

# Shàh Ni‘matullàh Walí in the Land of Ibn ‘Arabí<sup>1</sup>

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Greetings to all who are attending these sessions, to the organizers of this symposium, to all those interested in Shàh Ni‘matullàh Walí and Ibn ‘Arabí, and to all those who are interested in the mystics of Islam. I would like to begin by thanking those who have organized this symposium, the followers of Shàh Ni‘matullàh Walí, those who are engaged in research on Ibn ‘Arabí, the Spanish and Iranian professors, professors from other countries, and the other friends who have contributed to this conference. Special thanks should also be given to Dr. Azmayesh, whose cultural and Sufi affairs have become famous among Islamicists.

Fortunately, this symposium is being held in Seville, or as it was formerly called, Ishbilliyyah, which is where Ibn ‘Arabí made his home for many years. Although Ibn ‘Arabí and Shàh Ni‘matullàh Walí were distant from one another geographically and temporally, their hearts were united. In spite of the slight differences in their ideas, these two great Muslim mystics are spiritual friends.

The name of this city usually reminds people of the opera, *The Barber of Seville*, by Rossini, but it reminds students of Islamic mysticism of Ibn ‘Arabí. I hope that this symposium will make Seville even more widely known as the city of Ibn ‘Arabí.

There are several points to which attention should be given in this symposium. The first that comes to mind is the question of what is *‘irfàn* (gnosis, mysticism) and what is its relation to Sufism? Are they separate from one another? What are their principles?

The second problem is how *‘irfàn* and Sufism first appeared, and how it came to influence others. Were the Sufism of Shàh Ni‘matullàh and that of Ibn ‘Arabí their own inventions, or did other religions and sects have a role in it?

The third issue is that of the varieties of *‘irfàn* in different religions. It could be said that the mysticisms of all places are connected to a religion, such that one can speak of Jewish mysticism, Christian mysticism and Islamic mysticism. Are these different mysticisms in reality one? We should bear in mind, for example, that in Jewish mysticism, that has arisen from the Jewish faith, greater importance is given to worldly affairs, while in Islamic mysticism, following the Prophet, it is said that, “This world is the farm of the next,” or “This world is the prison of the believer and the paradise of the disbeliever.”

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<sup>1</sup> Message to the third Shàh Ni‘matullàh Walí Congress on Sufism and Art held in Seville, Spain, 22, 23 November 2004.

The fourth problem is that in Sufism we frequently come across the word *silsilah* (chain, order). What is meant by *silsilah*? What are the conditions of these various orders?

The fifth issue is that of *waâdat al-wujêd* (the unity of existence), which orientalists usually claim was coined by Ibn ‘Arabî. What does it mean?

The sixth issue is that of the differences in Sufi methods and styles.

The last problem is the problem of art and beauty. What is the position of the Sufis on this?

The first problem was that of *‘irfân*. In general, an understanding of the reality of existence has been sought by human beings from the beginning. The main difference between man and the other beings is that man can even think about himself. According to Rêmi:

From where have I come? For what?  
Where am I to go? And where shall my home be?

Human beings notice that they have a fixed reality that does not change as they age. They have turned to mystical thought in the attempt to find this reality and from it to approach absolute reality. This same reality is the reality of being, what the religions call “God.” All who are in search of this reality, and who seek knowledge of it, find some measure of *‘irfân* (gnosis). Someone who is lost in a desert sees a dark shadow and goes toward it to find out what it is, and to the extent he comes closer to it he gets a better idea of what it is. In Islam, the knowledge of the reality that casts this shadow is called *‘irfân*, and taking this path toward the truth in order to know it is called Sufism. So, *‘irfân* has different degrees and stages. Everyone who seeks the truth, everyone who seeks God, has a degree of *‘irfân* that can be perfected.

