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RECURRENT PATTERNS IN IRANIAN RELIGIONS

FROM MAZDAISM TO SUFISM

PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROUND TABLE HELD IN
BAMBERG (30th SEPTEMBER - 4th OCTOBER 1991)

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THE STRUCTURE OF EXISTENCE IN THE BAB'S TAFSIR AND THE PERFECT MAN MOTIF

The figure of the Bab, Sayyid 'Alī Muhammad Shīrāzī, and the movement associated with his name have been the object of renewed scholarly interest over the last 20 years or so. Some excellent scholarship on the latter has been published recently and has thrown considerable light on the social history of the Bābī religion, contributing much to the task of placing the Bab and his movement within the context of early to mid-19th century Iranian history.¹ We also have a fair understanding of the broad religious motifs that are connected with the rise, propagation and eventual demise of Babism. Features of the ancient Iranian motif of Perfect Man may be discerned in the Bab who claimed, as Shī'ī Messiah, the authority to change Islamic religion. The changes envisioned by the Bab were so radical that it may be questioned whether Babism was an attempt at reformation rather than transformation. In any case, the timing for such a claim could not have been more exquisite, coming as it did precisely at the millennium of orthodox 12er Shi'ism. We know, in fact, that the Bab was only one (though perhaps the most successful) of Iranian millenarian figures who put forth such claims at this time.

Whatever success Babism may have had, we also know, was due in large part to the prior spread of the ideas and veneration of Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsā'ī (d.1826). The vast majority of the Bab's first followers were devotees of what has come to be called Shaykhism. Shaykhism had become very popular throughout Iran and for a number of reasons, some of which remain obscure, had attracted the favour and allegiance of, among others, a

¹ Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: the Making of the Babi Movement in Iran 1844-1850* Ithaca, 1989; Moojan Momen, "The Social Basis of the Bābī Uprising," *IJMES* 14 (1983), pp.157-83; idem., *The Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions, 1844-1944, Some Contemporary Western Accounts*. Oxford, 1981.

sizable segment of the Iranian merchant class. There is some evidence that Shaykhism was used by this class as a means of protesting both official religious policy and personalities as well as official government policies.² Important as they obviously are, these matters need not detain us beyond observing that this widespread support was to function, after the fact, as a kind of *preparatio* for the new religion: many Shaykhis and Shaykhi-sympathizers would eventually convert to the cause of the Bab. In time, the religion of the Bab would become transformed in Iran into a large and, until recently, thriving Baha'i community. Corbin and others have written extensively on the Shaykhi movement so that we now have a substantial, though incomplete, analysis of its literature — a literature that may be considered a synthesis of Islamic theological, philosophical, and mystical traditions.³ The teachings of the leaders of this movement preserve and propound a distinctive spirituality perhaps best described as a latter-day version of primitive Islamic gnosticism.

The writings of the Bab (as distinct from the history of Babism) have not yet attracted the same scholarly attention. Inasmuch as his movement had such a profound influence on Iran in the 19th century, it is important that we gain a better idea of the religious ideas contained in his writings and the relationship between these ideas and Islamic religion in general and Shi'ism in particular. But more interesting perhaps for historians of religion, a study of his works, particularly the earliest ones, will help chart the relatively recent re-enactment of a process long recognized in the historical development of a religious tradition. I am of course referring to the process whereby "heresy" eventually becomes "orthodoxy".⁴ One particularly interesting feature of these writings is the way in which the Bab has used the language of Islamic mystical philosophy to express his own religious vision as it had developed at the time of the work under discussion. This vision entails a number of features common to apocalyptic literature in general: a concern with cosmology and primordial events, the recollection of the past, the employment of a peculiar type of *ex eventu* scriptural interpretation/prophecy, persecution, the description of and judgement upon the forces of good and evil, and concern with otherworldly beings.⁵ For the purposes of this paper we will be concerned primarily

² Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran*, Syracuse, 1982.

³ E.g., Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, Paris, 1971-2, vol. 4, pp. 203-300; Vahid Rafati, *The Development of Shaykhi Thought in Shi'i Islam*, Ann Arbor (UMI), 1979.

⁴ See Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions*, Cambridge, 1987.

⁵ Other elements common to apocalyptic literature, such as cosmic transformation, resurrection, concern with the afterlife may be read "between the lines" of the present work but would become more prominent, in their own distinctive way, in later writings.

with cosmology insofar as this is implied in the ontological theory known as the Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujūd*) associated with the name of Ibn 'Arabi (d.1240) and his school. The purpose of this paper is to point out the way in which the language and concerns of *wahdat al-wujūd* were employed by the Bab for his own particular purpose. Before turning to the Bab's writings, it is necessary to briefly recount the main outlines of *wahdat al-wujūd* and to introduce a number of those key terms that are used when it is discussed by Ibn 'Arabi's commentators. In this we will be concerned exclusively with selected terms that occupy an important place in the Bab's work under discussion here.

Wahdat al-wujūd

For Ibn al-'Arabi and his followers, the Oneness of God's Being and the consequent oneness of everything that exists dominate all other considerations. In their eyes, being or existence belongs only to God; only God truly *is*. Other things exist in a derivative or illusory manner; but ultimately, to the extent they do exist, their existence is God's own Being, which is One. There cannot be two existents in any real sense, so all existent things are theophanies of the One Being. Since Being is One Reality, all things are one to the very extent that they partake of existence.⁶

Central to an elaboration by his followers of this basic spiritual apprehension (one that was to provide the inspiration for much of Ibn 'Arabi's writings throughout his life) is the motif of presences (sing. *ḥadra*). The various presences account for the various degrees of existence as they are manifested or as they operate in the world. They describe an ontological hierarchy from the highest to the lowest through which Abstract or Absolute Being acquires form or "entification". This hierarchy is headed by Pure Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*), also called the "Essence" (*dhāt*), or the "unseen He-ness" (*ghayb al-huwiyya*). The human mind is incapable of knowing or saying anything meaningful about this level. In fact, al-Qūnawi (d.1274), known as Ibn 'Arabi's foremost disciple, held that Absolute Being is too exalted to be referred to as a level or "presence".⁷ Later commentators, such as al-Farghāni (d. ca. 1300), were willing to designate it as such, namely as the level or "presence" of Exclusive Unity

For a recent discussion of the nature of apocalypse see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*, Crossroad: New York, 1989.

