

## Opening Statement

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Original SSNV Paper in Farsi

### **The 1st Annual International Symposium on: Sey-yed Nourod-din Shah Nematollah Vali**

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San Jose State University (SJSU), San Jose, California, USA

#### **In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful**

I am very delighted that a group of scholars are assembled in this spiritual and academic gathering to honor one of Iran's greatest men of literature, *'irfān* (Sufism) and Islam. For my part, I appreciate and admire the efforts of all, especially Dr. Azmayesh, the founder and organizer of this gathering.

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#### **1 A brief biography of Dr. Nour Ali Tabandeh submitted along with the paper:**

His highness Dr. Hajj Nour Ali Tabandeh, Majzoob Alishah, the Qutb [Leader] of Nematollahi Order, was born 21st of Mehr, 1306 Hejri Solar, (October 13, 1927). His noble great grandfather, his highness Sultan Alishah Gonabadi (passed away 1327 Hijri lunar), was among the most famous "Orafa" and "Olama" of his time, and accordingly after him the Nematollahi Order became famous as the Nematollahi Gonabadi. Dr. Nour Ali Tabandeh received his theological education from his father, his highness Saleh Alishah. He later studied with the renowned religious scholars of Tehran, at University of Tehran, and later obtained his PhD degree from the University of Paris. In Paris, he also attended the classes of the late Islamic scholar and philosopher Professor Henry Corbin. Since Corbin was an expert in Islamic studies, academic research, and Sufism, including Nematollahi Gonabadi Order, Dr. Nour Ali Tabandeh and Professor Corbin undertook the task of collaborating a series of articles about this order. Dr. Nour Ali Tabandeh has held important judicial and cultural positions in Iran, including judge and legal consultant (attorney) at the Ministry of Justice and Professorship at the University of Tehran and other Universities around the country. He has also translated and edited several books on legal, social, and spiritual subjects, among which we can mention "A Collection of Religious Law and Social Articles" and "Familiarity with Irfan and Tasawwuf". His Highness Majzoob Alishah was initiated in the path of Sufism during the time of his eminent father. The Leadership and Guidance of the travelers of the Nematollahi Order was bestowed upon him. In 1375 Hejri Solar (1996), after the death of His Highness Mahboob Alishah, the Honorable leader of the order, and according to His Highness Mahboob Alishah's command.

Wherever our great men are honored and accordingly a gathering is organized, we are obliged to take part as ones who have views on the matter. Thus, when I found out about the good intention of the Symposium on Shah Ni‘matullah Vali, I approved it and viewed the request for a paper favorably. I hereby respectfully offer a green leaf from the ever-living tree of *walayah*.<sup>2</sup>

Hazrat Shah Ni‘matullah Vali was one of the greatest Sufis. His name is mentioned in the pages of Iranian history for various reasons. In fact, history’s pages are adorned by the existence of such men. The works and opinions of this great Sufi can be analyzed and researched from many different angles. From the literary point of view he has produced multiple articles in prose, in which he has argued mystical issues along with pure Islamic beliefs, and has explained these very clearly. Of course, I don’t intend to enter into details here, for I am informed—praise and thanks be to Allah—that the very knowledgeable participants have written articles on the occasion of this Symposium or will give speeches, such that the above subjects will be explored in detail. I only mention how the subject matter of his work ranks among the intricacies and positive aspects of the history of Iranian spiritual development.

Also in terms of poetry he has an abundance of poems in which instead of devising panegyrics, again he has put his efforts in explaining the spirituality of Islam and its mystical points. Of course, in Iran’s history of literature there have been many great poets like Manuchehri, Asjudi and Anwari and the likes, who wrote panegyrics. From a literary point of view they are all highly valued and hold a distinguished position, and we shouldn’t forget them. But the enormous rank of Shah Ni‘matullah Vali is as high as that of Ferdowsi, Sa‘di, Mawlavi (Rumi), and Hafiz. There will definitely be articles about his poetry, and the important points will be mentioned.