Regardless of some of the differences among the varieties of mysticism (*‘irfân*) found in different religions, they have many similarities. These similarities can guide to truth as well as lead to error; for example, some Orientalists have imagined that because of the similarities between Islamic and Buddhist mysticism, Islamic mysticism is derived from Buddhism, or because of the similarities between Christian and Islamic mysticism, it is imagined that Islamic mysticism is derived from Christianity. Mysticism was born with humanity, and Islam, Christianity and Judaism provide frameworks for it sent by God. Of course, we consider the best of these frameworks to be Islam, but it cannot be said that Islamic mysticism is derived from these others. It is similar to the case in physics where a law was discovered by two scientists, Boyle and Mariotte, at two different places at the same time without having any information about each other’s work. The same applies to *‘irfân* (mysticism). In spite of the slight differences in various religions, its reality everywhere is one.

As for the issue of the chains of transmission or the various Sufi orders, *silsilah*, the first point to be noted is that we should not understand these orders as sects (s. *firqah*). The word *firqah* denotes separation from the origin, while *silsilah* does not mean separation, but to the contrary, indicates the connection with the origin. It is a special insight and method in the understanding of Islam among different Muslims.

In principle, having a guide in religion is common to almost all mystical traditions, Muslim and non-Muslim. In various religions it has been mentioned that religious guides have to appoint their own successors. For example, it is explicitly stated in the New Testament that Jesus appointed Simon Peter as his successor. The Sufis say that regardless of the fact that a group of Muslims chose Abê Bakr after the Prophet to be his *successor* or caliph, the Prophet himself had trained ‘Alí to be his spiritual successor. In any case, the existence of a guide, or, in Sufi terminology, a *pír*, *shaykh*, or *murshid*, in every age is an important belief of Sufism. This succession of one guide following after the other is called *silsilah* by the Sufis. This is why they speak of the Ni‘matullâhí or Shâdhilí or Naqshbandí *silsilah* (orders). Each of these orders traces its lineage in its own way to the Prophet. Most of them trace their chains of succession through ‘Alí to the Prophet, with the exception of one or two who trace their chains of succession through Abê Bakr. There is no order that appeared spontaneously, or that can be said to have originated at some later date. The orders have taken specific names from particular guides or masters who gained notoriety because of exceptional dignity or knowledge; and after them an order that traces its succession through such a person came to be known by his name.

Shâh Ni‘matullâh Walí was the disciple and successor of Shaykh ‘Abdullâh Yâfi‘í, who was the successor of Shaykh Æaliâ Barbarí, and so on until Shaykh Abê Madyan, who was one of the masters of Ibn ‘Arabí and the successor of Shaykh Abê Mas‘êd Andalêsí. After Shâh Ni‘matullâh Walí, there were other successors and so the order has continued down to the present day. The Ni‘matullâhí Order is the same order that existed before Shâh Ni‘matullâh and it continued after him with the name Ni‘matullâhí. Thus, it is wrong to use the word sect or *firqah* instead of order or *silsilah*. The differences in the orders are due to the spiritual personalities that have loomed large along the chains of succession found in them.

As we have seen, Shâh Ni‘matullâh and Ibn ‘Arabí are in fact in the same order, the order that goes back to Abê Madyan and before him to Abê Mas‘êd Andalêsí. The thoughts of Ibn ‘Arabí have been the subject of particular attention of Shâh Ni‘matullâh and many other Sufi masters, especially the Iranian ones. Due to their common spiritual chain of succession, these two Sufi shaykhs are connected to each other. Concerning the book of Ibn ‘Arabí, *The Bezels of Wisdom (Fuææal-Áikam)*, Shâh Ni‘matullâh says:

The words of the *Bezels* in our heart,  
Like jewels, are mounted in their settings.

They reached him from the Prophet of God,  
And again from his spirit they attached to us.