⁶ Chittick, "The Five Divine Presences," *Muslim World*, 72 (1982), p.108.

⁷ Chittick, p.111.

(*aḥadiyya*). This is "God" as he knows Himself. It is only at the next stage, the stage of Divinity (*ulūhiyya*), also known as the level of the Inclusive Unity (*al-wāḥidiyya* or *al-waḥdāniyya*), or the level of God's comprehensive knowledge, that Pure Being expresses itself through the divine names and attributes. This "disagreement" amongst Ibn 'Arabi's followers has led to the presences being sometimes counted as five and sometimes as six. What is important is that the remaining levels of being, those of the spirit, the soul, the body, together with the divine level, culminate in the "presence" of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). The idea of the Perfect Man then is intimately bound up with such discussions, even if it is not explicitly mentioned in the course of them.⁸ The true nature of the Perfect Man will, of course, differ depending upon how the highest levels of Being are understood. In short, if the stage beyond entification is maintained as a "presence" then the Perfect Man acquires some of the characteristics of an "Incarnation". The Perfect Man embraces all levels of existence and in this embracing provides a means of communication amongst them. The Perfect Man is the mediator between God (however construed) and the World, between the Unseen and the seen. He is sometimes referred to as the *isthmus* (*barzakh*) between the two. He is the mirror by which and in which creation sees God and the eye by means of which God sees creation. It is only through the Perfect Man that the world becomes charged with existence and knowledge.

The process by which Being is mediated throughout all these levels is *tajalli*: the self-manifestation of Being. *Tajalli* occurs to and in the various places of manifestation (*mazāhir* "theophanies") as they are ranged in their own respective hierarchical positions throughout the universe. Prior to the ontological event of manifestation, these things are nonexistent, except in the "mind" of God as pre-existent archetypes (*al-a'yān al-thābita*). According to their own capacities for true existence they acquire a measure of being. Even here, however, they represent only "potential being" (*wujūd imkāni*) as distinct from Absolute Being (*wujūd muṭlaq*)⁹ It is through their own love and knowledge of Being/God that this potential being takes on life and acquires greater existential intensity through (conscious) participation, however limited, in Being. This love and knowledge is implied by the single word *walāya*, which, as it happens, denotes authority and allegiance. In the writings of the Bab, the greater one's devotion to the Imāms' authority (*walāya*), (a devotion nourished by love and knowledge of them), the greater will be one's participation in existence. Such love and knowledge is stimulated first by one's pre-existence as an object of God's

⁸ See for example the reference to al-Jandi in Chittick, p.122.

⁹ Cf. Ibn Sinā's distinction between *Wājib al-wujūd* and *imkān al-wujūd*.

knowledge. Thus for all existent things (*mawjūdāt*), *walāya* (knowledge and love) accrues 'to them through them' (*la-hum bi-him*).

This all too brief description of *waḥdat al-wujūd* will serve to provide some background for the following examination of the Bab's writings. It should be repeated that one of the main objects of the *waḥdat al-wujūd* theory is to account for the place of the Prophet as Perfect Man. It should also be born in mind that it was al-Farghāni's classification of the presences into six separate levels that has, according to Chittick, exercised the most widespread influence and that 'in order to maintain five Presences and avoid having to expand them to six, the all-comprehensive ontological level to which he refers [namely, the level of the Perfect Man] was often ignored.'¹⁰ This may help to explain why the epithet does not figure in the work under discussion.

The Bab first proclaimed himself the focus of an Islamic apocalypse in 1844/1260. Until recently, it had long been thought that the Bab's first major work was the one through which he made this proclamation, namely the *Tafsir sūrat Yūsuf*, known as *Qayyūm al-asmā'*. This book, cast in the form of a commentary on the 12th chapter of the Qur'an, is mainly concerned with establishing the author's messianic authority. Although it is quite long it contains very little of what might be called a clear and systematic doctrinal statement. Its style and contents, called by some an "unintelligible rhapsody,"¹¹ may be briefly described as an invocation of symbols and imagery, structured around the Quranic material, in a powerful and lyrical testimony to a new advent.

Thanks to some recent, diligent bibliographic research we have learned that in fact the first major composition by the Bab was indeed a commentary on the Qur'an, but one of a character strikingly different from the *Qayyūm al-asmā'*.¹² This earlier work, entitled the *Tafsir sūrat al-Baqara*, which exists only in manuscript, is a commentary on the first two chapters of the Qur'an.¹³ Though it is quite unusual vis a vis the greater *tafsir* tradition, it is far more expository of "doctrine" and belief than the later work. It is therefore enormously valuable in shedding light on the nature of the Bab's

¹⁰ Chittick, p. 119-20.

¹¹ E.G. Browne quoted in B.T. Lawson, "Interpretation as Revelation: The Qur'an Commentary of Sayyid 'Alī Muḥammad Shirāzi, the Bāb (1819-1850)," in A. Rippin (ed.) *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, Oxford, 1988, pp.223-253 (p.224).

¹² Denis MacEoin, *A Revised Survey of the Sources for Early Bābī Doctrine and History*, (Cambridge University thesis, 1977), now published as *The Sources For Early Bābī Doctrine and History*, Leiden, 1992.

¹³ All references to this work are to a photocopy of a manuscript from the library of the late H.M. Balyuzi. This work will be cited as *Baq* followed by a page number.

thought as it had developed prior to the time of his claim to be the centre of the long-awaited *zuhūr* of 12er Shi'ism.

