

Between Sunnism and Shiism: The Sufi Path in the Reverence for the Ahl al-Bayt (The Case of Sayyid Yahyā Shirvānī)

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Abstract

There are several different approaches between the Sunnis and the Shia when defining the characteristics of the Ahl al-Bayt. The views of the Sufis representing the Sunni tradition on this issue follow a unique path. Because the esteem and spiritual depth assigned to ‘Alī (d. 40/661) and his progeny by most Sufis of the Sunni tradition resembles the Shia approach in certain regards, some believe that this perspective emerged as a result of a Shia-Rāfiḍī influence. However, the source of the understanding of Ahl al-Bayt, which emerged under the example of the views of Yahyā Shirvānī (d. 1466), the second founder of the Khalwatiyyah order—a highly influential and well-known order amongst Sunni Muslims—, was not Shia-Rāfiḍī, but Sunni Sufi tradition, which kept the Prophet’s sunnah/teachings alive in its full meaning. The view adopted by the Sufis does not correspond entirely to the Sunni or the Shia-Rāfiḍī view but is, in fact, its own perspective.

Keywords

Sayyid Yahyā Shirvānī, Khalwatiyyah, Sufism, *taṣawwuf*, Ahl al-Bayt, Shiism, Rāfiḍah, Sunnism, caliphs.

Introduction

When we look at the history of sects in Islam, even today, it is seen that different ideas are manifested through many specific concepts. These concepts include, in particular, “Imamate” and the definition of Ahl al-Bayt¹ in connection with the Imamate. When the Sunni Sufi literature is

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¹ The term Ahl al-Bayt was used to describe the ruling family of a tribe during the pre-Islamic era. It is now used to refer to the family and lineage of the Prophet. The Imāmiyyah (Twelver) branch of Shiism includes the Twelve Imams in the definition of the Ahl al-Bayt. In contrast, the Sunni tradition has a wider view, maintaining that the term Ahl al-Bayt includes the wives, children, grandchildren, and even blood relatives of the Prophet. In addition, the Shia acknowledge the guidance of the Prophet Muḥammad, ‘Alī, and his progeny, and reject the three Caliphs preceding ‘Alī. Contrarily, the Sunni tradition acknowledges and upholds without exception the four

analysed, it is noteworthy that Sufis have a unique approach that traces the source of their interpretations to the Prophet's (peace be on him) morality and *sunnah* (a normative custom of the Prophet). In this context, our study examines the views of Sayyid Yaḥyā Shirvānī (d. 1466), one of the important representatives of the Sunni Sufi tradition and the *pīr-i thānī* (the second founder) of the Khalwatiyyah order, on Ahl al-Bayt and the position of these views between the two sects.

Yaḥyā Shirvānī, the focus of this article, was born in the Shirvan region of Azerbaijan between 1390 and 1400² and was thus known as Shirvānī. Since he spent a long period of his life in Baku, he was also known as Bākuvī. Furthermore, he was granted the title of *sayyid* due to his being a descendant of the Prophet,³ with his lineage being traced back through Mūsā al-Kāzīm (d. 183/799) to Ḥusayn b. 'Alī (d. 61/680). Shirvānī's father was the *naqīb al-ashrāf*⁴ to Shirvān Shāh Khalīl Allāh I (d. 1466), the Sultan of Shirvan.⁵ Shirvānī—who is said to have been familiar with the sciences of the *sharīah* (religious law) and the secrets of *ṭarīqah* (spiritual order) from an early age and to have had a love for *shaykhs* and *ṭarīqahs*—was initiated by Ṣadr al-Dīn Khiyāwī (d. 1455),⁶ one of the Khalwatī *shaykhs* of the time, and became his son-in-law.⁷ Mehmed Nazmi Efendi records that Ṣadr al-Dīn Khiyāwī willed that Sayyid Yaḥyā should succeed him. However, when Khiyāwī's other son-in-law, Pīrzādah, came forward saying, "The prayer rug is my right,"⁸ Yaḥyā

Caliphs consequent to the Prophet and has a profound affection for them as well as for the Companions and the Ahl al-Bayt. See Mustafa Öz, "Ehl-i Beyt," in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1994), 10:498-501. Twelve Imams are respectively: 'Alī (d. 40/661), Ḥasan (d. 49/669), Ḥusayn (d. 61/680), Zayn al-'Ābidīn (d. 94/713), Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 114/733), Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), Mūsā al-Kāzīm (d. 183/799), 'Alī al-Riḍā (d. 203/818), Muḥammad al-Taqī (d. 220/835), 'Alī l-Hādī al-Naqī (d. 254/868), Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-'Askarī (d. 260/874), and Muḥammad al-Mahdī (b. 255 AH). See Ethem Rûhi Fıġlalı, "İsnâaşeriyye," in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2001), 23:142-47.

² His year of birth is not certain.

³ Hasan Almaz, *Bakü'den Anadolu'ya Yansıyan Işık Halvetî Pîr Seyyid Yahyâ Şirvânî'nin Hayatı ve Eserleri* (Ankara: Nüşa Yayınları, 2007), 33.

⁴ An honorary position in various Islamic states, given to the head representative of the *ashrāf*, the descendants of the Prophet.

⁵ Helvacıbaşızâde Mahmud el-Hulvî, *Lemezât-ı Hulawîyya az Lumeât-ı Ulviyya*, Süleymaniye Library, Hacı Mahmud Efendi, no. 4546, 212.

⁶ Ibid., 211.

⁷ Almaz, *Bakü'den Anadolu'ya Yansıyan Işık*, 2007, 35.

⁸ Meaning the caliphate is my right.

Shirvānī travelled from Shamākhī to Baku.⁹ Shirvān Shāh Khalīl Allāh I allocated the Keykubad Masjid next to the palace in Baku to him, and Yaḥyā Shirvānī continued his *irshād*¹⁰ activities here for more than forty years. Upon his death in 1466, Yaḥyā Shirvānī left behind nearly ten thousand disciples, three hundred and sixty caliphs, and many written works. His tomb is in the courtyard of the palace of the Shirvān Shāhs in Baku.¹¹

It is worth noting that Shirvānī, himself a descendant of the Ahl al-Bayt, was held in high esteem by the Shirvanshahids, who adopted the Sunni creed. The continuation of his profound love for the Ahl al-Bayt was transmitted through his caliphs to another Sunni state, the Ottoman Empire, and with the support of the sultans, this order spread to a wide circle. Some researchers claim that the names of the Ahl al-Bayt Imams were changed or erased in the chain of the *ṭarīqah* during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries due to the wars between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shiite Safavids.¹² However, it can be seen that this information is not correct from Yūsuf b. Ya‘qūb’s *Manāqib-i Sharīf ve Ṭarīqatnāmah-i Pīrān Mashā’ikh-i Ṭarīqat-i ‘Aliyyah-i Khalwatiyyah*,¹³ one of the important works

⁹ Mehmet Nazmî Efendi, *Osmanlılarda Tasavvufî Hayat Halvetîlik Örneği*, ed. Osman Türer (Istanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 2005), 258.

¹⁰ Act of teaching and showing the true path.

¹¹ Mehmet Rıhtım, “Yaḥyâ-yı Şîrvânî,” in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2013), 43:264-66.

¹² See Hulûsî Yılmaz, “Halvetilik ve Anadolu Aleviliği İlişkisi Çerçevesinde Pir Ahmed Efendi Ahfadına Genel Bir Bakış,” *NEÜ Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 2 (2013): 123-24. F. de Jong makes a similar claim in his encyclopaedic article “Khalwatiyyah” in which he quotes Kissling extensively. Based on the above-mentioned sources, it becomes clear that their claim does not correspond to the facts. In this article, it is also claimed that the founder of Khalwatiyya was Shirvānī by referring to Kissling. See F. De Jong, “Khalwatiyya,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. E. van Donzel, B. Lewis, and Ch. Pellat, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 4:991-93. In the light of today’s findings, the tomb of the founder of the sect ‘Umar al-Khalwatī was found in Azerbaijan and information such as the date of his death and that he was the “founder of the sect” was found in the inscription. Therefore, it is now certain that the founder of the order is ‘Umar al-Khalwatī. See İlahe M. Kurşun, “Seyyid Yahyâ-yı Şîrvânî’nin Ehl-i Beyt Muhabbeti ve Tasavvufî Görüşleri” (PhD diss. Tasavvuf Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, Üsküdar Üniversitesi, 2024), 70.

¹³ 1) The Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11/632); 2) ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661); 3) Ḥasan b. ‘Alī (d. 49/669); 4) Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī (d. 61/680); 5) Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728). After Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, the chain continues as follows: 6) Ḥabīb al-‘Ajamī (d. 130/747-748); 7) Dāwūd al-Ṭā’ī (d. 165/781-82); 8) Ma’rūf al-Karkhī (d. 200/815-816). In another narration, the chain is as follows: Zayn al-‘Abidīn (d. 94/713); Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 114/733); Ja’far al-Şādiq (d. 148/765); Mūsā al-Kāzīm (d. 183/799); ‘Alī al-Riḍā (d. 203/818). After Ma’rūf al-Karkhī, the chain continues as follows: 9) Sarī al-Saqāṭī (d. 251/865); 10) Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/911); 11) Mimshād al-Dīnawarī (d. 299/911); 12) Muḥammad al-Kardī

of the sixteenth century, and Hulvī's *Lemezāt*, another example from the 17th century. These works are important records showing that even in the centuries after Shirvānī, the names of the Ahl al-Bayt Imams were preserved and continued.¹⁴

Returning to Shirvānī after a brief evaluation of the sources, it can be seen that his views on the Ahl al-Bayt, as a Sufi belonging to the Sunni tradition, are similar to those of the Imāmiyyah Shia. In this context, the views of Shirvānī, who was accused of being a Shia-Rāfiḍī, will be evaluated comparatively throughout the study, taking into account the doctrines of the Imāmiyyah Shia. Questions such as, "How is it possible for a Sufi who claims to belong to the Sunni tradition to show profound affection for the Ahl al-Bayt and use similar terms with Shia as if he were a Shia?"; "Are there similar examples of this attitude among other Sufis?"; "Do Sufis follow a different method between the two sects based on the example of Shirvānī?"; or "Do they attribute different meanings to known concepts?" will be answered throughout the article.