Shâh Ni‘matullâh himself has written several treatises in Persian commenting on parts of *The Bezels of Wisdom*, or on Ibn ‘Arabí’s own summary of it (*Naqsh al-Fuææal*). He also frequently uses Ibn ‘Arabí’s terminology in his poetry. In addition to him, some of the disciples of Shâh Ni‘matullâh have written commentaries on this book. Almost all the Sufi shaykhs have the same ideas as Ibn ‘Arabí but from differing points of view. Those who want to discover what casts the shadow in the desert can approach it from different directions, but they will all reach the same destination, while each thinks that his own path is the smooth one, and asks the others

to join him. The subtle differences between the paths of Ibn ‘Arabí and Shàh Ni‘matullàh are not like differences in physics or chemistry that can be readily described, rather, they are differences that can only be felt by those who have experienced spiritual wayfaring for themselves.

The problem of the unity of existence (*waâdat al-wujêd*), which is one of the main topics in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabí, has been the focus of attention of many Muslim mystics. In the above mentioned example, the shadow discovered by the traveler is one, but anyone who wants to describe it gives it a particular form. For example, if someone wants to describe the taste of halvah to someone who has never seen it and never tasted it, what can he say? If he says it is sweet, the other will say that sugar is also sweet. But halvah is not sugar. If one says it is delicious, the other will say that apples are also delicious. Whatever comparison is made, indicates that the items compared are similar only in some respect, while they are not the same. The same sort of problem arises with the unity of existence when we want to describe it. This is the reason for the controversies about the unity of existence after it was propounded as it was by Ibn ‘Arabí. The very principle of the unity of existence and its comprehension prior to Ibn ‘Arabí can be found among great mystics, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The spiritual states and words of the Sufis narrated in the Sufi hagiographies show that those living before Ibn ‘Arabí knew of the unity of existence without using the terminology. To the merit of Ibn ‘Arabí, he was able to explain it theoretically. Hence, through his commentators, this term, *waâdat al-wujêd* (the unity of existence), became current. Otherwise, the reality of the unity of existence is a reality that is mixed with the very nature of man.

There are many different doctrines that have been expounded regarding the unity of existence, but these differences have not resulted in the complete rejection of some Sufis by others.

The next issue is the difference in Sufi styles and methods. In any Muslim society, the Sufis do not constitute the entire population. There is only a limited number of people who follow the Sufi path, while the majority take no interest in it. Even among those who want to understand the Truth and be in harmony with it do not all put into practice what is necessary for taking the way to this goal. For these reasons, each of the Sufi masters had a particular style and method in accordance with his time and place.

However, Sufism considers itself obliged to help and guide all the members of society, and in fact this is in accordance with a saying of the Prophet, “I was sent to perfect ethical virtues”. Hence, the Sufi masters have sought to consider the exigencies of the societies in which they lived in their entireties. This in itself is considered an art, and from this art many other arts have been born. For example, there was an age when much attention was paid to music and *samà‘* (Sufi ritual dancing and singing) for the purpose of awakening the state of seeking the Truth in human beings. In none of the Sufi orders is music itself considered religiously prohibited, because music consists of the harmony of sounds. Hence, music is also found in nature. It is heard when wind blows through the branches of trees or as water flows in a river, etc. It is the opinion of some Sufi masters that music is always being played throughout all the world of existence. In Sufism, they have used the harmony of the music in their *samà‘* to stir the attention of man towards the order of nature and

the rhythm of the universe. For a long time prior to Shàh Ni'matullàh, *samà'* existed in many sufi orders. But *samà'* is a very narrow road that few people can travel. Although it can bring one to the goal, it has many dangers and losses. It may cause the wayfarer to deviate and be preoccupied with peripheral matters. Since *samà'* had deteriorated during his time, in order to preserve the spiritual life and to avoid its dangers, Shàh Ni'matullàh eliminated *samà'* from the practices of the Order.