The Bab begins this earlier *tafsīr* by acknowledging his Shaykhī teacher, the recently deceased leader of the Shaykhiyya, Sayyid Kāzīm Rashtī (d.1843) in affectionate terms, (*mu'allimī 'azīzī*). Indeed, he tells us that he was inspired to compose this commentary upon learning of the Sayyid's death. We should not be surprised, therefore, to discover in this work strong traces of the same Islamic gnosticism that characterizes Shaykhī literature. Central to all of the Bab's writing in this early work, is the figure of the Imām/Prophet and the institution of spiritual guardianship or *walāya*. This institution represents both the circumference of the Bab's religion and its centre. Under its heading, and only under its heading, do all other religious topics acquire their meaning and value.¹⁴

The word carries a cluster of meanings such as guardianship, friendship, authority, love, allegiance, and line of descent. Emphasis on *walāya* in the Bab's first book depends heavily on the theories of Ibn 'Arabī, (himself influenced here by the earlier Iranian, al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī, b. in Khurasān in the 3rd/9th, d. ca. 285/898), as these theories had been given their distinctive Shī'ī reading by such men as Rajab al-Bursī, Ḥaydar Amulī and Ibn Abī Jumhūr in the 14th and 15th centuries. By the time the Bab was writing, circa 1840, Shī'ī mystical philosophy had reached its highest culmination in the work of Mullā Ṣadrā (d.1640). This had in turn been severely criticized by Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī who objected to a number of Ṣadrā's formulations. The purpose of this criticism, for the present discussion, is to preserve the Prophet and the Imāms as representatives of the highest plane to which the human being may have access. We will leave aside the question of whether or not al-Aḥsā'ī fully understood Ṣadrā's philosophy and simply assume that he perceived there a threat to what he considered right belief.

The Bab, who shared Shaykh Aḥmad's preoccupation with the "utterness" of the Imāms, was not a professional scholar. He was in the first place a merchant, but a merchant with more than a casual interest in religious studies. Therefore, this book by the Bab is much less scholastic than other typically Shaykhī works. The only two literary sources referred to in it are the Qur'an and the (admittedly vast body of) Traditions (*akhbār*) sacred to Shi'ism. Apart from the mention of Kāzīm Rashtī, and one fleeting reference to a work by Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī, the Bab mentions no other learned work or personality. However, as will be seen presently, the ideas found in the *Tafsīr* are conveyed through the standard technical

¹⁴ For a general discussion of the word see Hermann Landolt, "Walāya," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, (Ellade, ed.) New York, 1987, vol. 15.

terminology of the distinct tradition of Islamic mystical philosophy mentioned above.

The *Tafsīr* treats a wide variety of topics; the subject of the structure of existence has been singled out for special attention because of its fundamental importance for all other topics, particularly the question of the Perfect Man theme with which it has a characteristic and distinctive, if unspoken, relationship. This relationship may be summarized as follows. True existence (*wujūd*) belongs to God alone. But, by virtue of their special relationship to God, the Prophet and the Imāms enjoy a degree of existence. It is only by devotion to the Family of God (*āl allāh* in the Bab's somewhat distinctive usage), namely the Prophet and the Imāms, that the average human being acquires any existence whatsoever. In a passage reminiscent of the one quoted above, the Bab affirms that all things other than God are non-existent:

He is not comparable with anything, and there is no knowledge of Him directly, neither by inspired intuition (*kashf*) nor by discursive proof (*istidlāl*), because whatever is other than Him is non-existent (*ma'dūm*) by comparison with Him. "And He is God. He was and nothing was with Him. He is now as He was."¹⁵ So how can He be known by one who does not exist? Nevertheless, He is known, insofar as such is possible, in the contingent world [viz. through the Prophet and the Imāms]. "There is no distinction in this knowledge except that [the Imāms] are His servants and His creation."¹⁶ He is known by means of signs, and is witnessed by means of tokens. This knowledge is the proper understanding of the transcendence (*tanzīh*) of the Living, the Ancient. At the level of contingency nothing else is possible.¹⁷

The point here is that the only connection between the "non-existent" world and true existence is the Prophet and the Imāms, the bearers of divine guardianship or *walāya*. It is therefore through this spiritual authority that the average human being acquires any existence at all. And such existence is in direct proportion to the degree one has acknowledged the authority of the Imāms through an ever renewed assent to the sacred covenant. In the Qur'an, of course, the primordial covenant is depicted as the day God extracted from the loins of Adam the "seeds" of all future generations and confronted them with the question: AM I NOT YOUR LORD? (Qur'an 7:172):

¹⁵ Hadīth Qudsi plus words ascribed to Junayd (d.910). One of several standard Sufi dicta repeated frequently and fluently throughout this work of the Bab's.

¹⁶ *Khabar* of the Imāms, variously ascribed.

¹⁷ Baq 10.

the *yāwm al-mithāq*. In the context of the Bab's *Tafsir*, this primordial covenant is reflected in the famous event at Ghadir Khumm when, according to Shi'i tradition, the Prophet named 'Alī as his rightful successor, Caliph and Imām. The Bab, as a Shi'i Muslim, sees the history of the Muslim community as symbolic. The refusal of the majority of Muslims to accept 'Alī as Caliph was not merely an event in the religious-political life of the *umma* in 632 a.d. Rather it was of such supreme importance that its true significance must be understood within a "metahistorical" context.¹⁸ It is, therefore, this "later" event at Ghadir Khumm that acquires all of the cosmic and ontological significance associated with the Quranic verse mentioned above. Those who are beyond the pale of this metaphysical covenant are indeed completely non-existent.

Explaining the command of God to the angels: BOW YOURSELVES TO ADAM!, [Qur'an 2:34] the Bab says that the esoteric interpretation (*tafsir al-bā'in*) reads the speaker of the command to be not God but Muḥammad, while the angels are the seeds of all created things (*dharr al-ashyā' fī mashhad al-ūlā*), an explicit reference to the language of Qur'an 7:172.¹⁹ The act of prostration is the confession of servitude to the *walāya* of God, which is equated with allegiance to 'Alī, and the disavowal of all else.

