The Imām and the *Quṭb* : The *Axis Mundi* in Shīʿism and Sufism[1]

Zachary Markwith[2]

Abstract:

According to the Islamic esoteric tradition as it manifests in both Sunni and Shīʿite Islam, it is through the Universal Man, who is the Imām (ruler and guide) in Shīʿism and the *Quṭb* (Pole) in Sufism, that God's Names and Attributes are most clearly reflected, and through whom He controls the spiritual affairs of humanity. This paper will examine how this *Axis Mundi* is envisaged in Shīʿism as the Imām, and in Sufism as the *Quṭb*, while comparing these terms to each other, and also to Christ's function in Christianity, which helps to define the term *Axis Mundi*. We will look closely at the functions, biographies, and sayings of the Shīʿite Imāms and the poles in Sufism, and examine how these two streams of Islamic esoterism connect through the reality of the Imām and the *Quṭb*, which according to the Shīʿite Sufi Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, "are two expressions possessing the same meaning and referring to the same person."

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1. We are indebted to the writings of S.H. Nasr, especially "The Sufi Master as Exemplified in Persian Sufi Literature" and "Shiʿism and Sufism: their relationship in Essence and in History" in *Sufi Essays* (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 1999), pp. 57-67, 104-120. We also wish to thank M.H. Faghfoory for his encouragement, and for allowing us access to his soon to be published translation of Shaykh Muʿadhdhin Sabzawārī's *Tuḥfeh-ye ʿAbbāsī*, and also Farah Michelle Kimball, who first introduced us to many of the texts mentioned in this study.

2. Doctoral student of Islamic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley

Key Terms: Imām, *Quṭb*, Axis Mundi, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ʿArabī, Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, the Prophetic light, the Universal Man

The earth shall never be empty of the witness of God (*ḥujjat Allāh*).[1]

In Christianity, Christ is envisaged as the *Axis Mundi*, or the cosmological and spiritual center around which the world rotates. The central and all-encompassing reality in Islam is Allah—the One (*al-Aḥad*)—who is transcendent, yet immanent. According to the Islamic esoteric tradition as it manifests in both Sunni and Shīʿite Islam, Allah is at the center of creation through the theophany of the purified heart of the Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). The Prophet of Islam said, "The heart of the faithful is the throne (*al-ʿarsh*) of the All-Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*),"[2] the throne being a symbol of Divine knowledge and authority. It is through the Universal Man, who is the Imām (ruler and guide)[3] in Shīʿism and the *Quṭb* (Pole) in Sufism, that God's Names and Attributes are most clearly reflected, and through whom He controls the spiritual affairs of humanity. The Imām and *Quṭb* in Islam derive their power and station from the inner reality of the Quran and the Prophet Muḥammad (*al-ḥaqīqah al-muḥammadiyyah*).[4] In Islam, Muḥammad is the Universal Man *par excellence*, while the Imām in Shīʿism, and the *Quṭb* in Sufism are seen as a continuation of the inner

1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Sufism and the Perennity of the Mystical Quest" in *Sufi Essays* (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 1999), p. 28.
2. See "The Heart of the Faithful is the Throne of the All-Merciful", by S. H. Nasr in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James Cutsinger (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002), pp. 32-45.
3. When we refer to Shīʿism we will be focusing on Ithnā ʿasharī Shīʿism and the Twelve Imāms in this tradition, while also recognizing the other braches of Shīʿism, such as Zaydī and Ismāʿīlī Shīʿism.
4. *Sufi Essays*, p. 111.

function of the Prophet, leaving humanity and the universe with a living link or bridge to Heaven.

This paper will examine how the *Axis Mundi* is envisaged in Shīʿism as the Imām, and in Sufism as the *Quṭb*, while comparing these terms to each other, and also to Christ's function in Christianity, which helps to define the term *Axis Mundi*. We will look closely at the functions, biographies, and sayings of the Shīʿite Imāms and the poles in Sufism, and examine how these two streams of Islamic esoterism connect through the reality of the Imām and the *Quṭb*, which according to the Shīʿite Sufi Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, "are two expressions possessing the same meaning and referring to the same person."[1] We will also examine the concept of the "Imām of one's being" in the writings of certain Shīʿite scholars. According to this perspective, each traveler on the spiritual path is encouraged to find the center of his or her own being, which he or she inwardly identifies with the Imām or *Quṭb.* While historical personages will inevitably figure into this topic, and to a certain extent help to elucidate the function of the Imām and *Quṭb*, our intention is not to definitively identify the Pole of each age. Rather, the objective is to examine the trans-cultural reality of the *Axis Mundi*, and specifically how it is envisaged in Shīʿism and Sufism according to the primary Islamic sources, including the Quran, *Ḥadīth* literature, and the sayings of the Imāms, as well as the writings of classical Sufi and Shīʿite scholars such as Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ʿArabī, ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, and Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī. While our approach intends to let the traditional sources speak for themselves, we will also rely on contemporary secondary sources to help analyze the important differences and remarkable commonalities that exist between the Imām in Shīʿism and the *Quṭb* in Sufism, and also other related issues which have shaped the religious and cultural ethos for Shīʿites

1. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

and Sunnis. Finally, we believe that this study, and others like it, will help to demonstrate important points of intellectual collaboration and mystical convergence between Shīʿites and Sunnis in Islamic history.

The Quran and the Prophet

The sole axis in Islam and Islamic esoterism as it manifests in Shīʿism and Sufism is the Absolute Reality, whose primary and central determination is the Quran. The Quran—the Word of God in Islam—is revered in a manner similar to Christ in Christianity.[1] According to the book of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God...Through him all things were made…"[2] Comparing Christ to all of creation, Ibn ʿArabī states in the chapter on Jesus in the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*,

> [Jesus] is the Word of God, and he is the Spirit of God, and he is the slave of God…All existent things are the inexhaustible Words of God; all come from Be! (*kun*), and Be! is a Word of God.[3]

In this passage, Ibn ʿArabī's ontology and cosmogony are based on the verse in the Quran which states, "But His command, when He intendeth a thing, is only that He saith unto it: 'Be!' and it is."[4] The entire cosmos is seen as a sacred text, which complements the Quran, and also issues from and indicates higher levels of being, and ultimately Absolute Being. In Ibn ʿArabī's cosmology, all of creation exists as living words, whose archetypal realities correspond to the words of the Quran.

1. Ibn ʿArabī states in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, "Gabriel conveyed the Word of God to Mary just as the Messenger conveyed the Word of God to his community." *The Ringstones of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*), trans. Caner K. Dagli (Chicago: The Great Books of the Islamic World, 2004), p. 159.
2. John 1:1-3.
3. *The Ringstones of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*), pp. 163-164.
4. Quran 36:81

From this perspective, the Quran is not only the central axis on the level of manifestation, but also the archetype of creation. To understand the role of the Prophet, the Imām, or the *Quṭb*, one must appreciate the central and existential importance of the Quran, which is considered by Muslims to be the primary source of all Islamic knowledge.

Referencing the French Orientalist Louis Massignon's work on the Muslim martyr Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj, whose life paralleled the life of Christ in Christianity, Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes:

> Through the study of Ḥallāj, he demonstrated that Sufism has its roots in the Quran. Far from being a heretic, Ḥallāj was the epitome of orthodoxy, for only the saint is orthodox in the most universal sense of the term. He stands at the Center and, from the traditional perspective, everyone else is located at a point which is peripheral *vis-à-vis* that Center. Massignon realized that meditation upon the verses of the Quran, emulation of the Prophet and the grace issuing from the Quranic revelation constituted the origin and substance of Sufism.[1]

Massignon was one of the first European scholars to appreciate the Quran's primary influence on Sufism and Islamic esoterism in general. His penetrating study of al-Ḥallāj revealed a Sufi, who, like Christ, embodied the Divine Word. In Islamic esoterism, the saint, like the Prophet before him, approaches God by absorbing His Word—the Quran—into his being. In traditional Muslim societies, the presence of the Quran is ubiquitous. A Muslim hears the Quran when he is born, in taxis, and in the bazaar. He recites it during the five daily prayers, reads a portion of it during the day, reflects on its message, and

1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: Kegan Paul International Ltd, 1990), pp. 259-260.

sees it in the sacred art of calligraphy. In addition, particular chapters such as *Yā Sīn*[1] are recited for him when he dies. The Sufi not only participates in and benefits from all of these recitations and remembrances of the Quran, but also focuses on and repeats quintessential verses during his daily litanies. One cannot exaggerate the importance of the Quran in Islamic esoterism.