In this context, to clarify what we mean by the terms "Ahl al-Sunnah, Rāfiḍah, and Imamate," which will be encountered frequently in the article, these terms will be explained briefly.

Ahl al-Sunnah

The phrase Ahl al-Sunnah, which literally means "those who adopt the path drawn in the spiritual field," is an abbreviated form of the expression Ahl al-Sunnah wa 'l-Jamā'ah (who adhere to the *sunnah* and who unite upon it). Therefore, one may define the concept of Ahl al-Sunnah as "those who adopt the path followed by the Prophet and his Companions in the basic issues of religion."¹⁵ This process started with

(or al-Kurdī) (d.?); 13) Walī al-Dīn al-Qāḍī (d.?); 14) 'Umar al-Bakrī (d. 487/1094); 15) Abū 'l-Najīb Suhrawardī (d. 563/1168); 16) Quṭb al-Dīn al-Abharī (d. 622/1225); 17) Rukn al-Dīn al-Najāshī (d.?); 18) Shihāb al-Dīn Tabrīzī (d. 702/1302-03); 19) Jamāl al-Dīn al-Azharī (d. 760/1358-59); 20) Zāhid Gīlānī (d. 700/1301); 21) Akhī Aḥmad Khalwatī (d.?); 22) 'Umar al-Khalwatī (d. 800/1397); 23) Akhī Miram Khalwatī (d. 812/1409); 24) Hājī 'Izz al-Dīn Khalwatī (d. 828/1425); 25) Ṣadr al-Dīn Khalwatī (d. 860/1455); 26) Sayyid Yahyā al-Shirvānī (d. 870/1466). See Yūsuf b. Ya'qūb, *Manāqib-i Sharīf ve Ṭarīqatnāme-i Pīrān Mashā'ikh-i Ṭarīqat-i 'Aliyya-i Khalwatiyyah* (Marmara: İlâhiyat Nadir Eserler Ktp., no. 297.75-.792).

¹⁴ In recent years, the generally accepted chain of the Khalwatiyyah order begins with the Prophet and 'Alī, continuing with Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. The names of other Imams from the Ahl al-Bayt are not included in this chain. See Mustafa Aşkar, "Bir Türk Tarikatı Olarak Halvetiyyenin Tarihî Gelişimi ve Halvetiyye Silsilesinin Tahlili," *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 1 (1999): 554.

¹⁵ Yūsuf Şevki Yavuz, "Ehl-i Sünnet," in TDV *İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (DİA) (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1994), 10:525-30.

the formation of Khawārij, Murji'ah, Shia, Qadariyyah, and Mu'tazilah and the emergence of a reaction against the views of these sects. Because the views of these sects were accepted as *bid'ah* (a belief or practice for which there is no precedent in the time of the Prophet), the holders of these views were called Ahl al-Bid'ah (People of the Innovation). Some of the important names in Islamic history who used this expression were Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889), and Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/936).¹⁶

The basis of these opposing views among the sects is related to the appointment of an imam as the head of the *ummah* (community) after the Prophet's death. As it is known, when the Prophet passed away, the Anṣār (helpers) gathered in the *Thaqīfah* of the Banū Sā'idah (the roofed assembly hall of the Sā'idah) to elect a person to govern them before his body was buried. Notable Companions such as Abū Bakr (d. 13/634), 'Umar (d. 23/644), and Abū 'Ubaydah b. al-Jarrāḥ (d. 18/639), who heard about this situation, were involved in the meeting of the Anṣār, and as a result of this meeting, Abū Bakr was elected as the first Islamic caliph after the Prophet. In this context, while Shia argued that Caliphate was 'Alī's right and rejected the first three caliphs, Ahl al-Sunnah accepted them all and argued that this Caliphate was legitimate.¹⁷ Consequently, the first divisions among the Muslims were rooted in this event and other disputes were shaped on this axis. This issue will be discussed in detail under the title of Imamate.

If we look at the history of sects in Islam, it is striking that the conflicts that have arisen have been caused by factors such as politics, tribalism, self-interest, or the imposition of one's own opinion as the ultimate truth. Since the Prophet said, "He who does not like my *sunnah* is not from me,"¹⁸ and all sects claim to follow his *sunnah*, it is, therefore, important to understand what the concept of *sunnah* meant in the time of the Prophet. The depth that Sufis representing the Sunni tradition brought to the concept of *sunnah* in the case of Shirvānī will clarify the issue.

In the sources of *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 297/909) is considered one of the founders of the Sunni Sufi tradition. Junayd al-

¹⁶ See Siddık Korkmaz, "Sınırları Belirlenen Bir Dini Oluşum: Ehl-i Sünnet ve'l-Cemaat," *Marife Dergisi* 3 (2005): 379-80.

¹⁷ Mehmet Hanifi Yoldaş, "The Concept of Imam in the Qur'an and Islamic Sects' Conceptualization of Caliphate," *Journal of MESNED Divinity Researches* 10 (2019): 244-45.

¹⁸ Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-nikāḥ, bāb al-targhīb fī 'l-nikāḥ, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5063>; Aḥmad b. Shu'ayb al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, kitāb al-nikāḥ, bāb al-nahy 'an al-tabattul, <https://sunnah.com/nasai:3217>.

Baghdādī,¹⁹ who was a great jurist and whose name is recorded in the chains of the Sunni orders, states that the path of Sufism is to follow the *sunnah* of the Prophet in the following words: “Except those who follow the Messenger of Allah, follow his *sunnah*, and follow his way, all paths to Allah are closed to human beings.”²⁰

The Sunni Sufi tradition, the foundations of which were laid with Junayd al-Baghdādī, was continued by names such as al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), al-Kalābādhī (d. 380/990), al-Makkī (d. 386/996), and al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), who would later be called “Classics of Sufism” by writing works and preserving the unity of *sharīah-ḥaqīqah* (law-truth).

On the one hand, they wrote works on the acceptance of Sufism as a religious science against “outsiders,”²¹ and on the other hand, they struggled against groups within Sufism who presented themselves as Sufis but misnamed Sufism by disrupting the balance between *sharīah* and *ḥaqīqah*. For example, al-Sarrāj expresses the situation of his time in the following words in the introduction explaining the reasons for writing *al-Luma'*:

Today, many people speak about the teachings of Sufis. Those who want to resemble Sufis and those who talk about Sufi teachings by means of allusion have increased considerably. Each of these groups has works written in their own expressions. It is not possible to consider all of them pleasant. This is because the great ones who spoke on this subject did not speak without severing their ties with the world and killing their *nafs* (ego) with struggling, asceticism and *wajd* (ecstasy). They turned their backs on the world and isolated themselves from everything except God. They embraced knowledge and became the people of the *taḥqīq* (who know the truth with evidence) in deeds, and thus they spoke after combining knowledge, truth and deeds.²²

Another example is al-Qushayrī, the author of *al-Risālah*. In the introduction of his work, he mentions a similar problem. He expresses his discomfort with the stagnation and relaxation in the path of Sufism, the erasure of the sense of the law from the hearts, and the existence of those who misname Sufism and claim to be “Sufis”:

The aim is to give strength to those who want to enter this order, to ensure that you testify in my favour that I have reformed the path of

¹⁹ Junayd al-Baghdādī's name is also found in the chain of the Khalwatiyyah order.

²⁰ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyyah*, ed. Johannes Pederson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), 145.

²¹ “Outsiders” here means scholars of *ḥadīth*, jurisprudence, and theology.

²² ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Alī al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma' fī 'l-Taṣawwuf*, ed. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1914), 3-4.

Sufism by explaining the conditions of the early Sufis, to find solace by writing my complaints about the conditions of the false Sufis, and to obtain the grace and mercy of Allah, the Most Gracious.²³

It can be concluded from these examples that Sufis representing the Sunni tradition act in accordance with the Qur'ān and *sunnah*, preserve the unity of the *sharī'ah* and *ḥaqīqah*, and suffer from groups that deviate from it. The Sufis whose names we have mentioned are representatives of this tradition, and they are also the names that Shirvānī mostly used as sources in his works.

Shirvānī maintains the same idea in his works. He counts the groups that he calls Ahl al-Bid'ah one by one in his work *Asrār al-Ṭālibīn* and emphasizes that they do not represent the Sunni tradition. He is very sensitive in this regard. According to him, Ahl al-Sunnah are the *shaykhs* of the *ṭarīqah* to whom the knowledge and enthusiasm passed from the Prophet through 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, and this truth was transmitted to the circles (communities) through them. The most important point that distinguishes Shirvānī's views from the Shia belief is the view that the Prophet's knowledge is manifested through 'Alī not only from the Ahl al-Bayt, who are blood relatives, but also from the perfect *walīs* (saints) who inherited the same knowledge from 'Alī.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the meaning that Sufis gave to the concept of Ahl al-Sunnah has gained more depth than what is known. Accordingly, the true Ahl al-Sunnah are those who follow the Prophet's *sunnah* and show love and respect for the first three Caliphs of Islam while accepting that the Prophet's wisdom was transmitted only through 'Alī. This is because the Prophet never used any unfavourable statements about Abū Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthmān (d. 35/656); rather, he praised and glorified them. At the same time, he made the love for the Ahl al-Bayt obligatory. Those who fulfil these two conditions properly are Ahl al-Sunnah. As will be seen in the following, this was also the attitude of the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt themselves. What we mean by "Ahl al-Sunnah Sufis" or simply "Sufis," which we will frequently refer to throughout this study, are Sufis who have this view. However, it is also the case that Sufis, who mostly maintained this balance, were accused of being "Shia-Rāfiḍah" by Ahl al-Sunnah and "Sunnis" by Shia. In this context, we will try to justify the claim that "Sufis attribute a deeper meaning to the definition of Ahl al-Sunnah by mentioning the names of Sufis who represent the Sunni Sufi tradition and have been subjected to similar accusations. In addition, while each sect argues that

²³ 'Abd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah al-Qushayriyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Ṭibā'ah al-Amīriyyah, 1870), 3.

they are following the *sunnah* of the Prophet, we believe that the new perspective that Sufis bring to the concept of the *sunnah* will lead to a different and unifying perspective on the subject.

