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Sheikh Ahmad al-Ahsai

Sheikh Ahmad al-Ahsai was a prominent religious leader in the Shiite Muslim world who sought to combine all of the streams of Islamic mysticism and philosophy into a single form of teaching. After his death, his followers formed a separate Shiite school that today has 300,000 to 400,000 adherents, mainly in Iran, southern Iraq, Kuwait, and the al-Ahsa region of Saudi Arabia.

Ahmad ibn Zayn al-Din al-Ahsai was born in in May 1753 into a Shiite family in the village of Mutayrafi in what is today the Saudi Arabian region of al-Ahsa. He received a full religious education at the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq and was a distinguished scholar, receiving certificates of completion of his studies from leading Shiite scholars of the time. From 1797 to 1806, he lived in various locations in southern Iraq. Then, in 1806, he traveled to Iran, where he was to remain for most of his life.

After a pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Rida in Mashhad in northeastern Iran, he was invited to settle in Yazd. In 1814, he moved to Kirmanshah in eastern Iran at the invitation of the crown prince, Muhammad Ali Mirza. He remained there until the death of this prince in 1821, when he was invited to move to Qazvin by Mullah Abdul Wahhab, a prominent religious scholar. It was during Sheikh Ahmad's residence in this city that he was denounced by Mullah Muhammad Taqi Baraghani as a heretic in about 1824. Sheikh Ahmad then left Qazvin and, after another pilgrimage to Mashhad, settled in Karbala. After a short time there, he decided to go on pilgrimage to Mecca, but he died a few stages away from Medina in 1826 and is buried in the al-Baqi cemetery there.

Sheikh Ahmad was a man of prodigious knowledge and wrote some 160 works on a wide variety of subjects, mostly in the area of mystical philosophy. He himself claimed, however, that the authority for his teaching came from the Shiite imams whom he met in dreams and visions. His teaching is a synthesis of the various strands of the Islamic sciences, especially mysticism and philosophy, and attempts to reconcile rational and intuitive knowledge. He has been denounced by some clerics because he taught that some of the concepts in the Islamic tradition should be understood as spiritual or metaphorical truths rather than taken literally. This same teaching, however, made him important to the later Babi and Baha'i religions.

Moojan Momen

Further Reading

Momen, Moojan. *An Introduction to Shiite Islam*. Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 1985; Momen, Moojan. *The Works of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England: Baha'i Studies Bulletin Monograph, no. 1, 1991; Rafati, Vahid. "The Development of Shaykhí Thought in Shí'í Islam." Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1979.

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