Like the Virgin Mary who gave birth to the Word of God, Muḥammad—the unlettered Prophet (*al-nabī al-ummī*)—was pure enough to receive the Word, but in the form of the Book. His soul complements the sacred Book. When asked about the Prophet, his wife ʿĀ'isha answered, "His character was the Quran—he liked what the Quran liked, and grew angry when the Quran was angry."[2] His *Sunnah* or wont, which includes his *Ḥadīth* or sayings, is the first explanation of the Quran. The Quran calls Muḥammad a shining lamp (*sirājun munīr*),[3] a mercy for the worlds (*raḥmatan lil-ʿālamīn*),[4] and the seal of the prophets (*khātam al-anbiyāʾ*),[5] among other honorific titles, which indicate his status among Muslims.

Generally speaking, all Muslims attempt to emulate the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, while Shīʿites and Sufis (who are Sunni or Shīʿite) also look to the inner reality of the Prophet (*al-ḥaqīqah al-muḥammadiyyah*). According to S.H. Nasr:

> In the metaphysical sense, the Prophet is both a manifestation of the Logos and the Logos itself, both the beginning of the prophetic cycle and its end, and, being its end and seal, he contains from

1. Quran 36:1-83
2. Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 46.
3. Quran 33:46
4. Quran 21:107
5. Quran 33:40

> an essential and inward point of view the whole prophetic function within himself.[1]

While Muslims view other prophets such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as Poles of their time, the Prophet Muḥammad is, from an Islamic perspective, a synthesis of the all the Divine messengers, and the chief Pole of all who came before him, and all who come after him. Eleven of the Imāms in Ithnā ʿasharī Shīʿism are his biological descendents through the Prophet's daughter Fāṭimah and his spiritual heirs through his cousin and son-in-law ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib.[2] Furthermore, every Sufi order (*ṭarīqah*) traces its lineage back to the Prophet through ʿAlī, and in some cases through ʿAlī and the Prophet's companion Abū Bakr.[3]

ʿAlī, the first man to accept Muḥammad as the messenger (*rasūl*) of God, said the following of the Prophet, which is

1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2002), p. 36.
2. Of course ʿAlī and Fāṭimah were married, and were the parents of the second and third Imāms in Shīʿism, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Among Shīʿites and Sufis, the sanctity of Fāṭimah is frequently compared to that of the Virgin Mary, both giving birth to the saintly martyr.
3. Reza Shah-Kazemi writes, "It is often said that the Naqshabandī *ṭarīqah* is the exception to this rule, tracing its decent from the Prophet through the first caliph, Abū Bakr, rather than through ʿAlī. But it should be noted that this affiliation with Abū Bakr pertains only to one of its three principal *silsilahs*. In his work, *al-Ḥadā'iq al-wardiyyah fī ḥaqā'iq ajilla al-Naqshabandiyyah*, (Damascus, 1306/1889), p. 6, ʿAbd al-Majīd b. Muḥammad al-Khānī, himself a Naqshabandī-Khālidī shaykh, refers to the first *silsilah* (*al-silsilat al-ūlā*) as the 'golden chain', and this begins with ʿAlī, proceeding through the Shiʿi Imams until ʿAlī b. Mūsā, then to Maʿrūf al-Karkhī and the other masters. The second *silsilah* (*al-silsilatu'l-thāniya*) likewise begins with ʿAlī and proceeds through Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. It is only the third *silsilah*, which is called *al-silsilat al-ṣiddīqiyya* which proceeds from the Prophet to Abū Bakr (*al-ṣiddīq*). *Justice and Remembrance: Introducing the Spirituality of Imam ʿAlī* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2006), p. 190.

recorded in the *Nahj al-bālaghah*:[1]

> He is the leader (Imām)[2] of all who exercise fear (of Allah) and a light for those seeking guidance. He is a lamp whose flame is burning, a meteor whose light is shining and a flint whose spark is bright. His conduct is upright, his behavior is guiding, his speech is decisive and his decision just. Allah sent him after an interval from previous prophets when people had fallen into errors of action and ignorance.[3]

This passage indicates the Shīʿite belief that the Prophet of Islam was the Imām of the first Imām, ʿAlī, and therefore the leader and guide of the Muslim community. This is an important point to examine because many Sunnis believe that the presence of the Prophet is eclipsed in Shīʿism by the Imāms, whereas Shīʿites simply see the Imāms as a continuation of the Prophetic light (*al-nūr al-muḥammadiyyah*), which is central in both Shīʿism and Sufism.

The presence and function of the Prophet is also central in Sufism, second only to the Quran. The Sufi sage ʿAbd al-Karīm

1. Regarding the authenticity of the *Nahj al-balāghah*, S.H. Nasr writes, "One day in the '60s [Henry] Corbin asked ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī the following question: 'As a leading authority on Shīʿite philosophy and religious thought, what argument would you provide to prove that the *Nahj al-balāghah* is by the first Imām ʿAlī [and not its compiler Sayyid Sharīf al-Raḍī as many Western orientalists claim]?' The venerable master of Islamic philosophy answered, 'for us the person who wrote the *Nahj al-balāghah* is ʿAlī even is he lived a centrury ago.'" "Reply to Zailan Moris" in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 28, ed. L.E. Hahn, R.E. Auxier, L.W. Stone Jnr. (Carbondale, IL, 2001), p. 635.

2. The title Imām is a Quranic term used to refer to prophets such as Abraham, as is the word Shīʿah, which is used to refer to the Shīʿah or followers of Abraham. In this paper we will use the word Shīʿah, as it is commonly used in the Islamic world to refer to the followers of ʿAlī.

3. Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, *Peak of Eloquence* (*Nahjul Balagha*), trans. Sayed Ali Reza (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1996), p. 238.

al-Jīlī, who is famous for his work, *al-Insān al-kāmil* (The Universal Man),[1] wrote the following about the Prophet of Islam:

O Centre of the compass! O inmost ground of the truth!
O pivot of necessity and contingency!
O eye of the entire circle of existence!
O point of the Quran and the *Furqān* (the Proof, i.e. the Quran)!
O perfect one, and perfecter of the most perfect, who has been beautified by the majesty of God the Merciful!
Thou art the Pole (*Quṭb*) of the most wondrous things.
The sphere of perfection in its solitude turns on thee.
Thou art transcendent, nay thou art immanent, nay thine is all that is known and unknown, everlasting and perishable.
Thine in reality is Being and not-being; nadir and zenith are thy two garments.
Thou art both the light and its opposite, nay but thou art only darkness to a gnostic that is dazed.[2]

S.H. Nasr also wrote the following poem entitled, "Yā Ḥabīb-Allāh (O Beloved of God)," about the Prophet, of which we shall quote an excerpt:

O Seal of Prophecy, Pillar of Existence,
O Prophet of God, His beloved,
At once praised and praising His Majesty,
Unlettered, yet fount of all knowledge
O most perfect of His creatures, drawn near,

1. See Titus Burckhardt's translation *De l'Homme Universal* (Paris, Dervy-Livres, 1975).
2. *And Muhammad is His Messenger*, p. 137-138.

In that Nocturnal Ascent which crowned thy earthly life,
Thy being for whom He created the heavens,
The servant of the One, yet master of the world,
Whose light sustains that spectrum of forms,
Which constitutes the abode of our existence…[1]

One can discern from the above passages that the Prophet Muḥammad is the Imām and *Quṭb* for Shīʿites and Sufis even if these titles are normally reserved for specific saintly personalities who succeeded him. The Prophet is the source of legitimacy for the Imām and *Quṭb*, who represent the light of the Prophet for generations of Muslims living after the time of Muḥammad. The Quran and the soul of the Prophet are the twin sources of Islamic esoterism and Islam in general. While our study is about the Imām and the *Quṭb* and their respective functions, it is not an exaggeration to state according to both Shīʿism and Sufism there is no sanctity in Islam, except through the *barakah* (grace) that issues from the Quran and soul of the Prophet.