Shia-Rāfiḍah

One of the most commonly used definitions throughout the study is the concept of “Shia-Rāfiḍah.” The term Rāfiḍah, which comes from the root *r-f-ḍ* meaning “to abandon, to leave, and to separate,” is used to denote a person or persons leaving a group or an idea. The term is believed to have emerged seven or eight years after the death of Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 114/733), one of the Twelve Imams. According to the sources, his brother Zayd (d. 122/740),²⁴ with support mainly from the people of Kufa, went to war against the Umayyads. However, the people of Kufa abandoned him because he accepted other caliphs as legitimate, along with ‘Alī. Zayd then addressed the people of Kufa and reproached them, saying, “*Rafaḍtumūnī*” (You left me alone in the face of the enemy). Sunni scholars throughout history have thus used the term Rāfiḍah for the Imāmiyyah Shia due to their rejection of the first three caliphs and concomitant claim that ‘Alī is the first righteous Imam after the Prophet.²⁵

Therefore, although the term “Rāfiḍah” was first associated with Zayd in history, we used the term “Shia-Rāfiḍah” together in our study because Ahl al-Sunnah used this term for the Imāmiyyah Shia. This concept expresses an appellation against the Shia from the perspective of Ahl al-Sunnah. The reason why Ahl al-Sunnah called the Sufis who had a high affection for Ahl al-Bayt as Rāfiḍah was that they used Shia and Rāfiḍah in the same sense. However, it is noteworthy that over time, the Shia also accepted this definition and even attempted to legitimize

²⁴ There is consensus within the branch of Zaydiyyah concerning the divine legitimacy of the first three Imams (‘Alī, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn), whilst the Imams that follow do not possess the same “innocence.” Moreover, Zaydīs do not consider the other Caliphs sinners and are more tolerant towards them. In this regard, although the other Caliphs’ rejection of ‘Alī is a mistake, this does not make them sinners. For more information, see Ebū’l-Ḥasan el-Eṣṣârî, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn: İlk Dönem İslâm Mezhepleri*, ed. Ömer Aydın and Mehmet Dalkılıç (Istanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2019), 120-44; Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, “Zaydism: Overview and Comparison to Other Versions of Shi’ism,” in *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*, ed. Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells (California: Rand Corporation, 2010), 285-89.

²⁵ Maḥmūd Tawakkolīan Akbarī et al., “Ta’ammolī dar Maḥmūd-e Rafḍ wa Kofr-e Rafiḍī,” *Motalaāt-e Eslāmī: Tārīkh o Farhang* 89 (2012): 10-11; Mustafa Öz, “Râfızîler,” in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2007): 34:396-97.

this term and used this term in a positive sense through verses from the Qur'ān and the words of the Twelve Imams.²⁶

Imamate-Caliphate

One of the most important disputes between the Ahl al-Sunnah and the Shia is the issue of Imamate-Caliphate. Addressing this issue in a historical context will help to better understand what the Sufis representing the Sunni tradition, and especially Shirwānī, meant by the concept of “imam” in the person of ‘Alī.

After the demise of the Prophet, with the election of Abū Bakr as the first Caliph, disputes over the “Imamate”²⁷ began to emerge in the history of Islam. In this context, although all sects have agreed on the necessity of the “imam,” they have differed in terms of the meaning they attribute to the concept. According to the Khawārij, Murji’ah, Mu’tazilah, and Ahl al-Sunnah, prophethood ended after the Prophet’s demise. Shia, on the other hand, claim that the governance continues both politically and religiously. In short, according to the Khawārij, any Muslim, slave or free, can be an imam, as long as the imam is just, ascetic, and a scholar. The Murji’ah took a similar stance on this issue and argued that every imam who ruled the society after he became a member of Islam should be accepted as legitimate. The Mu’tazilah also defended the necessity of Imamate and argued that the method of determining the imam is *ijmā’* (consensus). Shia, on the other hand, take a different stance from all other sects on this issue and claim that the issue of Imamate/Caliphate is fixed by the Qur’ān, *sunnah*, and testament. Accordingly, the administration of the *ummah* is a continuation of the prophetic duty. In this sense, since it has a religious value, Allah has regulated this field as He has regulated the prophetic system. As prophethood is a favour bestowed by Allah on His servants, so is the Imamate. Since Imamate is considered one of the fundamentals of religion, the one who denies it is called a disbeliever. The Shia are unanimous that the Imams are from the Ahl al-Bayt. Accordingly, the Prophet appointed ‘Alī as the Caliph after

²⁶ Etan Kohlberg, “The Term Rafīḍa in Imāmī Shī‘ī Usage,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99, no. 4 (1979): 677-79.

²⁷ The term “*imām*” in Arabic means “one who is followed.” This individual leads the community and governs its members. The leader is called an imam, while the governed community is referred to as the “Ummah.” As a political concept, it denotes the person who assumes the highest level of authority in the governance of the Muslim community after the Prophet Muḥammad. Events such as the death of the Prophet, the Battles of Jamal and Šifīn, and the arbitration incident led to this concept being thoroughly examined by sects such as the Shia, Murji’ah, Khawārij, and Ahl al-Sunnah. Consequently, discussions arose about the identity and characteristics of the “imam.” See Mustafa Öz and Avni İlhan, “*imâmet*,” in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2000): 22:201-3.

him, and the Imamate continued with the Twelve Imams, especially according to the Imāmiyyah Shia. Imams are innocent, the most deserving, and the most knowledgeable. Ahl al-Sunnah, on the other hand, express Imamate with the concept of Caliphate. According to them, Imamate is not one of the essentials of religion. It is not determined by the Qur'ān and *sunnah*. If this had been the case, it would not have been hidden and would have been known to the Muslims. The imam comes to power by *ijmā'*, that is, by the collective consultation of the *ummah*. Since Imamate is not a divine position, there is no need for the criteria of innocence and special knowledge. With the Prophet, the door of prophethood was closed. The imam is not the spiritual successor of the Prophet in this sense, but the one who continues to rule in general worldly and religious matters.²⁸

It should be noted that Shirvānī adopted the middle way between both sects in this regard. He, like the Shia, believes that Imamate is the continuation of the Prophet's rule in both worldly and religious affairs. However, according to him, while the Ahl al-Bayt continue the religious succession, the worldly administration can be carried on by any Muslim who meets the established criteria and on whom the *ummah* has agreed. From this point of view, Shirvānī differs from the Shia in that the imam can be chosen by *ijmā'* in worldly affairs, and he differs from the classical Ahl al-Sunnah view by emphasizing that the Prophet's spiritual legacy continues through the Ahl al-Bayt. He also gives a different meaning to the concept of Imamate. According to him, Imamate is a spiritual position. Not only the descendants of the Prophet but also every *walī* who inherits the divine secrets and truths from 'Alī in the denominator of *wilāyah* (sainthood) is a spiritual imam.

Sufis and the Ahl al-Bayt

The profound affection felt by most Sufis for 'Alī and his progeny and the authority he represents spiritually²⁹ does outwardly overlap in some points with the Imāmiyyah Shia tradition. It is generally recorded that Sufis see the Ahl al-Bayt as consisting of 'Alī, Fāṭimah (d. 11/632), Ḥasan (d. 49/669), and Ḥusayn, as well as nine other Imams from their

²⁸ See Yoldaş, "Concept of Imam," 253-68; Seyed Hasan Eslami Ardakani, "The Structure of the Doctrine of Imamate in Shiite Thought: A Developmental Approach," *Religious Inquiries* 12 (2023): 9-21.

²⁹ Sufis state that in the trinity of "divinity, prophethood, and *wilāyah*," 'Alī represents the *maqām* of "*wilāyah*." Accordingly, 'Alī continues to convey the knowledge of *wilāyah* and *ma'rifah* (cognition) that he learnt from the Prophet to the next generations through *shaykhs*. See Salih Çift, "Tasavvuf Geleneğinde Hz. Ali ve Ehl-i Beyt," *Uludağ Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Din ve Hayat Dergisi* 23 (2014): 46.

descendants.³⁰ Junayd al-Baghdādī's statement, "Our *pīr* (spiritual leader) in the *uṣūl* (method) and the calamity is 'Alī al-Murtaḍā," reveals the importance of Ahl al-Bayt in the Sunni Sufi tradition.³¹ 'Alī's lineage and progeny are known amongst Sufi orders as the *silsilat al-dhahab* (golden chain).³² When we look at the *ṭabaqāt* (biographical literature) of the early Sufis, it can be seen that the progeny of 'Alī and Fāṭimah are treated with particular reverence.³³

Sufis Who Were Accused of Being Shia-Rāfiḍah

Under this title, the views of Sufis representing the Sunni tradition on Ahl al-Bayt and the accusations of their being Shia-Rāfiḍah because of their love for them will be evaluated. Moreover, how they acted when confronted with these allegations will also be discussed. In this context, the experiences of Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820), Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. 618/1221), and 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492) will be presented, and the views of Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240), one of the sources of Shirvānī's works, on the Imāmiyyah Shia will be mentioned in terms of reflecting the thought of the Sunni Sufi tradition. In addition, these records are also important as evidence of Shirvānī's continuation of a pre-existing system of thought.

Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, who began his work *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā'* (The Biographies of the Saints) with Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) due to his love for Ahl al-Bayt, includes the following important views about the love of Ahl al-Bayt in his aforementioned work:

The People of the House are one. In remembering the name of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, all are remembered. Do not those who follow his interpretation also follow the way of the Twelve Imams? The truth is "the one is twelve and the twelve are one. . . ." He is foremost amongst the *shaykhs*. All trust him. He is the absolute guide. He was the *shaykh* of the devout, the Imam of the followers of the Prophet, the proof of the people of pleasure, the guide of

³⁰ See Özkan Ahmet, "The Perception of Sunni Sufis on Hz. Ali and Ahl al-Bayt: Eshrefoghlu Rumi's Sample," *Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Veli Araştırma Dergisi* 86 (2018): 85; Ethem Cebecioğlu, *Tasavvuf Terimleri ve Deyimleri Sözlüğü* (Ankara: Otto Yayınları, 2014), 143; Süleyman Uludağ, *Tasavvuf Terimleri Sözlüğü* (İstanbul: Kabalcı Yayınları, 2012), 36; Safer el-Muhibbi el-Cerrahi, *İştilāḥāt-ı Şūfiyya fī Vatan-ı Aşliyya: Tasavvuf Terimleri* (İstanbul: Kırk Kandil, 2013), 85.

³¹ 'Alī b. Osman el-Hücvîrî, *Kashf al-Mahjûb: Hakikat Bilgisi*, ed. Süleyman Uludağ (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2014), 135.

³² For the names in this chain, see Süleyman Uludağ, "Aleviyye," in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1989), 2:369-70.

³³ For example, after mentioning the four Caliphs in the chapter on "The Imams of the Sufis from the Companions, the Successors and the *Tab' al-Tābi'in*," Hujvîrî mentions Ḥasan, Ḥusayn, Zayn al-'Ābidīn, Muḥammad al-Bāqir, and Ja'far al-Ṣādiq in the chapter on the Imams of the Sufis from the Ahl al-Bayt. See el-Hücvîrî, *Kashf al-Mahjûb*, 131-45.

the people of love, the leader of the scholars and the honoured of the ascetics. . . . I am confounded by those who presume there is a difference between the Ahl al-Bayt and the people of the Sunni tradition. In truth, the Sunni tradition is formed by the Ahl al-Bayt. I have no idea how anyone can think otherwise and fall into such a deception. What I do know is that those who believe in Muḥammad but do not revere and believe in his progeny and his Companions negate their belief in the Prophet. Look here, because Imam al-Shāfi'ī loved the Ahl al-Bayt so much, they accused him of being a Rāfiḍī and put him in prison. One of the couplets of his poem about this is as follows: "If it is Rāfiḍah to love the people of the house of Muḥammad, let jinn and mankind bear witness that I am a Rāfiḍī!"³⁴

The experiences of 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, one of the Naqshbandī Sufis who was accused of being a Rāfiḍī because of his deep love for the Ahl al-Bayt, is another example in this regard. Jāmī's love for the Ahl al-Bayt and his written works on 'Alī were still cause for criticism, despite his praise for the first three Caliphs. He was also seen by Sunnis as being inclined to Shiism, in particular, as a result of his text on the pure lineage of 'Alī entitled *silsilat al-dhahab* (golden chain), while also being heavily criticized by the Rāfiḍah. Jāmī expresses his attitude towards the Rāfiḍah in the following words:

Look at the Rāfiḍī. He has transgressed by abandoning reason. He spoke words about 'Alī's praise that were nothing but old wives' lies. But 'Alī's worth is far superior to those words. Can a Rāfiḍī's mind ever reach it? A handful of despicable people praise him excessively. What is his fault in this excessive praise? He was the secret of Muṣṭafā's perfection. He was the last of the Prophet's Caliphs. A group turned away from pledging allegiance to him, and in this disobedience, they made a mistake. Disobeying the command of the people of maturity is due to sin and defect. . . . He is 'Alī, whose temperament and life are perfect. He was like Abū Bakr and 'Umar. Do not curse them, it is a curse on him. For a curse on a friend is a curse on a friend. The Rāfiḍī has nothing like 'Alī, neither in faith nor in life. . . . One becomes worthy of him by thinking and living like him.³⁵

From these attitudes of the Sufis representing the Sunni tradition, it is evident that they were not satisfied with the Shia's comments that

³⁴ See Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā'*, ed. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1905), 9-10.

³⁵ 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Evliya Menkıbeleri Nafaḥāt al-Uns*, trans. Lâmiî Çelebi (Istanbul: Pinhan Yayınları, 2011), 544; Ömer Okumuş, "Abdurrahmân Câmî," in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1993), 7:94-99; Mehmet Sever, "Shawāhid al-Nubuwwa Adlı Eseri Bağlamında Abdurrahman Câmî'nin Ehl-i Beyt Tasavvuru ve Ehl-i Beyt'in Emeviler'le İlişkilerine Dair Bazı Görüşleri," *Ondokuz Mayıs Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 48 (2020): 313-15.

amounted to insults against the first three Caliphs and that they opposed separatism. The reason for this point of view is better understood from the justifications put forward by Ibn al-‘Arabī in *Futūḥāt* when he states that the Imāmiyyah Shia follow *shayṭān* (devil).

Ibn al-‘Arabī emphasizes in his *Futūḥāt*, in the chapter “Knowing the thoughts originating from *shayṭān* (devil),”³⁶ that *shayṭān* can deceive people in spiritual matters and that the Shia, especially the Imāmiyyah Shia, are the most likely people in this situation. According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, the *jinn* demons first enter into these people so that they love the Ahl al-Bayt and devote all of their love to them. With such an illusion, they consider it the highest closeness to Allah. In this context, because of their love for Ahl al-Bayt, they deviated into two paths: One group hated the Companions and went to the extreme of cursing them for not putting the Ahl al-Bayt in front of them, thinking that the Ahl al-Bayt were more worthy of these worldly duties. The second group, in addition to this cursing, did not connect the ranks of the Ahl al-Bayt and their leadership in becoming the caliphs of humanity with the evidence. This led them to disrespect the Prophet, Gabriel, and Allah. According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, such thoughts stem from the love of the Ahl al-Bayt, which is a true principle. This love created a disorder in their thoughts so that they deviated and misguided others. Ibn al-‘Arabī evaluates the following verse in this context: “Say, O People of the Book, do not go to extremes in your religion unjustly, and do not follow the wishes of a people who have gone astray and led many astray, and have left the right path and gone astray.”³⁷

Based on these views of Ibn al-‘Arabī in his work *Futūḥāt*, the fact that the Imāmiyyah Shia do not accept the other Caliphs is actually because *shayṭān* deceived them and caused them to go to extremes in their religion. According to him, the Imāmiyyah Shia have deviated from the right path for two reasons: firstly, by cursing the Companions for not appointing Ahl al-Bayt as caliphs and secondly, by disrespecting Allah, the Prophet, and Gabriel for failing to prove their claims with evidence. This is because not proving that Caliphate is the right of the Ahl al-Bayt with the Qur’ān and the *sunnah* is disrespectful to Allah’s destiny and the teachings of the Prophet. However, Ibn al-‘Arabī emphasizes that the Shia’s love for Ahl al-Bayt is true. According to him, even if the love is genuine, it is false because of the hatred and divisiveness it causes. This approach is similar to ‘Alī’s attitude towards the Khawārij’s statement: “Let the Book of Allah be the arbiter between us.” In this context, with

³⁶ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (n.p.: n.p., n.d.), 1:282.

³⁷ Qur’ān 5:77; *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, 1:282.

the statement: “O Allah, how great You are! They mean *bāṭil* (falsehood) with the word of truth. When they are silent, they grieve us; when they speak, we silence them with proof; but if they rebel against us, we will fight against them.”³⁸ ‘Alī emphasized that no matter how true the word was, the intention behind it was more important. In this context, the Sufis consider the Shia’s desire to love Ahl al-Bayt to be correct. However, they state that this love is false because the intention of the Shia’s understanding of the love of Ahl al-Bayt is to humiliate the first three Caliphs and promote separatism.

Yahyā Shirvānī and His Love of the Ahl al-Bayt

Considered the second founder of the Khalwatī order, a well-known and respected order in Sunni circles, Shirvānī was also the descendant of the Prophet. Nevertheless, he was careful to avoid using this property as a pretext or a reason to express any superiority over the general public or the ‘*ulamā*’ (religious scholars). On the contrary, he was careful to underline the dangers implicit in it. For Shirvānī, revelling in or boasting of being a descendant of the Prophet was a trap set up by the ego. What truly mattered was spiritual and moral proximity to the Prophet.³⁹ It is noteworthy that Shirvānī uses the definition of the Ahl al-Bayt in a broader sense. According to him, blood relation with the Prophet is already an honour, but what is important is to be close to him spiritually. Spiritual closeness, in other words, living the Prophet’s morality in its fullest sense, means being within the scope of the meaning of Ahl al-Bayt. It is noteworthy that this view of his reminds the Prophet’s statement about Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 36/656), who was not a member of his own family but still considered within the scope of the Ahl al-Bayt: “Salmān is from us, from the Ahl al-Bayt.”⁴⁰ In this context, as will be seen later, Shirvānī did not limit the definition of Ahl al-Bayt only to the Twelve Imams but considered this concept as a *maqām* (spiritual position, rank). Those who live the truth of this *maqām* are Ahl al-Bayt. However, the true holders of this *maqām* are the Twelve Imams, with ‘Alī

³⁸ Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī l-Ta’rīkh*, trans. Ahmet Ağırakça (Istanbul: Bahar Yayınları, 1991), 3:342.

³⁹ Seyyid Celāleddīn Yahyā b. Bahāeddīn eş-Şirvānī el-Bakūvī, *Kashf al-Qulūb*, Çorum Hasan Paşa Provincial Public Library, 2101/1, fol. 12a.