The Quranic Adam, here, is none other than 'Alī. At this level *walāya* is also characterized as the *walāya* of the Exclusive Unity (*aḥadiyya*) belonging to 'Alī. 'Alī, then, is the symbol of primordial belief (*imān*). The angels, as mentioned above, are taken as the seeds or potential of all created things destined to develop into actuality. They are also referred to as the pre-existent apparitional forms (*ashbāh*) and the ontic shadows (*azilla*). The primordial drama had its historical re-enactment or analogue on the day of al-Ghadir when Muḥammad appointed 'Alī as his successor. At that time the ANGELS were Salmān, Abū Dharr and Miqdad, the stalwart supporters of 'Alī and the historical nucleus of Shi'ism.²⁰

At Qur'an 2: 62, the term Absolute *Walāya* (*al-walāya al-muṭlaqa*) is associated with the entire Family of God (*āl allāh*), because they are sanctified servants who do nothing of their own wills, but rather the will of God.

¹⁸ See Corbin.

¹⁹ *Baq* 131. The term *mashhad al-ūlā* is determined by the fact that *al-ūlā* ("pre-existence") is one of three technical terms which refer to separate historical-spiritual cycles. The other two are *al-dunyā* and *al-ākhirā*. These words occur in a verse of a visitation prayer for the Imāms and are commented upon at length by Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsā'i in *Sharh al-Ziyāra al-Jāmi'a al-Kabira*, Tehran, 1276 [1859] pp.68-70.

²⁰ *Baq* 131.

SURELY THEY THAT BELIEVE, AND THOSE OF JEWRY, AND THE CHRISTIANS, AND THOSE SABAEANS, WHOSO BELIEVES IN GOD AND THE LAST DAY, AND WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS — THEIR WAGE AWAITS THEM WITH THEIR LORD, AND NO FEAR SHALL BE ON THEM, NEITHER SHALL THEY SORROW. (All Quranic translations are from Arberry.)

The WORKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS mentioned in this verse therefore are described as being all included in the act of recognizing the requirements of Absolute *Walāya*, so that it is quite logical that we are told that THEIR WAGE AWAITS THEM WITH 'Alī. In the context of the verse itself, the suggestion is that even non-Muslims are implicated in the responsibility of recognizing 'Alī. This offers an indication of the way in which "absolute" (*muṭlaqa*) is to be understood here. Rather than "nonidentified", or "abstract", as is the case when applied to the utmost level of Being by Ibn 'Arabi's commentators (cf. *muṭlaq*), the adjective is used to mean "without exception," "non-negotiable". It is 'Alī to whom allegiance is due, and this to the absolute exclusion of all others.

Such is the nature of the Bab's transformation of the abstract terminology of high Islamic theosophy, where *muṭlaq* denotes the non-differentiated, infinitely unknowable divine essence, into a "confessional language". The implications of the Bab's use of these terms may be briefly summarized as follows. The "exclusivity" of the term *aḥadiyya*, sometimes translated as the Divine Exclusive Unity, and the "inclusivity" of *wahidiyya* "Inclusive Unity" have also acquired a sectarian or confessional meaning in addition to their original (purely?) ontological meaning. Whereas for Ibn 'Arabi and his school the terms refer to different modes or presences of the Absolute, one ontologically prior to the other, they are used here to describe the more exclusive unity of the Shi'a in contrast with the greater or more Inclusive Unity of the larger Muslim community. This usage is reminiscent of earlier terminology used by the Shi'a to distinguish themselves from other Muslims, for example "elite" (*khaṣṣ*) and "common" (*'amm*). In the following passages it is clear that the original meaning is also preserved and that the Bab wishes us to see a direct relationship between ontology and belief. In this way the apocalyptic themes of "cosmology" and "judgement of good and evil" entail and amplify each other.

At Qur'an 2:83, the philosophically determined term Universal *Walāya* (*al-walāya al-kulliyā*) occurs.

AND WHEN WE TOOK COMPACT WITH THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL: 'YOU SHALL NOT SERVE ANY SAVE GOD; AND TO BE GOOD TO PARENTS, AND THE NEAR KINSMAN, AND TO ORPHANS, AND TO THE NEEDY; AND SPEAK

GOOD TO MEN, AND PERFORM THE PRAYER, AND PAY THE ALMS.' THEN YOU TURNED AWAY, ALL BUT A FEW OF YOU, SWERVING ASIDE.

The Bab says that God is speaking about His TAKING COMPACT with all created things in the eight paradises, to recognize the *walāya* of 'Alī.²¹ The first of these paradises is the Sea of Unity (*lujjat al-wahda*), and is characterized by the command: YOU SHALL NOT SERVE ANY SAVE GOD "without any reference".²² That this level corresponds in some ways to the level of absolute transcendence of Being is born out elsewhere in the *Tafsīr* where the Bab describes the eighth paradise as that which is isolated (*fī khalwa*) from all paradises and all paradises are isolated from it.²³ In the second paradise the COMPACT was taken by means of recognizing the Universal *Walāya* of the PARENTS, i.e., Muḥammad and 'Alī, who are respectively, the symbols of universal fatherhood and motherhood. Such recognition, the Bab says, is in reality the GOOD mentioned in the verse, because to do good means to do good to all according to what each merits. The GOOD which these particular PARENTS deserve has only been hinted at, because were the Bab to openly describe it (*bi'l-tasrīh*), the prattlers/ naysayers (*mubṭilūn*) would doubt it.²⁴ The centrality of 'Alī in his reading of the Qur'an is further illustrated in the Bab's commentary on Qur'an 2:54.

AND WHEN MOSES SAID TO HIS PEOPLE, 'MY PEOPLE, YOU HAVE DONE WRONG AGAINST YOURSELVES BY YOUR TAKING THE CALF; NOW TURN TO YOUR CREATOR AND SLAY ONE ANOTHER. THAT WILL BE BETTER IN YOUR CREATOR'S SIGHT, AND HE WILL TURN TO YOU; TRULY HE TURNS, AND IS ALL-COMPASSIONATE.'