The Imam in Shì'ism

That which is sought in prayer and the Divine Law
The essence of devotion and the spiritual path
The purpose of the truth of the Truth
Is Allah, Muḥammad, and ʿAlī[2]
-Shaykh Mu'adhdhin Khurāsānī

The Imām in Shīʿism is the inheritor of the Prophetic light *(al-nūr al-muḥammadiyyah*). He is given political, intellectual,

1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Muhammad: Man of God* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, Inc., 1995), p. 5.
2. *Tuḥfeh-ye ʿAbbāsī*, p. 18.

and spiritual authority over the Muslim community through the *walāyah* or initiatic function, which is bestowed by God and His Prophet. We shall focus on what is most essential in the function of *walāyah*, namely, spiritual or initiatic authority. We have chosen this course because according to the Shīʿite tradition the other two domains of authority derive their legitimacy from the spiritual and initiatic reality of *walāyah.* Furthermore, a polemic discussion concerning political authority after the death of Muḥammad will only obscure the topic at hand. Many Sunnis and Shīʿites in Islamic history believe that this issue has and continues to be exploited to disrupt the unity of the Islamic community (*ummah*).

Concerning the concept of walāyah, S.H. Nasr writes,

> The Prophet, in terminating the prophetic cycle and in bringing the last *Sharīʿah* into the world, also inaugurated the cycle of "Muḥammadan sanctity" (*walāyah/wilāyah muḥammadiyyah*) which is ever present and which is the means whereby the spiritual energy of the Tradition is continuously renewed.[1]

The terms *wilāyah* (sanctity) and *walāyah* (initiatic power) are related to the word *walī,*[2] which means saint, friend, or master with various political, intellectual, and spiritual implications. According to the famous *ḥadīth* at Ghadīr Khumm, the Prophet said, "For whomever I am his master (*mawlā*) and the authority whom he obeys, ʿAlī will be his master. Oh God! Be friendly with the friends of ʿAlī and an enemy of the enemies

1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 2000), pp. 79-80.
2. *Sufi Essays*, p. 57.

of ʿAlī."[1] In the context of Shīʿism and Sufism, after the Prophet, ʿAlī is the first *walī Allāh* (friend of God), and therefore the model of sanctity in Islam. He was also given the title Amīr al-mu'minīn or Commander of the Faithful. According to another *ḥadīth*, the Prophet said to ʿAlī, "Are you not satisfied to be to me what Aaron was to Moses except that after me there will not be another prophet?"[2] According to Shīʿite sources, ʿAlī transmitted this initiatic power and esoteric function to his son Ḥasan, by Divine Command and the decree of the Prophet, who then passed it on to Ḥusayn, and so on. A Shīʿite participates in this initiation and sanctity by accepting the Imām as his leader and guide, especially in the domain of the Islamic sciences, which include Quranic interpretation (*tafsīr, ta'wīl*), the transmission of *Ḥadīth*, theology (*kalām*), philosophy (*ḥikmah*/*falsafah*), and gnosis (*ʿirfān*/*maʿrifah*). Henry Corbin describes the latter, which is central in our discussion, as follows "Shīʿite gnosis, as an initiatic religion, is an initiation in doctrine."[3] Shīʿism is however a complete tradition that contains both exoteric and esoteric dimensions. Our goal is not to reduce Shīʿism to gnosis, but to examine Shīʿite gnosis within its total religious framework. According to Shīʿism, by virtue of accepting the Imām one gains virtual, and in the case of the elect, direct access to the Divine Reality, in the same way that one does in Sufism through the initiatic chain (*silsilah*). The difference is that in Shīʿism this initiatic function is the exclusive right of the Imām, whereas in Sufism, one's spiritual master

1. ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Shiʿite Islam*, trans. and ed. S.H. Nasr (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1975), p. 180.
2. *Justice and Remembrance*, p. 20.
3. Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1978), p. 134.

takes on the inner function of the Prophet.[1]

The Prophet of Islam said, "My household is like the ship of Noah; whoever embarks upon it will be saved and whoever turns away from it will be drowned."[2] For Shīʿite Muslims, the ark of Noah and the household (*ahl al-bayt*) of the Prophet represent the nexus connecting the believer to Heaven. The ark is a symbol of posthumous salvation, and also represents the voyage of the Spirit, from the terrestrial domain of existence to the angelic world, from our occidental exile to the Orient, the abode of Light, during this life.[3]

The central axis in Shīʿism is the Imām. While all of the Imāms in Shīʿism participate fully in the reality of *walāyah*, there is also a distinct feminine pole of sanctity, which complements that of the Imām, and is most clearly represented by the Prophet's daughter Fāṭimah. According to Shīʿism, Fāṭimah was forced to endure many trials and is often compared of the Virgin Mary. In an act of special symbolic significance for Shīʿites and Sufis alike, the Prophet placed his cloak over his family, including his daughter Fāṭimah. S.H. Nasr writes:

> According to the famous *Ḥadīth-i kisā'* (the tradition of the garment) the Prophet called Fāṭimah along with ʿAlī, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn and placed a cloak upon them in such a manner that it covered them. The cloak symbolizes the transmission of the universal *walāyah* of the Prophet in the form of partial *walāyah* (*walāyat-i*

1. On the differences between these two perspectives, see Moojan Momen's chapter "Sufism, ʿIrfān, and Ḥikma" in *An Introduction to Shiʿi Islam* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 208-219.
2. *Shiʿite Islam*, p. 180.
3. See Henry Corbin's *The Voyage and the Messenger* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1998), which deals with this theme in Shī'ism, and also the work of Ibn Sīnā, ʿAṭṭār, Suhrawardī, and other Sufi masters.

> *fāṭimiyyah*) to Fāṭimah and through her to the Imāms who were her descendents.[1]

Henry Corbin writes, "Fāṭimah, the daughter of the Prophet and the mother of the holy Imāms, is the 'confluent of the two lights,' that of prophecy and that of initiation."[2] For Shīʿites, Fāṭimah is the archetype of feminine perfection, destined to suffer the loss of her sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Of particular importance for Shīʿites is the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn, Sayyid al-shuhadā' (the Master of martyrs), the third Shīʿite Imām, at Karbala'. The army of the Umayyad Caliph Yazīd killed him, along with seventy-two close associates and family members, on the tenth day of the month of Muḥarram in the year 61/680.

The epic battle at Karbala', culminating in the martyrdom of Ḥusayn, has been compared to the Passion and crucifixion of Christ in Christianity.[3] Perhaps more than any other event in Islamic history, the martyrdom of Ḥusayn helped to shape the religious ethos of the Shīʿite community. To this day, Ḥusayn's martyrdom is commemorated and mourned throughout the Shīʿite world during the Islamic month Muḥarram. Regarding the martyrs, the Quran states, "But do not think of those that have been slain in God's cause as dead. Nay, they are alive! With their Sustainer have they their sustenance...no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve" (3:169-170). The tomb of Ḥusayn in Cairo, where his head is buried, is in fact a spiritual center and a place of pilgrimage and *barakah* (grace/blessing) for Shīʿites and Sunnis alike.

1. *Sufi Essays*, p. 109.
2. *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, p. 156.
3. See James A. Bill and John A. Williams, *Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 63-74.

The fourth Shīʿite Imām Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn or Imām al-Sajjād is responsible for one of the most important prayers in the Shīʿite world, *al-Ṣaḥīfah al-sajjādiyyah*, also known as *The Psalms of Islam*,[1] which is among the earliest works of its kind in the Muslim world, and is perhaps the prototype of similar Sufi prayers. Imām Sajjād's son, the fifth Imām, Muḥammad al-Bāqir was also an excellent scholar who began the systematization of Islamic Law as well as other Islamic sciences, which his son, Imām Ṣādiq, and later scholars brought to fruition. Imām al-Bāqir also spoke about the Imām as the *ḥujja* or proof of God, which highlights some of the most esoteric Shīʿite teachings. According to Arzina Lalani,

> The world, al-Bāqir maintains, cannot exist even for a moment without the Imām who is the *ḥujja* of God. If the Imām were to be taken away from the earth even for an hour, the earth would swallow up its inhabitants just as the sea swallows its people. 'We [the Imāms] are,' al-Bāqir says, 'the *ḥujja* [proof] of God and His Gate. We are the tongue as well as the face of God; we are the eyes of God [guarding] His creation and we are the responsible guardians (*wulāt al-amir*) of God on earth.' Al-Bāqir adds that God is worshipped through the Imāms and it is through them that God is known and declared as One.[2]

Of central importance is also the sixth Imām, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, who unlike many of the Imāms was given a certain amount of intellectual freedom during parts of his life. He was able to

1. Imam Zayn al-ʿAbidīn, *The Psalms of Islam* (*al-Ṣaḥīfat al-ṣajjādiyya*), trans. William C. Chittick (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1988).
2. Arzina R. Lalani, *Early Shīʿī Thought: The Teachings of Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. 83.

