

Ahab Bdaiwi

The Imām vs the Sufi: Shi'i Opposition to Sufism

Since medieval times, and arguably until the present, the Shi'i engagement with Sufism has broken down into two different camps. One camp is virulently antagonistic to the Sufi conceptual universe and its related religious praxis, often describing Sufism and its adherents as heretical and deviant. The opposition camp is for the most part made up of Shi'i authorities who claim to anchor their worldview in the teachings of the Muḥammad and the successor Imāms. They also claim to adhere to a pristine Shi'i epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics.

The other camp consists of mystically inclined sympathisers, appropriators, and those who find much value in the intellectual substance of Sufism and, perhaps to a lesser extent, in the spiritual *modus vivendi* of renowned Sufi masters. The commitment of the sympathetic camp to the Shi'i tradition and its ethos is not less pronounced than their counterparts. Far from it. There is space for Sufism in their Shi'i epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. Sufism is not treated as an anathema but a credible source of mystical teachings.

The aim of the present talk is to engage in a close textual study that examines the theological and philosophical arguments presented by the critical camp, the Shi'i opponents of Sufism. It will do so by reading a representative text against Sufis and Sufism, titled *al-Risālah al-Ithnā 'Ashariyyah fi l-Radd 'alā al-Ṣūfiyyah*, penned by the famed Shi'i *muḥaddith* and theologian Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan, commonly known as al-Ḥurr al-'Āmilī (d. 1693). The talk will show that al-'Āmilī was not simply just offering scriptural and rational rebuttals against Sufism, portraying Sufism as antithesis to the dictum of the Shi'i Imāms; more significantly, he, and the coterie of Safavid-era critics of Sufism, was making a broader case for Shi'ism as the antidote to the insatiable thirst of spiritual seekers, to the mediocrity of intellectual pretenders, and to the improprieties of ethical corruptors among the Muslim multitudes.



Ahab Bdaiwi

University of Leiden

Dr Ahab Bdaiwi studied at the Universities of London and Exeter, and received his PhD in Arabic and Islamic Intellectual History from the University of Exeter (2015). He is currently the Assistant Professor of Islamic Thought and History at Leiden University. He is the founder of the Leiden University Shi'i Studies Initiative (LUSSI) and Leiden University Centre for Islamic Thought and History (LUTH) and co-founder of the Leiden University Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies (LAMS). He is also the Editor in Chief of the Leiden University Arabic Humanities Blog and a member of the Leiden University Centre for the Study of Islam and Society (LUCIS). His research interests include early Islamic thought and late antiquity, medieval philosophy and theology, and Shiism.