⁴⁰ Muḥammad b. Sa’d, *al-Ṭabaqāt* (Beirut: Dār Şādir, 1957), 4:75-93; It is even known that ‘Umar, based on this saying of the Prophet, gave him a salary equivalent to the salaries of other members of the Ahl al-Bayt. But Salman distributed all his salary as charity. See İbrahim Hatiboğlu, “Selmân-ı Fârisî,” in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2009), 36:441-43.

in the first place, and only through them can this spiritual position⁴¹ be attained.

It is recorded that Shirvānī was accused of being a Shia-Rāfiḍī⁴² like some other figures in history due to his deep love for the Ahl al-Bayt and the superior qualities he attributed to them.⁴³ However, along with his reverence and love for ‘Alī and his progeny, he also makes very important evaluations of the first three Caliphs—which no Shia-Rāfiḍī would accept—and praises them in accordance with the belief of the Sunni tradition. Therefore, following Shirvānī’s evaluations of ‘Alī and his progeny, his views on the other Caliphs will be included here.

Although Shirvānī did not distinguish between the four righteous Caliphs “Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Alī” in terms of the reverence and affection he showed for them, he did underscore that ‘Alī possessed several qualities that placed him in a different category from the others. The most important of these categories is “spiritual succession” and being a *khatm al-awliyā’* (the seal of the saints). For Shirvānī, the heirs of the Prophet are people beyond superficial thought and practice. The situation of those who practice with apparent knowledge only is similar to the situation of being the relatives of the Prophet. The heir must be a son with first-degree blood ties because a son carries the essence of the father, both externally and internally, both in the manifest and in the concealed form. The heirs with the closest blood ties to the Prophet were ‘Alī and his line, and they, as well as those who joined them, had been appointed as guardians of the true path—the holy path. They are thus the agents or the guardians of wisdom.⁴⁴ Shirvānī grants ‘Alī the title of *khatm al-awliyā’*, the highest accolade given to guardians, a term in Sufism which refers to the highest and the most refined of the representatives and refers to the seal of the guardians.

Shirvānī views ‘Alī, the last (chronologically) of the four righteous Caliphs, firstly within the framework of the *ḥadīth*⁴⁵ that says, “I am the

⁴¹ For Shirvānī, this spiritual position is the *maqām* of *wilāyah* (the state of being a true friend of God) represented by ‘Alī, which will be discussed in detail later.

⁴² It should be noted that Shirvānī has never been recognized as a Rāfiḍī in the history of Sufism. However, he has been accused of being a Rāfiḍī.

⁴³ See Şah Veli b. Uveys Ayntâbî, *Gunyat al-Sâlikîn*, Atatürk Library, Osman Ergin Collection, no. 720, fol. 2a.

⁴⁴ Yahya Celaledin Şirvani, *Asrâr al-Ṭâlibîn*, IBB Atatürk Library, Osman Ergin Collection, 0218/01, fols. 11b-12b. The work was translated into Turkish by Ahsen Batur. Seyyid Yahyâ Şirvânî, *Asrâr al-Ṭâlibîn wa Wird-i Sattâr*, trans. Ahsen Batur (Istanbul: Âlem Yayınları, 1998), 5-157.

⁴⁵ Muḥammad b. ‘Īsâ al-Tirmidhî, *Jāmi’*, kitāb al-manāqib, bāb manāqib ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, ḥadīth no. 116.

house of wisdom (*ḥikmah*) and ‘Alī is its gate.”⁴⁶ This *ḥadīth* constitutes the basis for his views on ‘Alī and the Ahl al-Bayt. Just as a city cannot be considered without taking into consideration its gates or its defences, so Muḥammad and ‘Alī should not be seen as any different. A gate can be seen as consisting of two sides: the side facing inward that knows and sees the city to the greatest degree, and the side facing outward, which may be viewed as a distinct entity. Nevertheless, just as a city cannot be accessed without a gate, Muḥammad’s legacy cannot be perceived without ‘Alī. Although they may appear different, the gate cannot be thought of as distinct from the city. When interpreting the above *ḥadīth*, Shirvānī explores the concept of arriving at the truth and points out that the intent or purpose behind this particular method is to be a part of the *al-‘ālam al-akbar* (the greater realm) or the “realm of mysteries.” While wandering this realm, the Prophet saw ‘Alī at the gate and thereby proclaimed, “I am the city of knowledge and ‘Alī is its gate.” One of the paths in this pronouncement is the path of the *shaykhs*, in that one can follow the chain of *shaykhs* to ‘Alī and from there to the Prophet.⁴⁷ In this context, another aspect of ‘Alī being the gate of knowledge is that the line of the *shaykhs* ends with him. Moreover, Shirvānī used the expression *quṭb al-‘ilm wa ’l-dīn* (the pole, the reference point of knowledge and religion),⁴⁸ thus underlining ‘Alī’s status as the heir to the Prophet’s secrets and wisdom. For Shirvānī, there is no other person who knows the *sharī‘ah* and the *ḥaqīqah* as well as ‘Alī. Allah revealed Himself to ‘Alī due to his insight and knowledge of the other world, the world of the unseen.⁴⁹

Shirvānī also points to ‘Alī as a guide and teacher. In his book *Manāqib Amīr al-Mu‘minīn* (The Merits of ‘Alī, the Commander of the Believers), he uses expressions such as the following:

I, a mere beggar, have seen ‘Alī, the great teacher after the Prophet himself, and I have seen ‘Alī, the gate of the city of wisdom . . . the storehouse of the mysteries of truth, the resolution of all problems. . . . I

⁴⁶ Seyyid Celâleddin Yahyâ b. Bahâeddin eş-Şirvânî el-Bakûvî, *‘ilm al-Ladunnî*, Çorum Provincial Public Library, 2101/9, fol. 111a. The work is registered in the Provincial Public Library of Çorum under the name *‘ilm al-Ladunnî*. However, the title of the work is *Bayân al-‘ilm*, as stated at the beginning of the work.

⁴⁷ Seyyid Celâleddin Yahyâ b. Bahâeddin eş-Şirvânî el-Bakûvî, *Shifâ’ al-Asrâr*, Süleymaniye Library, Hacı Mahmud Efendi 2283, fols. 147a-147b.

⁴⁸ Yahyâ, *‘ilm al-ladunnî*, fol. 111a.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

have seen ‘Alī, the guide on the path of truth. I have seen ‘Alī who encompasses all *ashyā*’ (things; pl. of *shay*’ in Arabic).⁵⁰

Shirvānī’s statements, especially that he “saw ‘Alī who encompasses all things,” must have been meant to express that ‘Alī possesses the knowledge of the truth of all beings. This should be considered in conjunction with the Sufi concept of the Muḥammadan Reality,⁵¹ a term that refers to the truth of the Prophet and the notion that all truth is gathered in him.

As mentioned above, ‘Alī is seen as the gate of the city of wisdom that is the Prophet, affirming Ibn al-‘Arabī, who writes, “There is nothing closer to Allah than the reality of Muḥammad. His truth and the truth of the universe came into existence from the manifestation of the Prophet. The person closest to him is ‘Alī and the secrets of the prophets.”⁵² In a similar vein, Shirvānī states, “Allah revealed all the knowledge of the prophets to Aḥmad, and let it be known that the heir to this knowledge is ‘Alī,”⁵³ thereby stressing the following qualities possessed by ‘Alī:

‘Alī can resurrect the dead with the breath of ‘Īsā (Jesus) and heal a severed hand. Like Mūsā (Moses), he can pull a hand as white as snow from his pocket.⁵⁴ His heart is infused with the light of Allah. Not even pearls are as lustrous as he is. His sword Dhū ’l-Fiḳār performs wonders. About him,

⁵⁰ Seyyid Celâleddin Yahyâ b. Bahâeddîn eş-Şirvânî el-Bakûvî, *Manzûmah-i Şalawât*, Manisa Provincial Public Library, 2906/10, fol. 192b. The part titled *Manâqib-i Amîr al-Mu’minîn ‘Alî Karîm Allâhu Vajhahu* is included in the work titled *Fî Şalawât al-Nabî*, which is registered under the name *Manzûmah-i Şalawât* in Manisa Provincial Public Library.

⁵¹ Muhammadan Reality is the most competent place of manifestation where the *Haqq* (the Truth) is realized, and in the most special sense, is *al-insân al-kâmil* (the perfect human being). According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, the first person to have used that exact expression, this truth is the perfect form of *al-insân al-kâmil* who gathers the truths of the existence in himself. In addition, the Muhammadan Reality is a lamp from which all prophets and saints receive their knowledge. See Suad el-Hakîm, *Ibn al-‘Arabî Sözlüğü*, trans. Ekrem Demirli (Istanbul: Kalcı Yayınları, 2005), 471-42. In this context, Shirvānī emphasizes that the knowledge of the beings, which he calls the Muhammadan Reality, belongs to the Prophet in the most perfect way and that ‘Alī is the heir of this knowledge. However, other saints can only obtain this knowledge through the medium and channel of ‘Alī because the Prophet said that ‘Alī is the gate of the city of knowledge.

⁵² Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, 1:345.

⁵³ Yahyâ, *Manzûmah-i Şalawât*, fol. 195a.