[This verse means] When 'Alī said to those who abandoned the vast sea of his *walāya*, 'you have done wrong against yourselves' by your lingering in the lesser sea of the veils of glory (*bahr al-subuhāt*)²⁵ and allusions. So turn away from the Calf by taking that which will direct you to the *tawḥīd* of your Lord and return to the divine *walāya* (*al-walāya al-ilāhīya*) by turning away from the love of anything but it.

And slay your worldly egos (*inniyyātakum al'imkāniyya*) which have veiled you from attaining to your Creator. Because

²¹ Baq 223. On the hierarchy of paradises in this work see B.T. Lawson, "The Qur'an Commentary of the Bab," Unpublished thesis, McGill, 1987, pp.146-186.

²² *bi-lā ishāra*, a brief quotation from the Hadīth Kumayl.

²³ Baq 9.

²⁴ Baq 224.

²⁵ Another reference to the Hadīth Kumayl.

my *walāya* is the vast sea of the Exclusive Unity (*aḥadiyya*). And THAT WILL BE BETTER FOR YOU IN YOUR CREATOR'S SIGHT.²⁶

Here the negative attributes of the human soul are indicated, a theme repeated often in the *Tafsīr*. For example, in the commentary on Qur'an 2:14 THEIR SATANS is glossed as *anfusi-kum*.²⁷ At Qur'an 2:44 the Bab says that those who have FORGOTTEN THEMSELVES are those who live in the (lesser) Inclusive Unity (*wāḥidiyya*) even though God taught them that "the Truth is with 'Alī".²⁸ 'Alī is referred to as the sign of the *nafs* of God, and even though this sign is created (*makhluq*), there is no distinction between it and the One who created it (*munshi'-hā*).²⁹

In his interpretation of Qur'an 2:45 the Bab again employs the term *inniyya* ("ego") to describe that which must be completely effaced in order that the servant become a place for the appearance (*mazhar*) of the Inclusive Unity, here apparently positive, and become TRULY HUMBLE.³⁰ At Qur'an 2:34, in the course of a very long commentary³¹ on the important figure of Iblis and his refusal to bow before Adam the Bab makes the following comments.

God has placed the manifestations (*mazāhir*) of His sovereignty in all things. To manifest knowledge (*'ilm*) he has appointed Adam as the agency of received lordship, and Iblis has been appointed as the agency of polytheistic ego throughout all the worlds. . . . The believers are the victorious angels, in them is

²⁶ Baq 185. The terminology in this section shows some distinct parallels with the *Tafsīr al-Ṣāfi* (Fayḍ-i Kāshāni, Litho, Iran, 1856) although none of the *hadīths* in the corresponding passage have been quoted.

²⁷ Baq 62.

²⁸ Reference to the well-known *hadīth*: "The truth is with 'Alī and 'Alī is with the Truth, it turns wherever he turns," cited in full by the Bab, Baq 16.

²⁹ Baq 172-3. A reference to another oft-cited Shi'i *hadīth*: "There is no difference between God and the Imams except they are His creation."

³⁰ Baq 173. Nūr 'Alī Shah speaks in similar terms about the level of Inclusive Unity; see Michel de Miras, *La méthode spirituelle d'un maître du Soufisme iranien, Nūr 'Alī Shāh, circa 1748-1798*, Paris, 1973, pp.324-25. Cf. also the verse ascribed to Hallāj:

bayni wa baynaka 'unniyun yuzāhimuni

'arfa' bi-'anniika 'anniyi min al-bayni

(*Akhbār al-Hallāj*, p.76)

The verse is translated as:

Entre moi et Toi, il y a un "je suis" qui me tourment,

Ah! ôte par Ton "Je suis", mon "je suis" hors d'entre nous deux.

(*ibid.*, French text, p.93.)

³¹ Baq 131-150, or approximately 1/15 of the entire commentary.

the dimension of lordship while the dimension of ego is absent from them.

At Qur'an 2:35, in which Adam and his wife are forbidden to approach the TREE, the following comment is made:

That is the Muhammadan Tree in which the sign of the Exclusive Unity appears. And it is the highest aspect of the Will. *Adam al-ülā* and HER MATE ³² APPROACHED IT through knowledge (*'ilman*), not deed (*lā 'amalan*), and thus BECAME WRONGDOERS.

The meaning of their DRAWING NIGH, is a property of potential being (*imkān*) which is the agency of ego that was in them. Thus their DRAWING NIGH means through worldly thoughts (*bi'l-khutūr al-imkāni*)³³ after God had taught them that the Tree of Ego which grows out of the earth has no stability (*qarār*, cf. Qur'an.14:26) [and to] not draw nigh unto it with even a single glance toward it. Because the signs of *tawhīd* are the signs of Muḥammad which God manifested to him by means of him (*lahu bi-hi*).

THEN THEY DREW NIGH THIS TREE because of the ego and . . . THEY BECAME WRONGDOERS. This wrong is that which God related to them and is a result of their DRAWING NIGH to the Originator of Origination (*mubdi' al-ibdā'*, viz, Muḥammad, as in the "Muhammadan Tree"). In all other cases this wrong refers to an impious approach to the depth of the Exclusive Unity, and

³² This grammatical anomaly is a reflex of those verses in the Qur'an which speak of God's having created mankind from a single soul (*nafs* = feminine noun) AND FROM IT ITS MATE (*wa khalaqa minhā zawjahā*) [Qur'an 4:1;7:179; cf. 39:6]. By this allusion, the Bab seeks to identify the "single soul" as Adam. As for *Adam al-ülā* (*sic* all mss.), it may be seen as deriving from comments such as those *ad* Qur'an 2:34 (*Baq*, p.131, cited above) which speaks of the *mashhad al-ülā* or the "place of witnessing", which pertains to the primordial *yawm*, and where Adam is identified as 'Ali. See the discussion of hierarchies in this work found in B.T. Lawson, "The Qur'an Commentary of Sayyid 'Ali Muḥammad Shirāzi, The Bab," Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, McGill University, Montreal, 1987, pp.115-186, and the reference to the eighth or highest heaven as *al-jannat al-ülā*. The frequency of the adjective in such unlikely places is probably a function of its status as a technical term in Shaykh Aḥmad's lexicon.