disseminate the exoteric and esoteric knowledge of his ancestors to a wider audience. Imām Ṣādiq is considered the founder of the Shīʿite school of law, which takes its name, Jaʿfarī, from him. We also know that the founder of one of the first Sunni schools of law, Imām Abū Ḥanīfah,[1] was one of his students, as well as other eminent Sufis such as Ibrāhim al-Adham, Bishr al-Ḥāfī, and Bāyazīd al-Basṭāmī.[2] In Michael Sells' chapter "Early Sufi Qur'an Interpretation" in his text *Early Islamic Mysticism*, he devotes the first section to Imām al-Ṣādiq, who interprets the verse in the Quran "Adam received from his lord the names" (2:27) to mean:

> Before any of his creation existed, God was. He created five creatures from the light of his glory, and attributed to each one of them one of his names. As the Glorified (*maḥmūd*), he called his Prophet Muḥammad [which also means "the praised" or "the deserving-of-praise"]. Being the Sublime (*ʿAlī*) he called the Amir of believers ʿAlī. Being the Creator (*fāṭir*) of the heavens and earth, he fashioned the name Fāṭima. Because he had names that were called [in the Quran] the most beautiful *(ḥusnā*), he fashioned two names [from the same Arabic root] for Haṣan and Ḥusayn. Then he placed them to the right of the throne.[3]

The above quotation is similar to another saying of Imām al-Ṣādiq, who is both the sixth Imām in Shīʿism and an early

1. *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, p. 161. All of the Sunni schools of law were therefore either directly or indirectly influenced by Imām Ṣādiq.
2. *Sufi Essays*, p. 114.
3. Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1996), pp. 77-78.

Quṭb in most Sufi orders, "We are the Names of God."[1] Sayings such as these are interpreted in a variety of ways by Shīʿites, who generally limit their application to the Imāms, and by Sufis who extend the meaning of "We" to include the *Quṭb*, *awliyā'* (friends of God), and all of creation.

Imām al-Ṣādiq is also significant because his son Ismāʿīl represents the continuation of Shīʿism through the Ismāʿīlī Imāms, while his son Mūsā al-Kaẓīm is the seventh Ithnā ʿasharī Imām. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of the branches of Shīʿism and their relation to Sufism, but it is not difficult to see how each Imām had more than one intellectual and spiritual successor.

This phenomenon is also seen in the life of the eighth Shīʿite Imām ʿAlī al-Riḍā. Many Sunni Sufi orders trace their lineage, not only through the first Imām, ʿAlī, but also through the first eight Imāms. The famous Sufi, Maʿrūf al-Karkhī was a direct disciple of ʿAlī al-Riḍā, about whom Martin Lings said, "the eighth Shīʿi Imām who, from his sepulcher at Meshhed, may be said to preside over the whole of Persia."[2] Of course the Imāms are not seen as specifically "Shīʿite" by Sunni Sufi orders, but as poles of their time. It is difficult to trace the influence of all of the Imāms on early Sufism. Indeed, this is not our intended purpose. Rather, our goal in this section is to gain insight into central importance and reality of the Imām, and then to compare the Imām to the *Quṭb* in Sufism.

For various reasons, it is even more difficult to trace the influence of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh Imāms (Muḥammad al-Taqī, ʿAlī al-Naqī, and Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī) on Sufism or

1. ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Kernel of the Kernel*, comp. and edt. Sayyid M.Ḥ. Ḥusayni Tihrānī, trans. Mohammad H. Faghfoory (Albany NY: State University of New York, 2003), p. 19.
2. Martin Lings, *What is Sufism*? (Cambridge: the Islamic Text Society, 1999), p. 120.

Shīʿism for that matter. It has been suggested that at this point in time during the Abbasid period the Imāms chose to remain silent due to persecution.[1] Regarding the twelfth Imām S.H. Nasr writes:

> In speaking of the Sufi master in the Persian context one must remember the role of the twelfth Imām, who is the Hidden Imām, both in Shīʿism and in Sufism as it exists in the Shīʿite world. Inasmuch as the Imām, although in concealment, is alive and is the spiritual axis of the world, he is the Pole (*Quṭb*) with whom all Sufi masters are inwardly connected. He is to Shīʿism what the supreme Pole is to Sufism in its Sunni context. In Shīʿism the Imāms, especially ʿAlī, the first, and the Mahdī, the last, are the spiritual guides *par excellence*. The Hidden Imām, representing the whole chain of Imāms, is the pole that attracts the hearts of the believers and it is to him that men turn for guidance.[2]

From one perspective, Imām Mahdī's (Ṣāḥib al-Zamān, the Lord of the Age) concealment is a symbol that is indicative of the end of time, where tradition, esoteric knowledge, and the Truth are veiled from the majority of men. They are to be revealed in the eschatological events, which include the return of the Mahdī along with Jesus Christ, that are prophesied in both Sunni and Shīʿite sources.[3] At present however, the Hidden Imām, makes it possible for men to reach the Divine Reality, in a manner that is similar to the initiatic function of Khiḍr the

1. *Tuḥfeh-ye ʿAbbāsī*.
2. *Sufi Essays*, p. 66.
3. Most Sunnis however do not believe that the Mahdī is the twelfth Imām, but await the return of another figure, who is also said to be a descendent of the Prophet.

"Green Prophet",[1] the guide of Moses mentioned in the Quran. This is exemplified by the guidance received by a contemporary of the Prophet, Uways al-Qaranī, who was guided by the Prophet spiritually, without having met him physically. Concerning Imām Mahdī, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi writes,

> Invisible or incognito, the presence of the hidden Imām has a beneficent effect on the faithful; his influence is compared to an illumination, or to rays of light; the Prophet is said to have stated: "…His faithful are illumined by his Light; they profit from his *walāyah* during his Occultation, just as one profits from the sun even when it is covered by clouds.[2]

In Ithnā ʿasharī Shīʿism the Mahdī had a lesser occultation, which began in 260/872, and a greater occultation, which began in 329/939 and lasts until the end of time. In Shīʿism, the Hidden Imām can be envisaged as the goal of mystic quest, in a manner similar to the Holy Grail. He is a source of spiritual sustenance and light that is hidden in the depths of the heart. According to S.H. Nasr:

> The Imām also exists within the hearts of men. He is the inner guide who can lead man on the journey beyond the cosmos and also into the inner dimensions of his own being, if only man could reach his inner pole. That is why certain Shīʿite gnostics and Sufis have instructed the disciple to seek the '*imām* of his being'.[3]

1. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: the Sources of Esoterism in Islam*, trans. David Streight (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 110.
2. *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, pp. 115-116.
3. *Sufi Essays*, p. 66.

Here the Imām takes on a similar function to that of Christ in Orthodox Christianity, as well as esoteric currents in Western Christianity.[1] The Prophet of Islam, as well as pre-Islamic prophets, also serve this function in certain Sufi schools, most notably the schools associated with ʿAlāʾ al-Dawlah Simnānī, which have spoken of the "Abraham of one's being" or the "Moses of one's being," who become identified with subtle physiological centers.[2] Likening the *ʿaql,* the Intellect or the eye of the heart, to the Imām, M.A. Amir-Moezzi writes,

> What is seen with the "eye of the heart" is a light (*nūr*), or more precisely several modalities of light (*anwār*). It is located at the center of the heart and is sometimes identified with Heiro-Intelligence (*al-ʿaql*): "Hiero-Intelligence in the heart is like a lamp in the center of the house." *ʿAql* is the means of vision with the heart and in this case it is a synonym of *īmān*, faith, but at the same time its reality (*ḥaqīqah*) constitutes the object of vision. It is known that the reality of *ʿaql* is identical to the Imām: *ʿaql* is the interior Imām of the believer…[3]

Amir-Moezzi goes on to quote the fifth Imām Muḥammad Bāqir, "The light of the Imām in the hearts of the faithful is more brilliant than that of the brilliant day star."[4] The hidden guide

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1. For a valuable study on this topic, see James A. Bill & John Alden Williams' *Roman Catholics and Shiʿi Muslims* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

2. See "The Seven Prophets of Your Being" in H. Corbin's *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, pp. 121-131.

