaykhism became even more fragmented. Since the time of Karim-Khan Kirmani, this doctrine has undergone significant changes and revisions of its original doctrines, which stemmed from the anti-Babi discourse in the following decades of its history. In all cases, later Shaykhism, which extends to the present, is a phenomenon independent of the original (early) Shaykhism, although it emerged from it and therefore deserves to be considered as a separate but related subject of study.

This study is based on the works of the founders of Shaykhism — Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i and Sayyid Kazim Rashti — as well as on other sources, including the treatise of Muhammad b. Ibrahim al-Musavi al-Qarabaghi,<sup>2</sup> *Risala dar 'Aqa'id* from the collection of IOM RAS. Thus, while the emphasis of this study is on early Shaykhism, it is not limited to it exclusively, where this seems appropriate.

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<sup>1</sup> The first part of this compound name is spelled by some authors as “Shaikh”, and, consequently, the adjective and the name of the school derived from it as “Shaikhi” and “Shaikhism”

<sup>2</sup> A follower of Karim-Khan Kirmani (1810–1873).



The English term “Shaykhism” is derived from the title of Shaykh Ahmad.<sup>1</sup> The other name of this school is *kashfi*.<sup>2</sup> This definition is revealed by Sayyid Kazim in his treatise *Dalil al-Mutahayyirin*:

“The meaning of the name ‘Kashfi’ (lit. people of Unveiling/Illumination)<sup>3</sup> refers to the companions of the greatest Shaykh ... the very embodiment of Shi’ism ... our Shaykh, our guide, and our pillar, Shaykh Ahmad b. Zayn al-din al-Ahsa’i. The meaning of the name ‘Kashfiya’ (lit. people of Discovery/Enlightenment), by which they have designated [this] community, is that [these people] are connected with the Venerable [Shaykh]. For the Lord of the world has thrown off<sup>4</sup> the veil of ignorance from their eyes and hearts. They are those from whose souls the darkness of doubt and suspicion has been removed, and they have been illumined by the light of truth through clear reasoning and intelligible proofs ... And they are also men from whose inner sight the Lord has removed the veil, and they have known things as they really are. And all that they did not know, they attributed the knowledge thereof to God, and they confessed their infirmities and limitations ... And though this title may be applied to any of the possessors of the Discovery who were before and after the venerable Shaykh, yet in most cases this school is called ‘kashfi’ as opposed to others, those who have no ‘Discovery’. [This] is similar to the use of the term ‘Imamites’ to denote the Twelver Shi’ite branch [of Islam]. Though it would be lawful to call as such anyone who has set up an Imam for himself, yet the enemies have fixed it universally upon these noble [Shi’ites] ... Yet the Lord of the world has made this name their exclusive property in the world of atoms ... Likewise, the name ‘Kashfiya’ is truly exclusive to them (i. e., Shaykhis), their followers and those who walk in their paths. But their contemporaries, those opposing them and contending with them, have interpreted this title with crude and strained interpretations ... and said, ‘The Lord has taken the veil from their hearts, and they contemplate knowledge and precepts without the need of the Messenger and the disposer of the spiritual testament of the Messenger ...’. And this despite the fact that they are those who duly recognize and fully confess monotheism, the mission of the prophets ... and the obedience of the guided Imams ... ”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> That is, from the title at the start of his compound name.

<sup>2</sup> This name was not widely accepted.

<sup>3</sup> For more information about this term, see Trimmingham 1971, p. 139.

<sup>4</sup> Lit. ‘opened’.

<sup>5</sup> Sayyid Kazim Rashti, *Dalil al-Mutahayyirin*, pp. 8–9. Hereinafter this work is quoted from the Persian version in the lithograph (volume of collected Shaykhi texts, library