³³ *Baq* 151-152. *Khutūr*, (usually *khawāḥiṣ*) is of course another classical term of Sufi "psychology." According to the Iranian mystic, Najm al-Din al-Kubrā (617/1220), they are the ideas which occur spontaneously to the soul, particularly in a state of retreat, and may be either divine or satanic in inspiration. This is mentioned in Schimmel, *Dimensions*, p.256.

had the first two not made bold to DRAW NIGH the *mubdi'*, then others would not have committed this sin either.³⁴

From such statements it becomes clear that Muḥammad is seen as something much more than "prophet" or "messenger" and that God is elevated beyond all discussion. This is obviously not an innovation of the Bab's, but rather the nature of his piety, a piety with a very long history indeed.³⁵ And if Muḥammad is thus elevated, then the position of 'Ali is also elevated, as has been seen.

Another factor that appears to have a determining role in one's participation in true existence is the soul and the degree to which it becomes irradiated by the self-manifestation (*tajalli*) of God, the Only True Existent. It is, therefore, the "ego" that prevents the soul from participating in true existence represented by the *walāya* of 'Ali. The subject of "ego" (*inniya*) or negative self, recurs in the comparatively short commentaries on a series of verses, which continue the ordeal of Moses in the wilderness with the Children of Israel.³⁶ The point here is that refusal by the followers of false *walāya* to accept the *walāya* of 'Ali, as announced as binding by the Prophet at Ghadir Khumm, is a direct result of the ego, specifically "their uprooted, lifeless egos" and "other selfish interests". The first designation takes the modifier from Qur'an 14:26: AND THE LIKENESS OF A CORRUPT WORD IS AS A CORRUPT TREE UPROOTED FROM THE EARTH HAVING NO STABILITY.

The Qur'an here is again read, *ex eventu*, as speaking about the fracturing of the Muslim community at the death of Muḥammad. The "metahistorical" *sabab al-nuzūl* (translated here as "moyen" rather than "cause") for Qur'an 2:67 is again the famous speech at Ghadir Khumm, and is read as referring to the historical Moses in only a secondary sense. This reflects the spirit, if not the letter, of earlier Shi'i commentary, which reads the verse as referring to the "excellence of Muḥammad and his family".³⁷

The true test of the soul (*nafs*) is in how it responds to this challenge to the unity of the *umma*. The *nafs* as an organ of perception and spiritual or psychological principle is related to others such as the *fu'ād*, *qalb*, *rūh*, and

³⁴ *Baq* 152. This appears to be, among other things, an echo of the famous *hadith*: "The good deeds of the pious ones are the sins of the near ones." For antecedents of such terminology as *mubdi' al-ibdā'* see Henry Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne*. (Bibl. Iranienne, 9) Paris and Tehran, 1961.

³⁵ See, for example, Corbin, *Trilogie Ismaélienne*, Paris & Tehran, 1961.

³⁶ Q.2:67-73 (*Baq* 201-5).

³⁷ *Tafsir al-Burhān*, v.1, pp.108-12. *Baq* 200-1.

'*aql*, of which it may be thought to be the lowest.³⁸ The earliest mention of *qalb* is in the following verse:

IN THEIR HEARTS IS A SICKNESS, AND THERE AWAITS THEM A PAINFUL CHASTISEMENT FOR THEY HAVE CRIED LIES. [QUR'AN 2:10]

The HEART (*qalb*) is the foremost place of appearance (*mazhar*) of the *fu'ād* and is in reality two hearts. One is the place of the First Intellect, which is the HEART of Muḥammad, and the other is its opposite which is the place of Universal Ignorance.³⁹ . . . The first is the source of all good, and one of its branches is *tawḥīd* and all righteousness. The second is the source of all evil, and one of its results is the rejection of God It represents the totality of all the hearts of all disbelievers The way to [the first] is utterly blocked; but a "First Intellect" which tells the story in the contingent world about what is in the heart of Muḥammad is 'Ali.

'Ali said about this primal universal divine soul (*al-naḥs al-ulūhiyya al-kullīyya al-awwaliyya*): "It is a divine power and a simple essence which lives with the Essence. Its source is the Intellect. It begins from it and summons on its behalf Its return is to it whenever it is perfected and becomes like it. From it begin all existing things (*mawjūdāt*), and to it they ultimately return. Thus it is the exalted⁴⁰ essence of God and the Tree of Repentance and the Lote-tree beyond which there is no passing, and the Garden of Refuge. He who recognizes it will never err and he who is ignorant of it errs and trespasses."⁴¹

In a very long *ḥadīth* which preserves a conversation between the sixth Imām, al-Ṣādiq, and his disciple Mufaḍḍal, which the Bab quotes⁴² during the course of his commentary on Qur'an 2:27, a number of features of the intellect are further identified. Mufaḍḍal asks the Sixth Imām:

³⁸ This is in line with the classical Sufi scale. In another work, the Bab seems to use *naḥs* for the totality of spiritual or human faculties. See his earlier *Risāla fi al-sulūk*, p.1, where the four principles of the soul are *qalb*, *fu'ād*, *rūh*, and *jism*. In this context, these four correspond respectively to the four supports of religion: *tawḥīd*, *nubūwa*, *walāya*, and *shī'a* which may be thought in turn to correspond to *ḥubb*, *ḥabīb*, *muḥibb*, and *maḥbūb*, the four signs from the manifestation of the Family of God which are "in you".

³⁹ The opposition of '*aql* and *jahl* has occupied the minds of Shi'i authors from earliest times. See, e.g., Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, v.1, pp.10-29: *Kitāb al-'aql wa'l-jahl*.