This prohibition does not mean that Shàh Ni'matullàh did not highly regard art and beauty. Art is the place of the manifestation of Truth man seeks to discover. Just as the Truth cannot be defined but must be experienced, so too, art is indefinable. There are different definitions given for art, just as there are different definitions of Sufism; each is right, but none of them is comprehensive. If, for example, one were to define "water" as a combination of oxygen and hydrogen, one would still have to answer questions about what oxygen is, what hydrogen is, and what is meant by their combination here. Art is something that can only be experienced; and in reality, the art of Sufism and the art of the Sufi master consists in making people aware of this state of seeking the Truth and giving them the strength to put it into practice.

Generally, the Islamic arts developed in the shadow of Sufism. There were few artists, such as poets, musicians, or calligraphers, who were not practitioners of Sufism. In previous centuries in Iran, anyone who wished to learn an art first had to be initiated into a Sufi order and to become a member of a society called *futuwwah*. The person to whom one became apprenticed was at the same time one's Sufi master, who would begin with instruction on the purification of the soul and spiritual wayfaring. The teaching of the skills needed for the art came afterwards.

Aside from being a Sufi master, Shah Ni'matullàh was also a skillful poet; in his verses, images drawn from art, music, *samà'*, poetry and painting are frequently employed. But, since he was a Sufi guide who cared about all the educational aspects and affairs of society, he was aware of the dangers that came from misusing some of the arts, especially when he saw the signs of corruption in society. In this regard, he was exactly like Plato, who, despite his great respect for poetry and poets, wanted there to be no poets in his ideal society. For this reason, Shah Ni'matullah ended the practice of *samà'*<sup>2</sup>.

The Sufi master recognizes the varying needs and circumstances of the time and the spiritual states of the wayfarers, therefore giving different instructions. For example, we find in the autobiography of some Sufi masters that they employed different methods to break the egoism or pseudo-personalities of their disciples. In the past it was possible for a Master to order a prince who was a seeker on the path of Sufism to arrange the shoes of those attending the Sufi gatherings. Apparently this is a simple and lowly kind of service, but it had a profound effect on the seeker's perception of his soul. Some Masters prescribed that other novices take up begging and give the money obtained to the master for the upkeep of the needy. Because of this, when ordinary people who were interested in Sufism saw a novice begging, they would give him something for the sake of the blessing thereby obtained. Nevertheless, when the effect of breaking pride through begging gradually wore off, and for some Sufis had become an occupation that led them to disdain real employment because of

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<sup>2</sup> In the same manner, Sultàn 'Alishàh prohibited the use of intoxicants 120 years ago.

laziness, Shāh Ni‘matullāh gave orders that begging was not permitted and unemployment was prohibited.<sup>3</sup>

A famous example of eliminating arrogance, especially the pride that comes from holding religious positions, is the instruction of Shams Tabrizi to Mawlana Rumi. Before encountering Shams of Tabriz, whose spark set fire to his existence, Rumi was a well-respected and famed theologian and *faqih*. In his capacity as *faqih*, Rumi ought to have upheld the Islamic legal impermissibility of drinking wine. Nevertheless, Shams ordered him buy a barrel of wine and carry it through the middle of the market, and Rumi complied. This instruction of Shams was aimed to cause Rumi’s disciples to leave him, breaking Rumi’s pride. Of course, it later became clear that the barrel had no wine, and the instruction given by Shams did not contravene Islamic law.

This manner of breaking pride through self-blame (*malāmāt*) has caused some scholars to imagine that Sufis that adopt this *malāmātī* way are establishing a distinct Sufi order. *Malamati*, however, is a method. Those who adopt this method think that since the wayfarer must refrain from anything that causes pride or that causes him to be the focus of attention, he must do works that appear to be reprehensible so that instead of respecting him, people are actually repulsed by him.

There were many Sufis who weren’t known to be *malāmātī*, but they shared the *malāmātī* attitude. One of these was Āamdên Qazvīnī, who was purported to be a *malāmātī*. He reported his spiritual experiences to Shaykh Junayd and Shaykh Sahl Tustarī and he was accepted by both of them. We know that Junayd was of the people of sobriety, in Sufi terminology, and not one of the people of intoxication. In his wayfaring he was moderate and he was never a *malāmātī*. Therefore, it is impossible to claim that Āamdên Qazvīnī was of a so-called *malāmātī* order.