3. *The Divine Guide in Early Shiʿism*, p. 48.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 49. These teachings are also found in Sufism. According to a poem attributed to Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj:

> For the Lights of religion's Light are Lights in men,
> For the Secret, Secrets in secret depths of souls,

(*ustād ghaybī*) as an inner light is also the theme of Henry Corbin's text *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*. In this text Corbin compares the intellectual intuitions of the inner angelic guide of the Sufis such as Simnānī, Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, and Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, to the Imām that is witnessed in the hearts of the faithful in Shīʿism. [1] It is this spiritual archetype that summons man to his higher nature and is in fact identical to it. The Imām is a centripetal and transcendent power orienting man's attention inward towards his heart and the angelic world, which is the locus of the Divine Presence. Corbin, like Suhrawardī and students of the Ishrāqī school of thought, emphasizes inner illumination through the Intellect or the eye of the heart, and the pristine source of other modes of knowing. In *ʿirfānī* Shīʿite epistemology, it is through this higher faculty that one perceives the Divine theophanies, one's higher Self, or the "Angel of one's being". This is the fount of Revelation (*waḥy*) for the prophets, and inspiration (*ilhām*) and sacred knowledge (*ʿirfān/maʿrifah*) for the saints. Corbin says, "the Angel [of one's being] has the same spiritual function as the Imām in Shīʿism, the *walāyah* of the Imām as the donor of hidden meaning, and it would seem that Shīʿite Sufism alone makes the idea of the *walāyah* clear from all sides."[2]

The *Quṭb* in Sufism

When speaking of the *Quṭb* in Sufism, one must realize that this term possesses different shades of meaning according to the

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And for Being, in beings, is a Being that saith 'Be'.
Reserved for it my heart is, guided, and chosen.
O ponder what I say with the Intellect's eye.
Keen is the Intellect of hearing and of insight.

Martin Lings, *Sufi Poems: A Mediaeval Anthology* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2004), p. 30.

1. *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, pp. 130-131.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

religious, historical, and cultural context in which it is used. In a Shīʿite Sufi context the term *Quṭb* refers to the Imām, and only by extension the Sufi masters who represent him. In Sunni Sufism, it can also refer to the direct successors of the Prophet, the heads of each Sufi order, or great scholars or saints who acquired this title from their respective communities. For the purpose of this study, I will be generally referring to the term *Quṭb* as the supreme living axis in the celestial hierarchy of the Sufis, while occasionally making use of the other more popular definitions when necessary. According to Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ʿArabī, who is considered by many to be the Greatest Master (al-shaykh al-akbar) of doctrinal Sufism,

> The Pole is both the centre of the circle of the universe, and its circumference. He is the Mirror of God, and the pivot of the world. He is bound by the subtle links to the hearts of all created beings and brings them either good or evil, neither one predominating. But from the point of view of the Pole, these things in themselves are neither good nor evil, and become good or bad as a result of the vessel that receives them. The Pole's dwelling place is the dwelling place of pure existentiation (*ījād*)…He is the universal Veil within Existence. He keeps the treasures of divine Generosity. God is perpetually epiphanized to him…He is located in Mecca, whatever place he happens to be bodily. When a Pole is enthroned at the level of the *quṭbiyyah*, all beings, animal or vegetable, make a covenant with him other than men and jinns (with a few exceptions)…[1]

1. Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ʿArabī* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p. 95.

This passage describes the role of the *Quṭb* according to one of the most influential Sufi scholars in Islamic history. It is clear from Ibn ʿArabī's words that the Pole is more than just a title of respect, but a spiritual function that transcends our ordinary understanding of what it means to be human. Indeed, in Sufism, the *Quṭb* possesses the highest degree of sanctity that a human can attain at any given time by virtue of his spiritual proximity to the Prophet of Islam and the Divine Reality. Moreover, he is responsible for governing a spiritual hierarchy, which directs and guides men on the spiritual path (*ṭarīqah*) to the Truth *(al-ḥaqq*). In Sunni Sufism, it is impossible to come to a clear consensus as to the identity of the Pole in any one age because each Sufi order traces its lineage through different masters.

According to the great Persian Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273) in his *Mathnawī*:

I adore ʿAlī, love is our creed
and whoever holds us as their enemy
May he become blind in both eyes.
We found felicity from the love of ʿAlī
On every breath our consciousness brings us more felicity

The lucrative reward that I have with the love of ʿAlī
O Brother! This world and the next are the reward in this deal
He who calls anyone other than the Prince of the Faithful as Imām
He is an idol-worshipper, and breaking idols is our job
O You lover of the Truth, love the king of all men
Whoever does not love this king is a stranger to us, and our enemy
The vision of every Khārajite is deprived from seeing ʿAlī's face

The neck of every *Nāṣibī* (ʿAlī's enemy) hangs on our hanging pole

O Shams of Tabrīz, be silent, do not reveal divine mysteries any more

Whoever know the mysteries of that king, is aware of our mysteries too.[1]

While there is not the same degree of unanimity that one finds in the Shīʿite world regarding the Imām, most Sufis suggest that ʿAlī is the first *Quṭb* after the Prophet Muḥammad.[2] The Sufi poet ʿAṭṭār wrote, "Know the light of Aḥmad [Muḥammad] and Ḥaydar [ʿAlī] as one. Discover these mysteries by the help of your intellect."[3] The axis of Islam is represented by ʿAlī's sword Dhū'l-faqār[4], which was given to him by the Prophet. The two points at the top of the sword can be said to represent the two main esoteric traditions in Islam, Shīʿism and Sufism, both of which come back to the hands of ʿAlī. Every Sufi Order

1. *Tuḥfeh-ye ʿAbbāsī*, p. 152.
2. Apparently this view was not held by Ibn ʿArabī, who puts Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān before ʿAlī when he writes, "Some of the Poles possess an authority which is manifested and hold the office of caliph in the external sense, just as they are caliphs in the inner sense in virtue of their spiritual rank. This was so in the case of Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān and ʿAlī, Ḥasan and Muʿāwiya ibn Yazīd, ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz and al-Mutawakkil…" Ibn ʿArabī does however recognize that the various Poles have different spiritual stations depending on which prophet they inherited their station from. He also writes, "The most perfect of Poles is the Muḥammadan Pole. The ones below him are divided hierarchically according to the rank of the Prophets whose heirs they are; for they are the heirs of Jesus, of Abraham, of Joseph, of Noah, and so on; and the position of each pole is determined by the position of the prophet who heir he is…Thus, some are superior to others, but this superiority relates only to their spiritual knowledge, and there is no distinction to be made between them as regards their office (*quṭbiyyah*) and the government of the universe (*tadbīr al-wujūd*)." He also states that ʿAlī, ʿUmar, Zayn al-ʿAbidīn, ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī and others were *afrād* or solitary saints, of equal yet independent status with the Pole. *Seal of the Saints*, pp. 95-96, 107.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
4. *Symbols of Sacred Science*, pp. 179-184.

(*ṭarīqah*) traces its lineage back to ʿAlī, including those such as the Naqshabandiyyah, which also trace their lineage back to the Prophet's close companion Abū Bakr. From ʿAlī and Abū Bakr the various Sufi Orders (*ṭuruq*) branch out, yet share the same trunk. This is the Muḥammadan grace (*al-barakah al-muhammadiyyah*), whose roots are the Divine Revelation. According to S.H. Nasr,

> It can be said that if Shīʿism is the "Islam of ʿAlī," the grace or *barakah* of ʿAlī is present in the Sunni world in the Sufi orders as well as craft guilds which have been traditionally linked to the orders…It cannot be said that Shīʿism is the origin of Sufism. But it can be said that because there is but one source of Islamic esoterism issuing from the revelation and soul of the Prophet and in as much as ʿAlī stands at the origin of Shīʿism, and is at the same time the outstanding representative of Islamic esoterism, the sources of Shīʿism and Sufism are nearly the same and they have many elements in common.[1]

Without a doubt, there are other companions or contemporaries of the Prophet, such as Abū Bakr, Abū Dharr, Salmān, Bilāl,[2] and Uways al-Qaranī,[3] who are also eminent

1. *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, pp. 121-122.
2. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1976), p. 84. It is interesting to note that among the Prophet's companions who are associated with Sufism, ʿAlī, Abū Bakr, Abū Dharr, and Uways (along with the Prophet himself) were Arabs, Salmān was Persian, and Bilāl was African. While most of the poles of early Sufism were either Arab or Persian, Sufi orders in sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent, China, the Malay world, and even Europe and the Americas, would also claim that their masters are or are connected to the current Pole.
3. Strictly speaking Uways was not a companion, but a contemporary who knew and was close to the Prophet spiritually while living in Yemen.