⁴⁰ A characteristic pun meant to evoke the name of 'Ali.

⁴¹ *Baq* 58-60.

⁴² *Baq* 96-104.

How is it that meaning abstracted from any form can occur in my mind? And can the Essence be imagined, or divided, or partitioned or changed . . . or fancied in the intellects as moving or at rest? And how can the Unseen appear "mixing" with weak creation? And how is the created thing able to regard the Creator, considering the weakness of created things?

al-Ṣādiq said: O Mufaḍḍal! IN THE CREATION OF THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH AND THE SEPARATION OF NIGHT AND DAY ARE SIGNS FOR THOSE POSSESSED OF MINDS. [2:164] O Mufaḍḍal! Our knowledge is terribly abstruse (*ṣa'b mustaṣ'ab*) and our secret much too difficult for the tongue to speak of in any but the most allusive language. Whatever our Shi'a knows, the same is according to their cognizance of us and their knowledge of us. Away with him who transmits what he does not understand and believes that which does not agree with reason or has not matured in the mind.⁴³

Here we see a kind of syzygy of reason and revelation in which the '*aql* is indispensable for right religion, although it appears that on its own it is unable to properly register the Unseen. As is the case with other faculties, or principles, the intellect is two-edged. Not only is it quite clear that the '*aql* is only profitable insofar as it used to contemplate the Imāms, but that it is also capable of leading to error. It would appear that the *naḥs*, *fu'ād*, *qalb*, *ḥubb*, and '*aql* are equally incapable on their own and must be assisted through the Imām in some way to receive "knowledge/existence".

The *fu'ād* is described by the Bab as the "highest perceptive organ of man." At Qur'an 2:8, the Bab says that the "name of the hidden one" (*ism al-maknūn*) is the "place where the Shi'a testify to the covenant of love" [for the Imāms which is binding upon them] (*mashḥad 'ahd al-maḥabba li'l-shi'a*). Its station (*maqām*) is the *fu'ād* where the Ḥujja (the hidden Imām) causes this love to appear.⁴⁴ Later at Qur'an 2:97, the Bab says that the HEART (*qalb*) is the first thing which was produced through the process

⁴³ *Baq* 97: The expression *ṣa'bun mustaṣ'abun* is also associated with the variant: *inna ḥadīth al-Muḥammad ṣa'bun mustaṣ'abun lā yu'minu bi-hi illā malakun muqarrabun aw nabīyyun mursalan aw 'abdun imtāhana 'llāhu qalba-hu li'l-imān*, and others to which Kulaynī has devoted a separate chapter: *Kāfi*, v.1, pp.401-2. The long *ḥadīth* quoted by the Bab, for which the quotation is something of an introduction, is not mentioned here and I have so far been unable to trace it elsewhere. Traditions transmitted through Mufaḍḍal are sometimes thought to be tainted because of his supposed Khawābiya allegiances; see the references in Kolberg, "An unusual Shi'i isnad," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975) p.147.

⁴⁴ *Baq* 51. The idea is that it is only the *fu'ād* that is touched somehow by the Imām. Another reading might suggest that it is love for the Shi'a itself, presumably incumbent upon believers, which enables the heart to recognize the Imām.

of Origination (*ibdā'*), and GABRIEL was appointed by God to carry to the HEART that which is SENT DOWN from the *fu'ād*.⁴⁵ Here the *fu'ād* appears to be beyond the contingent world, which poses the problem of how it can function as a place of testimony (*mashhad*) for the Shi'a. But it should be remembered that this HEART is Muḥammad's ("*qalbika*" and so perhaps in this case it is the heart of 'Alī) and presumably qualitatively different from others. Unfortunately, none of the several quranic verses which employ the word *fu'ād* are in the *sūra* of *Baqara*. In view of the general style of his *Tafsīr*, it is likely that the Bab would have described several hierarchical levels of the *fu'ād*, had the occasion arose, in which further details of its function would have become clear.

In sum, it is the soul (*nafs*) of the Prophet and the Imāms that is the channel for the self-manifestation of God. This soul is on a different ontological level than its counterpart in the common believer.

Ecstasy and Existence

It will be of interest to notice the treatment by the Bab of a subject of some importance, namely *wijdān* or ecstasy, which appears in three passages of the *tafsīr*. At Qur'an 2: 29 the Bab says the following:

As for the sign of the Exclusive Unity — it is in all things. And even if there is composition in their [the Imāms'] knowledge, God will remove whatever was causing spiritual deficiency⁴⁶ at the moment of ecstasy ('*inda wijdān*). Nor [at this time] will there be in them any aspect of mixture or plurality, because they [at such time] are a proof (*dalīl*) of the Living, the Self-subsisting. . . . No one knows Him and none understands His mode except Him. Nevertheless, that which is known (*ma'rūf*) is His Will [i.e., Muḥammad and the Imāms as the personifications of the Divine Will, *al-mashiyya*] and the intended ultimate goal of all "creation" (*ghāyat al-ikmān*) as a result His bounty in all regions according to [their respective spiritual capacities to receive] the divine manifestations of His Will.

Towards the end of his commentary on Qur'an 2:35, the Bab makes the following statement:

So when Adam DREW NIGH the Tree of Reality [which was] the manifestation of Fāṭima in the precincts of Being, he disobeyed

⁴⁵ *Baq* 239.