H. Corbin defines Shaykhism as a “philosophical renaissance” (*renaissance philosophique*) and considers it to be a distinctive phenomenon of “Iranian Islam” (l’Islam iranien) which has no parallel in the Islamic world.<sup>1</sup> It is equally, according to this author, “a Shi’ite philosophy” or “philosophy of Islam” that found fertile ground during the Safavid period. However, it did not emerge from the “underground” and find an official structure. Mulla Sadra and his disciples, Corbin notes, experienced many difficulties with the official clergy and to a certain extent practiced the discipline of “esoterism” (*la discipline de l’ésotérisme*) to “conceal their religious views” (taqîyeh).<sup>2</sup> This situation, according to Corbin, had the unfortunate effect of creating, in many territories where Islam had taken root, the phenomenon of theology being invaded by *fiqh*, the canon law, and a jurisprudence that tended to merge with it and even replace it. Yet, Corbin believes, for generations and up to the present, there has been no lessening of efforts on the part of followers of *Hikmat(-i) Ilahiya*, which does not quite correspond to what Europeans mean by “philosophy” and “theology”, but coincides fully with the notion of “theosophy”.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Corbin notes, in the face of an officially supported tendency to absorb theology in legal science and casuistic formalism, those who followed this theosophy faced misunderstanding and often suspicion.

The French scholar wonders how those who were to some extent familiar with the words of the Imams, the source of Imamite theosophy, could capitulate to this (“*fiqh* and casuistic formalism”—Y.I.). Corbin continues his analysis stating that because of these circumstances, Shi’ism, partly in hiding, so to speak, from itself, has managed to preserve its nature as an esoteric religion, and its adherents have found themselves in the same situation as Jewish and early Christian Gnostics.<sup>4</sup> This scholar, thus views Shaykhism as an esoteric doctrine underlying “true” Shi’ism, and sees in it the revival of Shi’ite theosophy. It should be noted that, although the present writer agrees with much of Corbin’s reasoning, the French scholar tends in principle to favor all that he sees as esoteric, and dislikes organized religions and movements, usually sharply contrasting one with the other.

Although this religious school (Shaykhism) is still in the bosom of Shi’ism, it was the subject of fierce controversy both in the theological milieu and in the political circles in Persia and beyond. It was characterized by both esoteric tendencies and

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code: Pk 213) from the collection of the IOM RAS. This lithograph has no pagination, and its pages here and hereafter are referred to by their sequential number. The present author believes that the Persian translation, which contains elements of interpretation and is a more unambiguous version of the text, is particularly suitable for scholarly research.

<sup>1</sup> Corbin 1961a, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Corbin 1961a, pp. 4–5.

heightened messianic expectations. However, both of these were expressed in the writings of the Shaykhi authors in a rather veiled form. Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i argued that religious leaders and authorities were no longer the bearers of truth and that it should be drawn directly from "divine sources". The school proposed new approaches to traditional Shi'ite doctrines. Although firmly rooted in Shi'ite Islam and based on the sayings of the Imams, these approaches were truly revolutionary for Shi'ite theological thought. Shaykhism revised some traditional ideas and introduced some new provisions, without claiming the status of an independent religious movement and defining itself as "Shi'ism in its original form". Many Shi'ite authorities nevertheless refused to accept it as such and regarded the school as "heretical".<sup>1</sup> It was not only with official Shi'ism that Shaykhi theorists profoundly disagreed and sharply polemicized. Sufism was also a frequent target of their criticism. We shall deal with this question in later chapters; here we will point out that, according to Corbin, in what may seem a somewhat categorical statement, Shaykhis believed that the "Shaykh", as he is perceived by Sufis, "has usurped" the authority of the "Hidden Imam", which supposedly contradicts the very concept of the "Hidden Imam".<sup>2</sup> It seems, however, that such an understanding might be more likely inherent primarily in later Shaykhism, which departed to some extent from the original teaching (see above).

Let us now turn to a brief review of the history of the study of Shaykhism in Europe. As F. Gillon rightly points out, the number of works in European languages devoted specifically to Shaykhism barely exceeds thirty, including several unpublished abstracts (Gillon 2019, p. 10). The earliest references to Shaykhism in European literature can be found in the books of Russian orientalist (M.) A. Kazem-Bek, "The Bab and the Babis ...";<sup>3</sup> and French diplomat and scholar Comte de Gobineau,<sup>4</sup> "*Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie central*"; both of which were published in 1865. de Gobineau mentions Shaykhis among the dissidents in Persian society, which shows his familiarity with their teachings.<sup>5</sup> Kazem-Bek not only mentions Sayyid Kazim, a disciple of Shaykh Ahmad, in Iraq, but also tries to formulate what he considers some of the principal differences between Shaykhism and what he calls "the dogmatic teachings of the Imamite Shi'ites", which eventually led them to dislike Shaykh Ahmad.<sup>6</sup> The discussion of certain aspects of Shaykhism and its history is found in the appendices and the lengthy commentaries to the works on the Babi Faith published by the famous British

<sup>1</sup> cf. Rafati 1979, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Corbin 1961a, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> In this book, the name of this author is spelled as M. Kazem-Bek. His full name is (Mirza) Alexander Kazem-Bek.