representatives of Islamic esoterism. Yet, the very fact that ʿAlī stands at the head of all Sufi orders going back the Prophet, suggests that the first Shīʿite Imām is also the first *Quṭb* in Sufism. The Prophet of Islam's saying, "I am the city of knowledge, and ʿAlī is its gate; so whoever desires knowledge, let him enter the gate," is often invoked by Sufis to legitimate this claim,[1] as well as the *ḥadīth*, "I did not whisper with him, but God whispered with him."[2] It is worth noting that one of the eminent representatives of Islamic esoterism in the generation following the Prophet was Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, a Sunni disciple of ʿAlī, and teacher of the great female saint Rābiʿah al-ʿAdawiyyah.[3]

Here we see how the influence of the *Quṭb* transcends outward religious differences, yet respects them on their own level. This in a sense sums up the attitude of Sufism towards Sunnism and Shīʿism. Indeed, there are Sufi orders that are Sunni such as the Qādiriyyah, the Shādhiliyyah, or the Naqshabandiyyah, and others that are of a Shīʿite persuasion, such as the Niʿmatullāhiyyah or the Dhahabiyyah.[4] On the one hand, the identity of the current *Quṭb* in a Shīʿite Sufi order will invariably be the Hidden Imām, who the Sufi shaykhs represent. On the other hand, there is no consensus among Sufis as to the identity of the *Quṭb* in the Sunni world, except in the case of past poles, such as the eminent ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī and Abū Madyan Shuʿayb. According to Martin Lings, "It would perhaps be true to say that no one since the death of the Caliph ʿAlī has exercised in person a spiritual influence of such far-reaching dimensions as did ʿAbd al-Qādir."[5] Jīlānī attested to his spiritual

1. *Justice and Remembrance*, p. 11.
2. *Tuḥfeh-ye ʿAbbāsī*, p. 3.
3. *Sufi Essays*, p. 114.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
5. *What is Sufism?*, p. 112.

rank by saying, "This foot of mine is on the neck of every saint of God."[1]

It is generally believed that at any given time there is only one Pole on the earth who initiates and guides men spiritually and even directs the affairs of the cosmos. He is surrounded by the *awliyā'* (friends of God) who make up a spiritual hierarchy and look after the affairs of humanity in various regions.[2] In the early days of Sufism it is generally agreed that the great poles were Sarī al-Saqatī and Junayd of Baghdad, and also Ibrāhim al-Adham and Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī of Khorasan. It is also believed that the founders of the great Sufi orders were poles (*aqṭāb*) such as ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, Muʿīn al-Dīn Chishtī, Abū'l Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Shāh Niʿmatullāh, Aḥmad Tijānī, Mūlāy al-ʿArabī al-Darqāwī, Aḥmadu Bāmbā, Aḥmad al-ʿAlawī,[3] as well as saints who did not found a *ṭarīqah,* but are seen as intellectual and spiritual poles nonetheless. Here we are reminded of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī,[4] Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabī, and Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrazī, who was a Shīʿite. We should reiterate the point that many Sunni Sufi orders have as many as the first eight Imāms of Shīʿism in their *silsilah* (chain of initiation) as poles, such as the Qādiriyyah and Shādhiliyyah orders.

Concerning the qualities of the Pole, which he recognized in his own master, ʿAbd al-Salām ibn Māshish, Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī wrote:

> The Pole has fifteen miracles. Hence, anyone who makes a claim to all or any of them must be distinguished by the [Divine] provision of mercy,

1. *Seal of the Saints*, p. 108.
2. Here we are reminded of the seven saints of Morocco and the nine saints of Java.
3. *What is Sufism?*, pp. 100-127.
4. Abū Ḥāmid's younger brother Aḥmad Ghazzālī was a Pole of Sufism, while many Muslims believe Abū Ḥāmid was an intellectual pole, if such a term is permitted, whose defense of Sufism remains virtually unsurpassed in Islamic history.

> sinlessness, viceregency, proxyhood, and the sustenance granted to those who carry the majestic throne. In addition, he must have received illumination into the reality of the Divine essence and an all-encompassing comprehension of the [Divine] attributes. He must likewise be honored with the miracle of judgment, the ability to distinguish between the two existences, the separation of the first from the first, that from which it was separated until its end and those who have been established therein, the judgment concerning what is before and what is after and concerning the One who has neither before nor after, and the knowledge of the beginning, that is, the knowledge which encompasses every science and everything known, from the first secret until its end, then returning to it again. This, then, is a criterion which God gave the shaykh by which to test anyone who makes a claim to this lofty rank, which guards secrets and encompasses the divine provision of lights. [1]

Some antinomian Sufis have suggested that the Divine Law (*Sharīʿah*) is dispensable at a certain stage of the Path. This perspective contradicts the teachings and experiences of most Sufi masters and poles, such as Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī,[2] who wrote the following regarding his own spiritual station:

1. Ibn 'Ata'Allah al-Iskandari, *The Subtle Blessings* (*Lata'if al-Minan*), trans. Nancy Roberts (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005), p. 112.
2. Some would object to this assertion, citing Moses' experience with Khiḍr, mentioned in the Quran. Khiḍr's actions, however, did not contradict the Divine Law, they only appeared to in the eyes of Moses.

> My heart was enlightened one day and I saw the kingdom of the seven heavens and the seven earths. I then committed a minor sin, after which the vision was concealed from me. I was astonished that such a trifling occurrence could conceal from me something so momentous. Just then someone said to me, '[Spiritual] insight is like [physical] sight: The tiniest thing that gets in the eye can obstruct one's vision.'[1]

We read in the Quran, "On the earth there are signs, to all who are endowed with inner certainty, just as [there are] within your own selves…"[2] This verse is of particular importance for Sufis. And like other verses in the Quran it has several levels of meaning. For the *Quṭb* or Universal Man, the signs on the earth and those in his soul coincide. Not only does he initiate men into the Divine mysteries, but the actual cosmos is seen as a reflection of his inner state. One often hears stories about the birth of the prophets, the Imāms, or great saints, which coincide with rare celestial events, such as the coming of a comet, or even stories of people who have seen the sky light up—as it does during the day—in the middle of the night! One recalls the story mentioned in the Gospel, where the three wise men saw a star in the east, which signified the birth of Christ.[3] The cosmos is said to reflect the inner state of the *Quṭb* during his entire life. When the Prophet of Islam first received the Revelation in 610, it is said that the entire sky turned green. While it is impossible to verify the hagiographical miracles associated with the lives of prophets and saints, it is important to note that many Shī'ites and Sufis believe that there is a direct connection between the

1. *The Subtle Blessings* (*Lata'if al-Minan*), p. 111.
2. Quran 51:20-21
3. Matthew 2:1-2

macrocosm and the microcosm—or the Universal Man—who is seen as the axis of the world.

Of particular importance in Islam and Sufism is the symbol of the spiritual sun. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's enigmatic companion Shams al-Dīn (lit. the sun of religion) al-Tabrīzī is said to symbolize the spiritual sun—the light of the Prophet (*al-nūr al-muḥammadiyyah*) and the Divine Light (al-Nūr). Shams set Rūmī's heart on fire, and inspired his incomparable poetry, such as his *Mathnawī*, which many have identified as an esoteric commentary on the Quran. In the *samāʿ* (spiritual concert) of Rūmī's Mawlawiyyah *ṭarīqah*, the dervishes turn around their own axis, the heart, and also in a larger circle around the shaykh. The dervishes represent the movements of the planets around the Sun, the angels around the Throne, and also Rūmī's lament for his companion Shams. The latter's mysterious disappearance[1] left Rūmī in a state of separation and longing, which only increased his love for the Friend. Many Sufi orders have movements that correspond to those in the Mawlawiyyah *ṭarīqah* and that assist in orienting man's attention towards the Divine Sun, not to mention the circumambulations that Muslims make around the Kaʿbah during the annual pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) to Mecca. The presence of Shams in the life of Rūmī reveals the enormous impact of the Pole, not only for those in the Mawlawiyyah *ṭarīqah*, but also for the world at large, which continues to draw inspiration from Rūmī's poetry, and the sacred dance that the Mawlawiyyah order performs.[2]

1. Some Shīʿites believe that Shams was the Hidden Imām. Despite the problems that arise when one attempts to verify such claims, Shams serves the same function for Rūmī and the Mawlawiyyah *ṭarīqah* as the Hidden Imām does for Shīʿites. Again we are concerned with how the Imām and *Quṭb* are perceived by Shīʿites and Sunnis.