⁴⁶ *Baq* 115: *iftiqār*. Izutsu translates the word as "ontological need". (Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, Berkely and Los Angeles, 1983, p. 168.)

his Lord because God had commanded him not to DRAW NIGH unto her except through an ecstatic experience, because at the time of such an experience the one who DRAWS NIGH is [in fact] the TREE and nothing else.⁴⁷

Here the Bab seizes upon what might otherwise appear as the relatively accidental grammatical gender of TREE to introduce a reference to Fāṭima who is accounted one of the Family of God and therefore represents the same ontological intensity associated by him with the Prophet and the Imāms. Commenting on the quranic WHOSO FOLLOWS MY GUIDANCE (*man tabi'a hudā'i*) at verse 38, the Bab says:

FOLLOWING (*al-tabi'iyya*) has several degrees. "The paths to it (*ilayhā*) are as numerous as the souls of the creatures."⁴⁸ . . . I testify that the thing FOLLOWED is his ['Alī's] *walāya*, inasmuch as none can follow the GUIDANCE of God like him, because God, appeared (*tajallā*) to him by means of him (*la-hu bi-hi*), and verily HE IS THE TRUTH [Qur'an 41:53], LIKE HIM THERE IS NAUGHT [Qur'an 43:11]. HE IS THE EXALTED ('Alī) THE GREAT (*kabīr*). [Qur'an 22:62; 31:30 34:23; 40:12].⁴⁹ And he ('Alī) is the Followed One in reality and therefore the Most Great Example (*al-mathal al-kubrā*, cf. Qur'an 79:20) and whatever is other than him if purified from accident and caused to forsake illusions and counterfeits, and caused to enter the House of Glory (viz., love of the Imāms), absorbed in the beauty of ecstasy⁵⁰ oblivious of the clouds of the contingent world, then he has FOLLOWED⁵¹ the GUIDANCE of God . . . so that NO FEAR SHALL BE ON THEM, NEITHER SHALL THEY SORROW [Qur'an 2:38].⁵²

Wijdān or *wajdān* (the vowelting is not specified in the ms.) are derived from the root *wj d* from which comes *wajada* 'he found'. *Wujūd*, of course, means existence, or 'the state of being found'. The intensive

⁴⁷ *Baq* 155. As a matter of fact, the figure of Fāṭima plays a very important role in this *tafsīr*. Unfortunately, it is not possible at this time to do more than mention this in passing.

⁴⁸ This is a variation on the famous hadith quoted by the Bab in his *Sulūk*, p.1: *al-turuq ilā allāh* . . .

⁴⁹ That is, all of these quranic verses are read as referring to 'Alī.

⁵⁰ *Baq* 166.

⁵¹ *itaba'a* (as opposed to the quranic *tabi'a*) connotes also "investigate," "examine," "study".

⁵² *Baq* 165-6. It should be noted that the last phrase of the verse is repeated at Qur'an 10:62, where it is specifically the "friends of God" (*awliyā' allāh*) who will neither grieve nor sorrow. (*Baq* 195-6.)

noun forms can also mean 'finding' but it is generally reckoned that their use by Muslim mystics refers to a special state in which one finds oneself and which state is at the same time perhaps unheralded or unanticipated. This is in line with that element of the English verb 'to find' which connotes 'coming upon something unawares'. As an intensive form of *wj d*, one might also translate the term as 'superexistence'.⁵³ Whatever the intent of *wijdān* in classical Sufism might be,⁵⁴ it is clear that the Bab associates it not with the unreachable divine Essence, but with 'Ali and/or the other members of the "Family of God"'.

Here it is clear that the *wijdān* experience refers to a total absorption of the subject into the object. It is the spiritual time (*waqt*) when any potential existent acquires the greatest possible degree of existence. For the Bab, the pinnacle of existence is represented by the Prophet and the Imāms. In this case 'Ali specifically. This is of course in line with Sufi usage; it is also reminiscent of the specifically Iranian *hikmat-i ilāhī* tradition as it developed from Suhrawardī to Mullā Sadrā and beyond to the Shaykhiyya. The idea of "knowledge by presence" is somewhat akin to the idea expressed here by the Bab, but with the characteristic emphasis, at least with respect to Mullā Sadrā, that the highest "object" which the soul can attempt union with and knowledge of is the Divine Will, as hypostatized by Muḥammad and the Imāms. In this respect, the Bab is faithful to the teachings of Shaykh Aḥmad.⁵⁵ 'Ali being the link between the believer and Muḥammad, who is the highest "spiritual idea" the believer may aspire to, is the object of the ecstatic experience. It may be speculated that the Bab's reference to ecstasy stems from his own experience. This experience (or experiences) is seen as the immediate background for the Bab's eventual claim, announced within a few months of writing this commentary, to be the focus of the above-mentioned Islamic apocalypse.

That the mystico-philosophical terminology of the *waḥdat al-wujūd* metaphysicians acquired additional communalistic and even apocalyptic meaning might be thought to have been an inevitable development of a meeting between the *waḥdat al-wujūd* school and Shi'ism. But in this first major work of the Bab, a number of other features have been noticed, namely the attribution of features pertaining to a mythical cosmogony to the

⁵³ Cf. Corbin's translation of *baqā'* as *surexistence*, *Ell*, v.1, p.224.

⁵⁴ Cf. e.g., Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā, where *wijdān* is the fifth level of a hierarchy of eight spiritual conditions ranging from the lowest, *manām*, to the highest, *takwīn*. In this scale, *wajd* is fourth. See Fritz Meier, *Die "fawā'ih al-gamāl wa fawā'ih al-galāl" des Nagmuddīn al-Kubrā*, Wiesbaden, 1957, Arabic text, *fasi* 41 & 95. Meier translates *wijdān* as "being touched inside" (p.101 German text).

⁵⁵ Henry Corbin, *Mullā Sadrā Shīrāzī: Le Livre des pénétrations métaphysiques*, Paris, 1964, p.224.

Prophet and the Imāms. Some of these ideas are also found quite early in Shi'ism, both "12er" and Ismā'īlī, prior to Ibn 'Arabī. Years ago, Massignon demonstrated how some of the "physiognomy" of the Primordial Man of the Manichaeans was projected on the figure of Salmān.⁵⁶ A comparison of some of the features of that physiognomy with the function of Muḥammad, 'Ali, and the "Family of God" in this early work by the Bab displays striking similarities.

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⁵⁶ Louis Massignon, "Salman Pak et les prémices spirituelles de l'Islam iranien." (= *Publications of the Société des Études iraniennes*, No. 7) Tours, 1934.