<sup>4</sup> His full name was Joseph-Arthur Comte de Gobineau.

<sup>5</sup> See de Gobineau 1865, p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> See Kazem-Bek 1865, pp. 4, 47, 185.

Orientalist E. G. Browne at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *A Traveller's Narrative ...*, vol. 2; M. H. Hamadani, *The Táríkh-i-Jadíd ...*, etc. This scholar clearly distinguishes between the two significantly different periods in the development of Shaykhism (see above) in his works. A particularly complete description of Shaykhism with detailed citations of sources, including, first of all, the works of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i and Sayyid Kazim Rashti, is contained in the four-volume work of A.-L.-M. Nicolas, the outstanding French researcher of the Babi Faith and Shaykhism and translator of many of the Bab's Writings, *Essai sur le Chéikhism*, (1910–1914, vols I–IV), which, like other works by this author, has not lost its importance to this day. It includes an overview of the history and origin of Shaykhism, a biography of its founders (largely based on the text of Sayyid Kazim's *Dalil al-Mutahayyirin*), detailed lists of works by these authors, analysis of some provisions of the doctrine, and an account of the persecution of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i and Sayyid Kazim Rashti by traditionally oriented Shi'ite theologians. In the second volume of his work, Nicolas elaborates on a rarely mentioned, but crucial for understanding the relationship between Shaykhism and the Babi Faith, for which the former had prepared the ground, a late work by Sayyid Kazim (*Sharh-i Qasida*) that contains a clear allusion to the Bab (see the relevant section of this book). This circumstance largely explains why the ranks of the first adherents of the founder of the Babi Faith were formed by people from a Shaykhi background.

If Browne (as was mentioned above) and others, quite reasonably clearly distinguished between the two principally different stages and even two schools in the development of Shaykhism: the "old" (using the present author's terminology, the "early") and the "new" one,<sup>1</sup> such a distinction, unfortunately, is not made by the already mentioned prominent French scholar Corbin, who devoted much of his research to this school and published a series of works about it, including excerpts from Shaykhi texts: "L'École shaykhie en théologie shi'ite" (1961a), "Terre céleste et corps de resurrection..." (1961b, pp. 282–401), "History of Islamic Philosophy" (1993, pp. 352–358), "En Islam iranien ..." (1971a, vol. 1). In Corbin's works, Karim-Khan Kirmani, who actually removed from the teachings of his prominent predecessors (including Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i) many "revolutionary" provisions for Shi'ite thought that gave Shaykhism its basic originality and specificity, or "smoothed" them with more "moderate" interpretations from the point of view of normative Shi'ite Islam, is presented as an organic successor to Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i and Sayyid Kazim Rashti.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> cf. "The old and the new Sheykhí school" (*A Traveller's Narrative ...*, p. 241, n. E). Thus, Browne wrote: "If from the bosom of the former it (i. e., The Babi Faith — Y.I.) originated and from it drew strength to a considerable extent, with the latter it was in fierce opposition" (*ibid.*).

<sup>2</sup> cf. Corbin 1961b, pp. 109, 328, 339; Corbin 1971a, p. 313, etc.