2. Rūmī says in his Diwān-i Kabir, "I am a slave of the Quran if I have a soul. I am dust of the road of Muḥammad, the Chosen. If anyone quotes from my sayings other than this, I have nothing to do with him and I have nothing to do with his words."

We must also distinguish between the *Ghawth*, who is the chief *Quṭb* in Sufism, and the poles of each order. Ultimately, there is only one Pole on the earth at any given time. Yet, each order has its own pole (who may in fact be the *Quṭb*), who is the spiritual master (*shaykh* or *pīr*). These two perspectives do not necessarily contradict each other because the spiritual master of a particular order is seen as having a spiritual connection with the *Quṭb* or the Prophet of Islam. While being effaced in the Divine Reality and the light of the Prophet, he is also effaced in the light of the *Quṭb*. In fact, he represents the light of prophecy and the light of initiation for the disciple, while existing somewhere on the spiritual hierarchy in the proximity of the *Quṭb*, whom he has found in his own being.

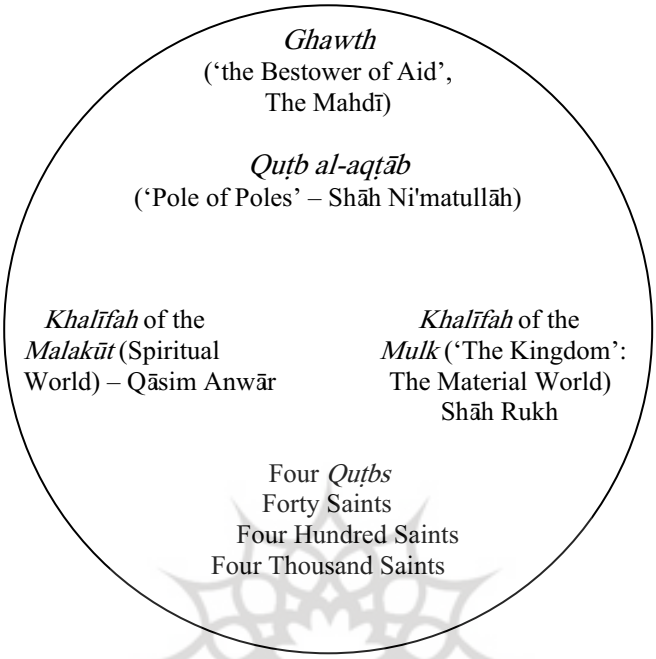
In the context of Shīʿite Sufism, the *Ghawth*, who can be envisaged as the supreme Pole, is the Imām, while the *Quṭb* is a Sufi Master who is the deputy of the *Ghawth*. From a Shīʿite Sufi perspective the Imām is responsible for initiating the founders of the great Sufi orders. As we have seen, the Imāms do in fact play a major role in the chains of even the Sunni Sufi orders. This perspective is seen in the diagram below,[1] which presents the spiritual hierarchy as seen by the Niʿmatullāhī *ṭarīqah* in the time of its founder Shāh Niʿmatullāh.

In this model, we see a bipartite differentiation of the supreme Axis, who is seen as the Mahdī and who is represented by the Sufi Master.

While various orders gravitate to either Shīʿism or Sunnism, depending on what region they are found in and their spiritual chains, Sufism has always been able to transcend outward differences. It is also possible to have Sunnis and Shīʿites in the same *ṭarīqah*, not to mention rare cases when seekers from other

1. Nasrollah Pourjavady and Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Kings of Love: The History & Poetry of the Niʿmatullāhī Sufi Order of Iran* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1978), p. 42.

religions were given guidance by Sufi Masters, and allowed to participate in Sufi gatherings.



Referring to the spiritual hierarchy of saints (*awliyā'*), which can be envisaged as concentric circles surrounding the Axis, Henry Corbin quotes Rūzbehān Baqlī:

> God, possesses on earth *three hundred eyes* or persons[1] whose heart is consonant with the heart of *Adam*; *forty* whose heart is consonant with the heart of *Moses*; *seven* whose heart is consonant with the heart of *Abraham*; *five* whose heart is consonant with the heart of *Gabriel*; *three* whose

1. One is reminded of the famous *ḥadīth qudsī*, in which God speaks through the Prophet in the first person, "…When I love [my servant] I become his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot with which he walks…"

> heart is consonant with the heart of *Michael*; *one* (the *pole*) whose heart is consonant with the heart of *Seraphiel*.

And Corbin then adds his own commentary:

> The sum of 356 persons is raised to the total of 360 by four figures of prophets who, according to Islamic esoterism meditating on the Quranic revelation, have the common characteristic of having been carried off *alive* from death: Enoch (that is to say Idrīs, identified with Hermes), Khiḍr, Elijah, and Christ.[1]

Closely connected to the spiritual hierarchy of the Sufis is the connection between prophecy and sanctity. In the writings of many Sufi scholars, most notably Ibn ʿArabī, each saint takes his station from a particular prophet, such as Enoch, Moses, Jesus, or Muḥammad, which determines the saint's level of realization.[2] William Chittick, one of the contemporary authorities on the writings of Ibn ʿArabī, refers to the spiritual hierarchy in terms of the Divine Names, which make up the cosmos itself:

> Thus for example, the Pole manifests the name God, because the Pole is the fully actualized image of God, comprehending and embodying all the divine attributes without exception. The two Imams manifest the names King and Lord—that is, God as ruler and controller of the universe (the Absolute) and God as nurturer and protector of each living thing in the universe (the Infinite). The four Pegs display the traces of the names Living, Knowing,

1. *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, pp. 54-55.
2. For an in depth discussion of this topic see M. Chodkiewicz's *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ʿArabī*.

> Desiring, and Powerful (often called the "four pillars" of the divinity). The seven Substitutes reveal the properties of the names Living, Knowing, Loving, Powerful, Grateful, Hearing, and Seeing.[1]

The Names and Attributes of God are a central theme in the Quran. These are the permissible aniconic forms of worship for the Muslim. According to Ibn ʿArabī and others, each person was created through or with a Divine Name, and must actualize that latent quality or virtue within themselves. As we see above, the *awliyā'* and the *Quṭb*, reflect these names most clearly, and in the case of the *Quṭb*, the Supreme Name, Allah.[2] Herein lies one of the mysteries of the Prophet's name ʿAbd Allāh (servant of God), or other names such as ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (servant of the Merciful), ʿAbd al-Qādir (servant of the Powerful), etc. The servant is annihilated before the Name, and is seen to reflect (to a degree[3]) that Quality of God in the cosmos.

On the question of whether or not a woman can be considered the *Quṭb*, Claude Addas writes concerning Ibn ʿArabī's view, "He distinguishes himself from some of his co-religionists, because for him there was no level of spiritual

1. William Chittick, "The Absent Men in Islamic Cosmology" in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone, Jr. (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 2001), p. 703.

2. According to Arzina R. Lalani, "The Imāms, too, according to [Imām] al-Bāqir, know the Greatest Name of God (*ism Allāh al-aʿẓam*) which has seventy-three versions…" *Early Shīʿī Thought*, p. 79. See also Ibn al-ʿArabī's *The Meccan Revelations* (*al-Futūhāt al-makkīyah*), ed. by Michel Chodkiewicz, trans. William Chittick & James Morris (New York: Pir Press, 2005) p. 190-197.