⁵⁴ *Al-Yad al-bayḍā*, which means “the white hand,” was a miracle performed by Prophet Moses (peace be on him) to prove his prophethood. For details, see Ömer Faruk Harman, “Yed-i Beyza,” in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2013), 43:376-77.

the Prophet said, “If you wish to see Ādam and Yaḥyā (John), or even Mūsā and ʿĪsā, look at ‘Alī, for he is the lion of Allah.”⁵⁵

As mentioned above, ‘Alī inherited these qualities from the Prophet Muḥammad. The Prophet’s characteristic of being *Jawāmi‘ al-kalim* is well known; that is, he gathered in his own being the truths expressed by the other prophets, who were similar to *kalimah* (word) in terms of their truths.⁵⁶ In the incident relayed in the following account, Shirvānī expounds upon ‘Alī and his status as being a favourite of Allah and the Prophet:

One morning, while ‘Alī was on his way to the mosque to perform the morning prayers, he came across a pious but very elderly man. ‘Alī refused to walk ahead of the old man, out of respect. Meanwhile, the time for *ṣalāh* (prayer) had arrived, and everyone had begun to perform the prayer. When the *rukū‘*⁵⁷ began, the Prophet paused, for he knew ‘Alī was on his way to the mosque. What was even more interesting was that Allah, *al-Ḥayy* (the Alive, the Everlasting) and *al-Jabbār* (the Compeller), did not make the sun rise. The wheels of fate had momentarily stopped spinning out of reverence for ‘Alī, a prince amongst the brave.⁵⁸

Shirvānī talks not only about the deep truth of ‘Alī’ and love for him but also about his progeny, whom he calls “the people of Yāsīn.”⁵⁹ He emphasizes that it is obligatory to love them and that those who do not love them are unbelievers. Shirvānī also states that one of the signs of hypocrisy is to live a life that is not in accordance with the teachings of the Prophet and not to revere and respect his lineage; while the sign of a believer is to love the Prophets’ kin more than one’s own life and to be willing to sacrifice one’s life for his pure lineage. This is because the Prophet, in one of his pronouncements, said, “Let it be known that those who love my son also love me and whosoever loves us also loves God. Whosoever despises my house is destined for hell.”⁶⁰

It is clear from the above commentary that the Ahl al-Bayt of the Prophet also bears the truth of the Prophet Muḥammad, and the denial

⁵⁵ Yahyâ, *ʿilm al-Ladunnī*, fols. 111a-111b.

⁵⁶ This concept expresses the Prophet’s characteristic of expressing much meaning with few words. Ibn al-ʿArabī, on the other hand, likens every being to a word and emphasises that this concept refers to the Prophet’s characteristic of gathering all words or truths in his being. See M. Yaşar Kandemir, “Cevâmîü’l-Kelîm,” in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1993), 7:440; Suad el-Hakîm, *İbnü ’l-Arabî Sözlüğü* (Istanbul: Kabcacı Publication, 2005), 139.

⁵⁷ The gesture of bending the body forward during *ṣalāh*.

⁵⁸ Yahyâ, *ʿilm al-Ladunnī*, fol. 111b.

⁵⁹ Here Yāsīn is used to refer to the Prophet.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, fol. 115b.

of the Ahl al-Bayt is also the denial of the Prophet and Allah. The following lines represent a succinct summary of Shirvānī's views on the Prophet Muḥammad, 'Alī, and the Ahl al-Bayt:

Learn Noah's wisdom, Yaḥyā's piety, and 'Īsā's teachings through 'Alī
For they all exist within him

....

He who loves 'Alī will be among the people of bliss
Do not doubt the message of the Prophet; all faces turn to Alī
Whosoever loves Ḥaydar ('Alī) gains the love of the Prophet and the love of
God

Know that it is 'Alī who unveiled the secrets of the Lord
'Umar said, Had it not been for 'Alī, I would have been ruined
The Prophet said, 'Alī is the sole treasure trove of wisdom
Love of Ḥaydar in life, love of Ḥaydar in death
He is the balm for all wounds, the cure for all woes
To resent him is to resent the Prophet and to resent Allah
To revere and adore him is the key to wisdom, for 'Alī is the font of
wisdom

Moreover, the Prophet stated, "Know that whosoever dies with love of 'Alī
in his heart shall have 'Alī by his side"

....

If you do not have love for him in your heart, you will not know the love of
God

'Alī is the guide on the path and the knower of all mysteries

....

Love of Ḥaydar is the religion of those whose faith is firm
The person who has accompanied the Prophet since before time is 'Alī
Know that the indolent Sayyid is but a servant of Ḥaydar
And that it shall be Muḥammad or 'Alī who takes them by the hand on the
Day of Judgement⁶¹

Shirvānī expresses great affection for 'Alī, whom he says is from the same soul as the Prophet Muḥammad, the origin of religion and the source of the knowledge of the Prophets; and states that to love him is to love God and the Prophet, and to hate him is to hate God and the Prophet. In the following lines taken from his work *Bayān al-'Ilm* (The Declaration of Knowledge), Shirvānī emphasises that love of Ahl al-Bayt is a feeling and quality exclusive to believers:

Love Muṣṭafā with all your heart and soul

⁶¹ Yaḥyā, *Manẓūmah-i Ṣalawāt*, fols. 194a-195a.

Let your life be sacrificed for his house
 What can one say to those who proudly proclaim they are his people
 And that their hearts overflow with love for him?
 Muḥammad, the mediator of the two worlds, said
 There is not even a grain of doubt in your faith
 If you love my progeny
 Rest assured, that means you love me

 If you hold a grudge against my progeny
 Rest assured, you are destined for hell
 Keep your heart pure
 Go with the inspiration of the people of Yāsīn like the brave

 The believers shall heed my words
 Whilst these same words shall be like spears for the pretenders

 Protector of pure souls, Lord
 Forgive us of our sins, have mercy on us

 If it is Muḥammad that asks for intercession
 Then Allah will forgive both worlds for the sake of the Prophet
 Forgive us for our doubts, grant us wisdom
 Bring us close to Muṣṭafā
 May all say amen to these words of mine
 To this follower of the people of Muṣṭafā and Yāsīn⁶²

Yahyā Shirvānī and His Thoughts on the Rightly-Guided Caliphs

Shirvānī's commentaries on the rightly guided Caliphs and his other analyses in line with the Sunni tradition disprove the accusations of his being a Rāfiḍī. As a matter of fact, in addition to his evaluations of 'Alī, it is seen that Shirvānī also explicitly expressed in his works the meanings represented by the other three Caliphs and drew special attention to the fact that each of them is sublime in his own *maqām* (position, state). No Shia-Rāfiḍī would ever use the expressions Shirvānī used for Caliphs other than 'Alī. Rather, they would use excoriating language, whereas Shirvānī, in writing about the Prophet, says, "May Allah have mercy on his soul, his family, companions, wives, sons, and the subsequent

⁶² Yahyâ, *ʿIlm al-Ladunnî*, fols. 115b-116a.

Caliphs; for they too were righteous, guided, and also *mahdī*.”⁶³ This, therefore, demonstrates that he did not distinguish between the Caliphs and other companions. For Shirvānī, those who loved whomever the Prophet loved and denounced whomever the Prophet denounced would be free of hypocrisy; the Prophet loved Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Alī.⁶⁴ Mercy would be bestowed by Allah upon those who showed love and affection for those whom Allah favoured,⁶⁵ and those who showed even the slightest hostility or dislike for the four righteous Caliphs were destined for hell.⁶⁶ It must also be noted that when expounding upon the four Caliphs, Shirvānī included them in his prayers, saying, “In the name of the Four Friends, show mercy to this wretched man,”⁶⁷ a clear testament to his views.

Shirvānī also likens the four rivers of water, milk, wine, and honey that flow in heaven to the four Caliphs: with the water representing Abū Bakr, the milk ‘Umar, the wine ‘Uthmān, and the honey ‘Alī. According to the verse, “And we created from water every living being,”⁶⁸ Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq is the very essence of religion. An infant is nourished and grows with milk, after which he/she is nourished and strengthened by other foods; just as an infant is nourished by milk, the religion of Islam is nourished, strengthened, and spread by ‘Umar. Just as the drinker of wine is generous, so the love of Islam was planted in the heart of ‘Uthmān, where it became generous and unafraid to give, whether openly or in secret. Meanwhile, ‘Alī is like honey; for true sweetness comes from honey. All wisdom is found in ‘Alī, and there is nothing sweeter than wisdom.⁶⁹

Shirvānī states that the only difference between the four Caliphs is in what they represent; in this regard, ‘Alī is the representative of the

⁶³ As can be seen, the meaning Shirvānī gives to the concept of *mahdī* differs greatly from that of Shia-Rāfiḍī understanding. He interpreted the concept on the lexical level and reiterated that he also saw the first three Caliphs as *mahdī* due to their status as “standard bearers for piety/wisdom,” a view that differs greatly from the Shia perspective and is the clearest example yet of his holistic/unifying perspective. See Sayyid Celāleddīn Yahyâ b. Bahâeddīn eş-Şirvânî el-Bakûvî, *Wird al-Sattâr*, Süleymaniye Library, Galata Mevlevihane Collection, 297.73, fol. 3b.

⁶⁴ Yahyâ, *Shifâ’ al-Asrâr*, fols. 43a-43b.

⁶⁵ Yahyâ b. Bahâeddīn eş-Şirvânî el-Bakûvî, *Risâle-i Etvârü’l-Qulûb*, Çorum Hasan Paşa Provincial Public Library, 2101/8, fol. 99a.

⁶⁶ Seyyid Yahyâ b. Bahâeddīn eş-Şirvânî el-Bakûvî, *Manâzil al-Âshiqîn*, Çorum Hasan Paşa Provincial Public Library, 2101/4, fol. 34b.

⁶⁷ Yahyâ, *‘Ilm al-Ladunnî*, fol. 110b.

⁶⁸ Qur’ân 21:30.

⁶⁹ Yahyâ, *Shifâ’ al-Asrâr*, fols. 194a-194b.