Although Corbin could not be denied insight into the esoteric ties of this teaching, his attempts to reconcile the incompatible and to consider Shaykhism as a unified and holistic phenomenon leads him to significant contradictions with the sources and sometimes highly speculative judgments. Some of these contradictions will be shown in the relevant sections of this book, but here it would be sufficient to point out Corbin's distorted understanding of the relationship between Shaykhism and the Babi Faith, and his view of them as totally opposed to one another. Such an impression might arise if by Shaykhism one understood only "late" Shaykhism, which was in sharp opposition to the Babi Faith, but the flaw in Corbin's approach to the problem, as has been noted, lies in the absence of such a division. Thus, after the French researcher expressed regret that Europe was unfortunately occupied with the Babi Faith (*on s'est occupé du bâbisme*) instead of turning its attention to Shaykhism, he asserts that "contrary to popular opinion", "which influenced even some orientalists", "the Babi Faith should not be considered a branch of Shaykhism."<sup>1</sup> These sentiments represent the quintessence of Corbin's position on this issue, which includes gross distortions of the facts and a simplistic approach to their interpretation. So, this will be dwelt with later in more detail.

Let us begin with the third claim. That the Babi Faith is not an automatic continuation of Shaykhism is obvious from the very fact that the two phenomena are different in scale. Shaykhism is a school within Islam, while the Babi Faith originally declared itself to be an independent religious system, based on a new religious revelation after Islam (and this position is quite in line with the "theory of cycles" mentioned by Sayyid Kazim; see the relevant section). It is also true that no provision of the Babi Faith can be directly derived from Shaykhism. However, this does not preclude the fact that Shaykhism in its early version did pave the way for the Babi Faith, and that it prepared the first disciples of the Bab, the vast majority of whom were from Shaykhi background, i. e., the disciples of Sayyid Kazim Rashti, nor does it exclude the possibility of a definite similarity between certain elements of the teachings of Shaykhism and the Babi Faith. Accordingly, it is inherently incorrect and based on ignoring facts, including historical ones, to bring the distinction between them as independent phenomena to the point of opposing them to each other, as is done by Corbin.

Viewed from this angle, it does not seem accidental that this scholar never mentions, even in passing, the treatise of Sayyid Kazim, *Sharh-i Qasida*, which contains an almost transparent allusion to the Bab. It must be underscored that the Bab was originally recognized and acknowledged as a bearer of a high spiritual mission by Shaykhis, more precisely by Mulla Husayn Bushru'i, and later by other Shaykhis who followed him. That this "recognition", followed by

<sup>1</sup> See Corbin 1961a, pp. 8, 22.

acceptance, occurred in accordance with Shaykhi perceptions becomes evident when one examines many Shaykhi texts, especially, but not exclusively, those that came from the pen of the founders of this school. This is despite the fact that subsequent generations of Shaykhi theologians, and Corbin being under their strong influence, have attempted to challenge it. By “some Orientalists” who were “influenced by these false notions” of a connection between Shaykhism and the Babi Faith, Corbin obviously implies primarily his distinguished and non-comparable in terms of scholarly outlook and breadth of vision predecessors, Browne and Nicolas, and this conclusion, which is in fact a slightly veiled invective, is on his conscience.

It is relevant to note that it was through interest in the Babi Faith that interest in Shaykhism was engendered in Europe, and without the former, Shaykhism, which certainly deserves proper attention as an independent subject of study, could have remained on the periphery of scholarly research.

Moving on to other works on Shaykhism, it would be relevant to note highly informative articles: “Ahsai, Shaykh Ahmad” by D. M. MacEoin and “Kāzem Rašti” by A. Eschraghi in “Encyclopædia Iranica”. Selected issues of the history and teachings of early Shaykhism are covered in MacEoin’s monograph on the Babi Faith: “The Messiah of Shiraz...” (2009). Particular provisions of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i’s teachings are considered in a number of publications by J. Cole: “The World as Text: Cosmologies of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i” (1994), “Individualism and the Spiritual Path in Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i” (1997) and others. In the present writer’s opinion, the most holistic and comprehensive presentation of the teachings of early Shaykhism to date in the West can be found in V. Rafati’s study: “The Development of Shaykhī Thought in Shi’ī Islam” (1979) published in Canada.<sup>1</sup>

In Russia and the former Soviet Union, Shaykhism, apart from individual references to it in Kazem-Bek’s book (see above) and the publication, with A. G. Tumansky’s translation, of a brief excerpt from the work of Shaykh Ahmad,<sup>2</sup> was not really studied until the early 21st century and the appearance of the present writer’s works on this subject — among which are the monograph-translation of Sayyid Kazim Rashti’s *Usul-i ‘Aqa’id: “Osnovopolagayushiye Dogmati*

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the French-language book published in 2017: D. Hermann. “*Le shaykhisme à la période qajare: Histoire sociale et doctrinale d’une École chiite*” has not been available to the present author. However, as far as the table of contents on the Internet shows, only a small part of the book is devoted to the doctrine itself (*Introduction à la doctrine shaykhie*). Special gratitude goes to S. A. Frantsuzov and A. A. Khismatulín for making available to the present writer a detailed review of this monograph (Gillon 2019).