In addition, in order that people should not consider the wayfarers as a separate class of people with deceptive characteristics, Shāh Ni‘matullāh prohibited the Sufis from wearing distinctive clothing, and this is in accord with Islamic law, which forbids one from seeking to become conspicuous, even if only by one’s manner of dress. In this way, in the Ni‘matullāhī order, there is no special Sufi clothing and the wayfarer can wear any clothing that is suitable to the circumstances.

Shāh Ni‘matullāh was the disciple and follower of Shaykh ‘Abdullāh Yāfī‘ī, and he himself has mentioned his initiatic chain in detail in his poetry. In those days in the Islamic world, Shi‘ism was known as *rāfi‘ī* (heterodox), and nobody made it publicly known that he was Shi‘ite. In his book, *Shawāhid al-Nubuwwah*, Jāmī does not mention Imam ‘Alī among the Companions of the Prophet; but in a separate chapter under the title of “The Twelve Imams”, he mentions all the Shi‘ite Imams with ‘Alī as their leader, and he extols all of them in the manner of the Shi‘ites. For example in the biography of the Twelfth Imam, Jāmī states that he is alive and will appear. Despite all this, Jāmī never announces that he is a Shi‘ite.

Since in the Western lands of Islam there was much opposition to Shi‘ism, the Sufis there, such as Shaykh ‘Abdullāh Yāfī‘ī, had to practice dissimulation (*taqqiyah*).

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that this instruction does not include the modern phenomenon of unemployment caused by unavailability of jobs due to economic problems.

Therefore in their beliefs, they were Shi'ite, but they presented themselves in their jurisprudence as Hanafi, Malaki, or Shafi'i, etc. When Shàh Ni'matullàh came to the eastern lands of Islam (Iran), where there was less persecution of the Shi'ites, he made it publicly known that he was a Shi'ite Muslim. This does not mean that he had not already been Shi'ite, but that he had now acquired Shi'ite beliefs. Just as before, he maintained his respect for his predecessors and introduced them as his masters, and he now explicitly showed his special devotion to Imam 'Alí and the other Imams. By doing this, this misgiving that Sufism originated among the Sunnis was removed.

In principle, the division in Islam between Sunnis and Shi'ites in the form that is current now is not acceptable in Sufism. In the view of the Sufis, everyone who believed that 'Alí was the spiritual successor to the Prophet is a Shi'ite. On the other hand, with regard to political succession, all the Muslims believe that Abê Bakr, according to the election by some of the Muslims, became the caliph. However, in Sufism spiritual succession (*walayah*) is more important than the caliphate.

With courage and boldness, Shàh Ni'matullàh ended the suppression of ideas and the inquisition which dominated the world of Islam at that time. There is no prejudice in Shàh Ni'matullàh's views on Shi'ite and Sunni Islam. Whatever is good or bad in either is to be recognized for what it is.

In his method of wayfaring, Shàh Ni'matullàh struck a balance between sobriety and intoxication and the states of fear and hope. His instructions after him are still practiced in the Ni'matullàhí Order.

I would like to conclude by affirming that Sufi Shaykhs similar to Ibn 'Arabí and Shàh Ni'matullàh are still alive today. As Hafiz once wrote, "One whose heart becomes alive through love, will never die". The proof of his words is that you are commemorating these two mystics today. It is a pity that in some Islamic societies, especially among those who call themselves Shi'ites, sufficient attention is not paid to these great Sufis. Fortunately, in other societies and in gatherings such as this symposium, this interest is present. Here I bid farewell to all of the professors and attendees, my dear brothers and sisters present, and those who organized the symposium. Again I thank you, and I hope that God gives you grace and success in organizing such affairs in the future.