Muhammadan knowledge.⁷⁰ This can be seen in various writings written by Shirvānī:

Salutations to Shaykh Abū Bakr al-Şiddīq, also known as ‘Atīq, most merciful of the Caliphs, slayer of the godless, and companion to the Prophet in the cave. Salutations then to ‘Umar b. Khaṭṭāb, the crowning glory of the Companions, a friend of the *maşjid* (mosque) and of the *mihrāb* (the prayer niche in the mosque), he whose every word is truth, whose name is mentioned in the Book, commander of the faithful. Salutations also to ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān, beloved of the Merciful, compiler of the verses of the Book, the eloquent upstanding one, martyred during his recital of the Qur’ān, commander of the faithful. Salutations then to ‘Alī, nephew of the Prophet, conqueror of the gates of the Khaybar, husband of the beloved Fāṭimah, guardian of the wisdom of the Prophet, commander of the faithful, favoured by God, ever generous and ever selfless. And salutations also to Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, the two Imams, the two emirs of the believers, who were brave, who attained happiness and martyrdom, the two oppressed, the two lovers, the two moons, the two suns, who were content with the pleasure of Allah, who were patient with the trouble, whose lineage was pure.⁷¹

Yaḥyā Shirvānī and the Sunni Tradition

Shirvānī’s writings on the four righteous Caliphs indicate that Shirvānī was not a Shia-Rāfiḍī.⁷² In addition, it is well known that Shirvānī belonged

⁷⁰ Here the Muhammadan knowledge is synonymous with the previously mentioned concept of the Muhammadan Reality. According to Shirvānī, ‘Alī, the perfect successor of the Prophet, inherited from the Prophet the knowledge of the truth of beings.

⁷¹ Yahyâ, *Wird al-Sattâr*, fols. 3b-4a.

⁷² As mentioned above, Ayntābī states that Shirvānī was condemned by some notable figures in his time for his love of Ahl al-Bayt and glorification of them and accused of being a Shia-Rāfiḍī. However, he does not give detailed information about the identity of these figures. Although we do not know detailed information about these figures, the fact that Shirvānī’s caliphs mentioned the concepts of “Rāfiḍī” and “Khārijī” in their works shows that they were also subjected to similar accusations in the same period. For example, Dede ‘Umar Rūshanī (d. 893/1487) uses the following sentence in his work: “If I do not love ‘Alī, the son-in-law of the Prophet, I am a Khārijī, but if I separate ‘Alī from ‘Umar, I am a Rāfiḍī.” However, although Sunnism was the predominant sect in Azerbaijan during Shirvānī’s lifetime, it is known that the Ilkhanid ruler Öldjeitü Khan (d. 716/1316), who conquered the region in the fourteenth century, spread Shiism in those lands. See Şahi Ahmedov, “Azerbaycan’da Şiiliğin Yayılma Süreci” (PhD diss., Ankara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Temel İslam Bilimleri Anadolı, 2005), 28-29. He also ordered the names of the first three caliphs to be removed from the *khuṭbahs* (sermons) and coins and the names of the Twelve Imams to be written instead. After the Ilkhanids, the Safavid state also spread this ideology and with Shāh Ismā‘īl, Imāmiyyah Shiism became the official sect. See Reşat Öngören, “Safeviyye,” in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2008), 35:460-62; Abbasgulu Agha Bakıkhonov, *Gülüstan-ı İrem* (Baku: Kitap Kulübü Yayınları, 2019), 91-106; Oktay Efendiyev, *Azerbaycan Safeviler*

to the Ḥanafī school, and it can be seen that he frequently included the interpretations of *fuqahā'* (jurists), such as Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795) and al-Shāfi'ī, who, along with Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150/767), were among the other *fuqahā'* of the Sunni tradition. His sources for the ḥadīth are the sources used in the Sunni tradition, such as the *Ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875); the *Sunan* by Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889) and Ibn Mājah (d. 273/887); and the *Musnad* by Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855).⁷³ Moreover, Shirvānī's use of terms such as "our mother 'Ā'ishah,"⁷⁴ "Mother of the Faithful," when writing about the Prophet's wife 'Ā'ishah in his works cannot be reconciled with Shia belief.

As can be seen below, Shirvānī's categorizations and interpretations regarding Sufi groups are yet further evidence that he was firmly entrenched within the Sunni tradition. In his work *Asrār al-Ṭālibīn* (The Secrets of the Searchers of Truth), Shirvānī adopts the categorisations and evaluations of Sufism by Abū Ḥaṣṣ 'Umar al-Nasafī (d. 537/1142), a leading scholar within the Sunni tradition. As expounded upon in his work *Kitāb fī Madhāhib al-Mutaṣawwifāh*,⁷⁵ Shirvānī divides Sufis into twelve groups and stresses that of these twelve, only one can be considered *Ahl al-Sunnah wa 'l-Jamā'ah* and thus part of the community. He explicitly states that his works and actions were in line with the *sharī'ah* and the *ṭarīqah* and that the other eleven groups are non-orthodox/heterodox, or *Ahl al-Bid'ah*. These groups are as follows: The Ḥulūliyyah, Khāliyyah, Awliyā'iyyah, Shumrāhiyyah, Ḥubbiyyah, Ḥūriyyah, Ibāhiyyah, Mutakāsiliyyah, Mutajāhiliyyah, Wāqifiyyah, and Ilhāmiyyah. After naming these groups, Shirvānī states that the path of the Sufis within the Sunni tradition is the path of the Companions, who were in a conversation with the Prophet; and that after the Companions, who were in a state of ecstasy in this conversation, this ecstasy was passed to the *shaykhs* of *ṭarīqah* through 'Alī and was divided into many

Devleti (Baku: Şark-Garp Yayınları, 2007), 41-51. In light of this information, it seems possible that Shirvānī's love for Ahl al-Bayt caused him to be accused of being a Shia-Rāfiḍī by the Ahl al-Sunnah in such a period.

⁷³ It is possible to see these sources frequently in all of Shirvānī's works, especially in the following works: Seyyid Celāleddīn Yahyâ b. Bahâeddīn eş-Şirvânî el-Bakûvî, *Maqāmât*, Çorum Hasan Paşa Provincial Public Library, 2101/4, fol. 45a-57a; Seyyid Yahyâ, *Risāla-i Atvār al-Qulūb*, Çorum Hasan Paşa Provincial Public Library, 2101/8, fol. 99b-100a; Seyyid Celāleddīn Yahyâ b. Bahâeddīn eş-Şirvânî el-Bakûvî, *Sharḥ-i Suālāt-i Gulshan-i Asrār*, Çorum Hasan Paşa Provincial Public Library, 2101/7, fol. 80b-95a; Seyyid Yahya eş-Şirvânî el-Bakûvî, *Shifā' al-Asrār*, 82-83.

⁷⁴ Yahyâ, *Shifā' al-Asrār*, fol. 129b.

⁷⁵ The Turkish translation of this Arabic work was published by Süleyman Uludağ. See Ömer Neseî, *Kitāb fī Madhāhib al-Mutaṣawwifāh*, ed. Süleyman Uludağ (Istanbul: Dergah yayınları, 1992).

circles. He emphasized that these circles weakened and broke in time, and false *shaykhs* emerged, and Ahl al-Bid'ah groups, such as the Qalandariyyah and Ḥaydariyyah, emerged in this way. In short, according to Shirvānī, the way to recognize Ahl al-Ḥaqq (People of the Truth)⁷⁶ is through external and internal signs. The external means that they adhere strictly to the commands and prohibitions of the *sharī'ah*, and the internal means that they have clairvoyance and accept the guidance of the Prophet because the soul of the Prophet is the mediator between the Ahl al-Ḥaqq.⁷⁷

The Sufi Path in Terms of Reverence for the *Ahl al-Bayt*

Although the understanding of Ahl al-Bayt that emerged within the framework of the views of Shirvānī is often confused with the views of the Shia-Rāfiḍah because it possesses a deeper and more nuanced view than that adopted by the Ahl al-Sunnah, the Sufi understanding is never the same as the Shia-Rāfiḍah understanding in terms of aim and intent. As seen in the example of Shirvānī, the attitude adopted by the Sufis representing the Sunni tradition on this issue does not fully conform to the Ahl al-Sunnah understanding or the Shia-Rāfiḍī view; the Sufis follow their own path in this matter, which they call the *sunnah* of the Prophet and the way of his Ahl al-Bayt. In this context, the dialogues between the Ahl al-Bayt Imams, followed by the Shia and the Sufis and scholars representing the Sunni tradition, will be evaluated. This information is important to show that there is no difference between the Ahl al-Bayt Imams and the Sufis representing the Sunni tradition in terms of teachings and that there is no “Sunni-Shiite” distinction between them.

The following dialogue between Dāwūd al-Ṭā'ī (d. 165/781), who occupies an important place in the history of the Sunni Sufi tradition, and Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, was narrated by Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār and is important in the context of this paper's main idea, which is that the Sufis and the Ahl al-Bayt Imams shared the same teachings and acted to unite the divisions:

Dāwūd al-Ṭā'ī approached Ja'far al-Ṣādiq and said, “Greetings to you, the descendant of the Messenger of God. Instruct me, for my heart is dark with foreboding.” In response, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq said, “Greetings, Dāwūd! You are a famous ascetic. Why would you need my advice?” “O descendant of the Prophet. You are pre-eminent amongst all beings. You have superiority over all creatures, and it is obligatory for you to advise everyone.” “O

⁷⁶ In Shirvānī's terminology, Ahl al-Ḥaqq refers to the “Sufis representing the Sunni tradition.” These are the way of the Companions who were in ecstasy from the Prophet's conversation. After the Companions, this ecstasy was passed on to the *shaykhs* of the *ṭarīqah* through 'Alī.

⁷⁷ Yahyâ, *Asrār al-Ṭālibīn*, fols. 34b ve 35a.