<sup>2</sup> This passage is cited by Tumansky in the Appendix to the fundamental book of the Bahá’í religion, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, which he published with a translation. See *Kitab-e Akdes...*, pp. 50–51 (Appendix I).

Very” (“The Basic Religious Beliefs”) (2011) and the article: “Rannii Sheykhizm, Yevo Uchenie i Kontseptsia Babov—‘Vrat” (“Early Shaykhism, Its Teachings, and the Concept of the Bābs—‘Gates”) (2015).

The present work continues my series of studies on Shaykhism and summarizes previous experience in this inexhaustible field. The rich collection of works by Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i and Sayyid Kazim Rashti (mainly manuscripts, but also lithographs) in the St. Petersburg Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IOM RAS) contains a valuable collection of more than 50 works, including fundamental ones. The particular importance of this collection is that the majority of the manuscripts date from the early Shaykhism period (before 1844) and they contain no elements of “editing” from a later point of view. There are also a large number of works by Karim-Khan Kirmani and other Shaykhi authors in the collection. This study is based on primary sources, manuscripts and lithographs from this collection and other materials, including works by the present author’s predecessors. Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i’s treatises from two published volumes of his collected works: *Jawami’ al-Kalim* and *Rasa’il al-Hikma*, now available through the Internet, have also been used.

This book covers the history of Shaykhism and many significant aspects of its teachings. It is a similar, but not an exact reproduction in English of the earlier monograph: Ioannesyan Y. A. *Ocherki Sheykhizma...* (“Essays on Shaykhism...”) (2022). The second part of the book presents some of the author’s articles on the subject previously published in Russian. These articles have not previously been available to English-speaking readers; therefore, it was deemed useful to include translations of them in this book. This second part replaces Part 2 of the Russian monograph containing translations of the original sources. The Russian monograph and this book are supplemented with a large set of photographs of the most valuable manuscripts from the collection of the Institute of the Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The photographs illustrate large parts of manuscripts D 702 (*Sharh al-Ziyara al-Jami’a al-Kabira* by Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa’i), A 706 (*Hayat al-Nafs fi Hadrat al-Quds* by the same author and *al-Siyar wa’l-Suluk* by Sayyid Kazim Rashti), and A 1578 (*Risala dar ‘Aqa’id* by Muhammad b. Ibrahim al-Musavi al-Qarabaghi).

Since the works of the Shaykhi authors were written in both Arabic and Persian, a number of terms and names are presented in this monograph in two versions — the accepted Arabic used in Arabic literature and the Persian used in Iranian studies (separated by a slash). This is especially true of the rendering of words and proper names where the Arabic definite article is not used in Persian. One difference is that the “w” used in Arabic words and titles is often replaced by a “v” in the Persian. No subscript or superscript diacritical marks for Arabic and Persian terms, names, and titles of works (except in quotes from and references to other published sources) are used in this book. Translation of

the original Persian and Arabic, unless otherwise noted, is made by the present author (—Y.I.). Qur'anic quotes do not follow verbatim any particular published translation of the Qur'an.

The present writer hopes that the work will be useful to a wide range of specialists: Orientalists, religious scholars, philosophers, culturologists, etc., as well as be used in pedagogical activities of teachers of relevant disciplines in universities.

The author expresses his special gratitude to his departed senior colleagues and mentors who supported him in his research: O.F. Akimushkin and V.V. Kushev. He also extends special acknowledgement to S.A. Frantsuzov and V.A. Drozdov for their valuable comments on this monograph, and to A. Kavetsky and M. Thomas for their help with the English version of the book.



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