3. In Islamic cosmology, God's angels, books, the signs in nature, and other theophanies also reflect the Divine Attributes, while He and His Attributes transcend even the greatest manifestation in the cosmos.

realization which women are incapable of attaining."[1] Addas then quotes Ibn ʿArabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyah* (*The Meccan Revelations*), "Men are women have their share in every level, including the function of Pole (*Quṭb*)."[2] While the Pole and the celestial hierarchy of saints are generally viewed within the context of Islamic esoterism, some eminent authorities in Islamic history have suggested that this hierarchy is made up of saintly men and women from all religions. Regarding the inclusion of saints and sages from other religions in the celestial hierarchy of the Sufis, S.H. Nasr writes,

> During these years [Ibn ʿArabī] continued to have his theophanic visions. He had already had a vision of the invisible hierarchy ruling the Universe, consisting of the Supreme Pole (*Quṭb*); the two *imāms*; the four "pillars" (*awtād*) governing the four cardinal points; the seven "substitutes" (*abdāl*) the influence of each of whom reigns over one of the climates; the twelve chiefs (*nuqabāʾ*), dominating the twelve signs of the Zodiac; and the eight nobles (*nujabāʾ*) corresponding to eight heavenly spheres. He also had a vision of all the spiritual poles of the revelations anteceding Islam, and realized the transcendent unity of all the traditions revealed by God to man.[3]

1. Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p. 87.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
3. *Three Muslim Sages*, p. 95. S.H. Nasr also writes, "Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, made no reservations in pointing to the correspondence existing between the "Muḥammadan" pleroma of seventy-two stars of the Islamic universe and the seventy-two stars of the pleroma comprised of those sages who had preserved their primordial nature but belong to a world outside of the specifically Islamic one." *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 72

Referring to the eschatological events that are said to occur during the rise of the Mahdī, whose function, but not his identity, is generally agreed upon by Sunnis and Shīʿites, Amir-Moezzi states:

> The Mahdī will also restore other religions, likewise abandoned and disfigured, to their original truth, in effect, it is said that he will take out of his cave, where they are hidden, all the holy Books of the earlier prophets, and that he will have their principles followed by their faithful.[1]

We must remind our readers that after the return of the Mahdī, Muslims believe that Christ will return, and will therefore be the Axis for Muslims, as he has been for certain Sufis in Islamic history, and the whole of Christendom. Christ is of central importance in the writings of many Sufis; foremost among them is Ibn ʿArabī, who referred to Christ as the Seal of the Saints (*khatm al-awliyā'*)[2] because of his role at the end of time, as well as his archetypal importance as a Sufi master. Christ is one of the clearest examples of Muḥammadan poverty (*al-faqr al-muḥammadiyyah*) in the minds of many Muslims. And, as is the case with all pre-Islamic prophets, his teachings and presence are revered among Muslims.

1. *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, p. 119.
2. S.H. Nasr writes, "Ibn ʿArabī and following him Dā'ūd al-Qayṣarī consider Christ as the 'universal seal of sanctity', and Ibn ʿArabī refers indirectly to himself as the 'particular seal of sanctity' whereas most Shīʿite authors believe these titles belong to ʿAlī and the Mahdī respectively. In this delicate question the distinction between the 'universal seal of sanctity' and the 'particular or Muḥammadan seal of sanctity' must be kept especially in mind. In any case this is a point of contention between Ibn ʿArabī and even his most ardent Shīʿite followers such as Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī." *Sufi Essays*, p. 108.

Some Conclusions

One cannot go so far as to equate Shīʿism and Sufism.[1] While there are many parallels between the doctrine of the Imām and the *Quṭb*—especially among Shīʿite Sufis—the function and identity of these figures is not completely agreed upon among Shīʿites and Sunnis. Some of these differences are highlighted by Moojan Momen:

> It is precisely this closeness in certain areas between Shīʿism and Sufism that has led to antagonism among Shīʿi ulama towards Sufism. The concept of the *Quṭb* (who for most Sufi orders is the head of the order) as the purveyor of spiritual guidance and of God's grace to mankind is in direct conflict with the concept of the Imām who in Shīʿism fulfils this role…Indeed for Shīʿis, the Twelfth Imām, who is alive and only in occultation, is the living *Quṭb* and there can only ever be one *Quṭb* upon the earth at any one time.[2]

Shīʿism and Sufism have a great deal in common, but as we have seen they are not identical. Sufi masters can either been perceived as inheritors or usurpers of the spiritual function of the Imāms, much in the same way that some Sunnis perceive the function of the Imāms in Shīʿism in relation to the Prophet. S.H. Nasr helps to resolve this issue by stating:

> The function of the Imams and their descendents in the Shīʿite world is fulfilled in the Sunni world by the saints, who are in fact in a metaphysical sense the spiritual progeny of the Prophet and the Imāms.

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1. Of course for Shīʿite Sufis, Shīʿism and Sufism are the same reality. According to S.H. Nasr, "It is [Sayyid Ḥaydar] Āmulī who believed that every true Shīʿite is a Sufi and every true Sufi a Shīʿite." *Sufi Essays*, p. 115.
2. *An Introduction to Shiʿi Islam*, p. 209.

> The names of many of the Imāms appear in the chain of transmission (*silsilah*) of every Sufi order…[1]

As we have seen, there are Sunni and Shīʿite Sufi orders. The latter of which believe that the twelfth Imām is the *Quṭb*, whereas Sufi orders in the Sunni world have as many as eight of the Shīʿite Imāms on their chains of transmission as poles, but also assign this function to a host of other saintly figures in Islamic history, such as all four rightly-guided Caliphs, the founders of the Sufi orders, and often the current head of each *ṭarīqah*.[2] It is very difficult to reconcile the various applications of these doctrines in the Shī'ite and Sunni worlds without reducing one point of view to the other. However, Shīʿite Sufis believe the Imām and the *Quṭb* are the same person.[3] Conversely, when one closely examines the early chains of transmission of

1. *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, p. 173.

2. This matter can be resolved further when we take into account the *afrād* or solitary saints such as Khiḍr, who, according to Ibn ʿArabī and others, achieve a level of sanctity on par with the *Quṭb*, but are not under his jurisdiction. The story of Khiḍr and Moses in the Quran (18:65-82) helps to illustrate this point. If we maintain that there are other *afrād* in Islamic history, as Ibn ʿArabī does, then it is not difficult to see how there can be more than one center of spiritual authority. In fact, ʿAlī is seen by Ibn ʿArabī as one of the *afrād*, but a Pole only after the first three Caliphs. When Shīʿism begins to crystallize as a tradition in Islam, it does so independently of Sunnism, in the same way that ʿAlī was independent and even advised the first three Caliphs. One is again reminded of the story of Khiḍr and Moses in the Quran. The lives and functions of all of the Imāms are in many ways analogous to Khiḍr and his function. See Ibn al-ʿArabī's *The Meccan Revelations*, vol. I, ed. M. Chodkiewicz, trans. W.C. Chittick and J.W. Morris (New York, Pir Press, 2005), p. 266, and *Seal of the Saints*, pp. 95-96, 107-108.

3. For example, some Shīʿites have suggested that the Prophet transmitted the solar or total initiatic function (*walāyat-i kulliyyah*) to the Imāms, while the Prophet's close companions and the Sufi masters possess what has been called the lunar initiatic function (*walāyat-i qamariyyah*), because of their spiritual proximity to the Prophet and/or the Imāms. See H. Corbin's *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, pp. 105, 156.

the Sunni Sufi orders, one inevitably finds the name ʿAlī, and in many cases the names of the first eight Shīʿite Imāms, although they are not seen as Imāms according to Shīʿite Imamology, but as poles of their time.

In any case, the Imām and the *Quṭb* share a common function for their respective communities, whether they are envisaged as the Prophet Muḥammad, Fāṭimah, the Twelve Imāms, the *Quṭb*, the *awliyā'*, Khiḍr, or even pre-Islamic figures such as Jesus or the Virgin Mary. Without oversimplifying the matter, for Muslims, all of these figures are manifestations of the *Axis Mundi*, the central spiritual axis that connects Heaven and earth, and around which the world turns. While Shīʿites and Sufis believe that there is only one supreme *Quṭb* who manifests physically in our current era, the prophets, Imāms, and saints are all seen as celestial archetypes and manifestations of the Pole for particular communities and individuals guiding them back to the Divine Reality.

Our intention was not to identify the Pole of each age, but rather to elucidate the reality of the Imām and the *Quṭb* in Shīʿism and Sufism. In addition, we have sought to demonstrate their remarkable similarities, which include their cosmological function as inner guide to the faithful, and bridge between Heaven and earth. This is seen most clearly when the Axis of Shīʿism and Sufism does in fact coincide, as is the case with the Prophet Muḥammad, ʿAlī, the Mahdī, and Christ. Ultimately, the Imām or the *Quṭb* is the supreme witness of Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*). One may take the first *shahādah*, *Lā ilāha illa'Llāh*, "There is no god but God," to mean, "There is no center but the Divine Center," or "There is no axis, but the Divine Axis." To which He has added, *Muḥammadun rasūl Allāh*, "Muḥammad is the messenger of God," who is the manifestation of Unity on the plane of multiplicity, the *Axis Mundi*, which sanctifies the entire cosmos. Finally, one must remember the words of the Prophet,

which resonate clearly in the hearts of Shīʿites and Sufis alike, ʿ*Alīyun walī Allāh*, "Ali is the friend of God," which signifies initiation and transmission of the Muḥammadan grace, and realization of the Divine Center in the heart of the Universal Man.

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