Dāwūd, I am afraid of my ancestor Muḥammad taking me by the hand on the Day of Judgement and saying, ‘Why did you not fulfil your obligations to me and show modesty? Salvation is not earned by blood or by lineage. It is attained by piety and by pious actions!’” Hearing this, Dāwūd wept and said, “Praise be! If someone whose veins carry the blood of the Prophet and whose ancestor is the Prophet Muḥammad and whose grandmother is Fāṭimah can be in such a state of pious humility, who is Dāwūd to be so supercilious in his behaviour and his comportment?”⁷⁸

Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq’s statement to Dāwūd al-Ṭā‘ī, “You are a famous ascetic,” is important here in documenting that he did not discriminate between Sunni and Shia. Moreover, his stressing the importance of deeds rather than ancestry and membership of the Ahl al-Bayt is in line with the Sunni Sufi tradition, as seen in the example of Shirvānī, rather than with that of Imāmiyyah Shia belief. As mentioned before, Shirvānī, just like Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, emphasized the importance of spiritual and moral proximity to the Prophet rather than blood ties and ancestry. At the same time, his words are also important in terms of showing that the concept of Ahl al-Bayt is not limited to blood ties. Just as the Prophet called Salmān al-Fārisī “my Ahl al-Bayt,” Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq continues this view of the Prophet with the expressions he uses. This is in line with the view of the “Ahl al-Bayt” held by the Sufis representing the Sunni tradition. For, according to them, Ahl al-Bayt are both the Twelve Imams who are the descendants of the Prophet and the people who represent this spiritual position, as we explained above.

Another important point is that Abū Ḥanīfah, the founder of the Ḥanafī school of Islamic law and the teacher of Dāwūd al-Ṭā‘ī, was one of the important Sunni scholars who crossed paths with Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq and was known to have conversed with him.⁷⁹ It is also noted that Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778)—a leading jurist, traditionist, ascetic, and one of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq’s students—took his teacher as an example in terms of lifestyle and, like his mentor, steered clear of politics throughout his life.⁸⁰ These examples are important records of the intertwined relationship between the Sufis representing the Sunni tradition and the Ahl al-Bayt Imams.

The relationship of Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī (d. 200/815-16), another important figure in the history of Sufism, with ‘Alī al-Riḍā (d. 203/818), the eighth of the Twelve Imams, can also be given as an example. It has

⁷⁸ Feridüddîn-i Attâr, *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā’* (Istanbul: Kabcacı yayınları, 2012), 53.

⁷⁹ Mustafa Uzunpostalıcı, “Ebû Hanîfe,” in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1994), 10:131-38.

⁸⁰ Recep Özdirek and Ali Hakan Çavuşoğlu, “Süfyân es-Sevrî,” in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2010), 38:23-28.

been recorded that Ma'rûf al-Karkhî was born into a Christian or Sabian family and was converted to Islam by 'Alî al-Riḍā, of whom he remained in service throughout his life. Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamî (d. 412/1021), one of the Sufis from the classical period, states in his *Ṭabaqāt al-Şūfiyyah* that Ma'rûf's death occurred due to a stampede by a large group of Shiites who had come to visit Imam 'Alî al-Riḍā.⁸¹

In terms of the history of Sufism, the importance of Ma'rûf al-Karkhî is mostly due to his contribution to the continuation of the line of many sects, such as the Khalwatiyyah, Qādiriyyah, Naqshbandiyyah, Rifā'iyyah, Dasūqiyyah, Mawlawiyyah, and Baktāshiyyah. One of these chains of legitimacy reaches back to 'Alî through 'Alî al-Riḍā, Mūsā al-Kāẓim, Ja'far al-Şādiq, Muḥammad al-Bāqir, Zayn al-'Ābidîn (d. 94/712), and Ḥusayn b. 'Alî. Ma'rûf al-Karkhî's leading student was Sarî al-Saqāṭî (d. 251/865), tutor to Junayd al-Baghdādî, with whom many Sunni lineages were maintained and continued.⁸² A further example that is pertinent to this paper is Hujwîrî, author of one of the classics of Sufism, describing Ja'far al-Şādiq as "the Sword of the *Sunnah*" in reference to him.⁸³

The information we have discussed so far shows that the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt did not make a "Sunni-Shiite" distinction during their lifetime. On the contrary, Sufis and Ahl al-Sunnah scholars themselves listened to and followed their teachings⁸⁴ with great love and reverence,

⁸¹ Ebû Abdurrahman es-Sülemî, *Ṭabaqāt al-Şūfiyyah*, ed. Nûreddin Şerîbe (Kahire: Mektebetü'l-hâncî, 1986), 83-90; Reşat Öngören, "Marûf-ı Kerhî," in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2003), 28:67-68.

⁸² Öngören, "Marûf-ı Kerhî," 67-68.

⁸³ Hücvirî, *Hayat Bilgisi Keşfü'l-Mahcûb*, ed. Süleyman Uludağ (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2014), 144.

⁸⁴ In these teachings, it is also evident that the Sufis learnt "unification" from the Imams of Ahl al-Bayt because the Prophet himself said, "Do not revile my Companions, do not revile my Companions. By Him in Whose Hand is my life, if one amongst you would have spent as much gold as Uḥud it would not amount to as much as one much [*sic.*, *mudd*] on behalf of one of them or half of it. Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Şaḥîḥ*, kitāb faḍā'il al-şahābah, bāb taḥrīm sabb al-şahābah, ḥadīth no. 2540, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:2540>. Similar views were shared by 'Alî, and it is recorded in his book *Nahj al-Balāghah* that he preached by saying, "I have seen the Companions of the Prophet, but I have not seen among you people similar to them. Then he emphasized how pious they were." Sayyid Raḍî, *Nahj al-Balāghah*, trans. Kadir Çelik (İstanbul: Kevser Yayıncılık, 2013), 154. In addition, when we look at the names of 'Alî's children, it is seen that he gave the names of the first three Caliphs to his children. See Mustafa Öz, "Ali Evlâdı," in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1989), 2:392-93. 'Alî makes the following statements about Abū Bakr: "When Abū Bakr seized control of matters [of governance], [on some issues] he was lenient, [on others] severe; he was moderate and judicious. Thus, I associated with him as an advisor, and I obeyed him with diligence where he obeyed God." See 'Abd al-Karīm Bi-Azar Shirāzî, "Imam 'Alî and the Caliphs:

and imams respected and praised the Ahl al-Sunnah scholars. Among the Sufis, this affection was also manifested by recording the names of the Ahl al-Bayt Imams in the chains of the Sufi orders. As can be seen, the Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt, whom the Shia claim to follow, did not discriminate between Sunnis and Shiites and did not speak negatively against the first three Caliphs, in accordance with the Prophet's *sunnah*. In the case of Shirvānī, it is seen that the Sufis representing the Sunni tradition continued the same path. Therefore, Ahl al-Bayt is the middle point between both sects. And their teachings are not to divide but rather to unite.

To summarize up to this point, although the Sufis have some similarities with the Shia-Rāfiḍah with regard to 'Alī and his progeny, their points of departure and their intents are not the same; since the Shia-Rāfiḍah's praise of 'Alī is based on political considerations, they do not accept the legitimacy of the first three Caliphs and insult them severely. However, Shirvānī's appreciation of 'Alī consists in seeing him as the main bearer of the Prophet's knowledge and wisdom, as the lineage of the Sufi order is based on him; therefore, he glorifies him.

Their Relationship and Interaction," trans. D. D. Sodagar, *al-Taqrīb* 3, no. 2 (2008): 3. He married his young daughter Umm Kulthūm to 'Umar and became very close relatives with him. See Huriye Martı, "Ümmü Külsûm bint Ali," in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2012), 42:323-24. When 'Uthmān's house was under siege, he sent his sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn to protect his house. It is possible to mention many such examples about 'Alī. See Ethem Ruhi Fırlalı, "Hasan," in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1997), 16:282-85. The fourth Imam, Zayn al-'Ābidīn, one of the witnesses of the Karbala incident, is also recorded as praying for all the Prophet's Companions and preaching unity. See Ali Muhammad Sallâbî, *Hız. Ali'nin Hayatı, Şahsiyeti ve Dönemi*, trans. Şerafettin Şenaslan (Istanbul: Ravza Yayınları, 2016), 818. The fifth Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir admonished and expelled the Iraqis who had criticized and spoken against the first three Caliphs in his presence with the following words: "You are not of those who say, 'Our Lord, forgive us and our brothers who believed before us, and leave no hatred in our hearts against those who believed' (al-Hashr, 59/10)." See Zekeriyâ Güler, "İmâm Ebû Hanîfe'nin Ehl-i Beyt Mensuplarıyla Münâsebetleri," *Diyanet İlmî Dergi* 4, no. 56 (2020): 1295. Another important example is Ḥasan al-Muthannâ (d. 97/715-16), the son of Imam Ḥasan, who survived the Karbala incident. He regarded the struggle against the Shiites as a deed that brought him closer to Allah and responded to the Shiites who called on him to take over the sultanate as follows: "You are wrong to think that I am more worthy of the Caliphate because of my closeness to the Prophet. For the Prophet, acts of worship such as prayer, fasting and zakat are superior to emirate." Another important point in terms of our subject is that Ḥasan al-Muthannâ expelled Mughīrah b. Sa'īd, who cursed Abū Bakr and 'Umar, from his presence. See Recep Uslu, "Hasan b. Hasan b. Ali," in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1997), 16:324. As mentioned earlier, Zayd also never agreed to curse the first three Caliphs and was abandoned for this reason. All these examples are important records that show that the Ahl al-Bayt never had any problems with the first three Caliphs. On the contrary, they had good relations with them.

Thus, it is not the case that the other Caliphs are considered unworthy or rejected. Accordingly, the “guidance” in the phrase “there is no guide but ‘Alī” is understood to be spiritual guidance, not political leadership.

Conclusion

The Sufis’ view about the scope and the characteristics of the Ahl al-Bayt and their respect and love towards the “People of the House” are of a deeper and more advanced quality compared to that of the standard Sunni perspective. For that reason, their statements glorifying the Ahl al-Bayt should not be misinterpreted as similar to those of the Shia-Rāfiḍah in certain respects, as their starting points and intentions are completely different. Therefore, as seen in the example of Yaḥyā Shīrvānī, the path generally adopted by the Sufis should be accepted as a unique path that brings both sects closer to each other in their love for Ahl al-Bayt.

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