However, the most important aspect of his life, which is also what he is renowned for, is the mystical aspect, and the fact that during a period of time, he has been the *qutb*<sup>3</sup> of Sufism and the dervishes, so that his followers after him became famous as the “Ni‘matullahi Order”.

Regarding the issue of *silsilah* (order)<sup>4</sup> and the understanding of the meaning of it within the domain of Sufism, we should return to the beginning of Islam. During the time of the Messenger himself, [may Allah’s blessings and greetings be upon him and his family], there may have been differences in regard to style, taste and opinions among Muslims, but they never became cause for major disagreement, because the final decisive word, regarding every single subject, was what the noble Prophet himself would say, or what was divulged in the form of revelation. However, immediately after his death a dispute arose; in that a group of Muslims and great [men

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2 *Walayah* is the inner spiritual dimension of Islam which was continued after the Prophet by Imam ‘Ali and his successors. (All footnotes are by the translators.)

3 Spiritual pole, guide, master.

4 *Silsilah* (pl. *salasil*) literally means a chain, indicating a chain of authorization associated with a Sufi Order.

of God] such as Salman Farsi, Abu Dhar, and ‘Ammar who had heard the holy words of the Messenger directly, from his own tongue, or indirectly, knew that ‘Ali, peace be upon him, had been assigned by the Messenger to succeed him.

Regarding the issue of *risalat* (being the Messenger of God), everyone believed that the Messenger was the last Prophet of God—the “Seal of the Prophets”—and after him there would be no other messenger. Therefore, the issue of succession of ‘Ali was regarded as one within the internal domain of Islam. A verse of the Noble Qur’an says: O Messenger! “*You are but a warner and to every nation [there is] a guide.*” (13:7) Of course, this verse applies more to future times, after the Prophet. The Messenger had two aspects; one was the warner and one was the guide. The warning aspect, which pertains to prophethood, ended with the death of the Messenger. However, the guiding aspect remains until the Day of Resurrection. God ordered the Messenger to hand over to ‘Ali the duties of *walayah* and guidance. Consequently, in contrast to the Companions of the Messenger who had dedicated their *bay‘at*<sup>5</sup> specifically to ‘Ali, another group did not take the precious words of the Messenger as determination of his successor as being ‘Ali; and said that the purpose of his words was to show the position and rank of ‘Ali and not his assignment. They said we also accept these ranks and we regard ‘Ali as being in possession of high rank in Islam; and since the Messenger has not specified anyone for leadership of the Muslim community (*ummah*), we among ourselves must specify someone for leadership. Thus, they specified one of the special companions of the Prophet, Abu Bakr, for the position of Caliphate. They said whatever the *ummah* has decided is valid and should be put into practice.

Due to the fact that the subject is extensive, and during the course of history hundreds of books have been written about it, I do not intend to argue the point here. The purpose is to show how these two groups were formed: the first group was called the Shi‘ites [followers] of ‘Ali. During the history [of Islam] this group has been given various names. For a period of time they were even called *rafidi*. *Rawafid* is the plural of *rafidi*, meaning someone who has abandoned the religion. In other times they were called *shu‘ubi* (nationalist), since this group referred to this verse of the Qur’an: “*O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations (shu‘ub) and tribes that ye may know one another. Verily, the most honored of you with God is the one with the most taqwa (God-wariness). Lo! Allah is the Knower, Aware.*” (49:13), and their motto was: “*Verily, the most honored of you with God is the one with the most taqwa (God-wariness).*”

These names were coined later, however the core of Shi‘ism comes from the Messenger’s word, who said: “For whomever I am the *mawla* [leader], truly, this ‘Ali is his *mawla*.” If historians and orientalist are to discuss the issue of the dates that Shi‘ism started, they should not mistake the origin of the word “Shi‘ite” with the origin of the faith itself. Of course, the word “Shi‘ite” and other terms for them developed during the course of history, but the root of Shi‘ite

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5 A two sided transaction done between a person intending to enter the Path of Allah and the Caliph of Allah or his representative. By virtue of this transaction Allah has promised His satisfaction and paradise for the person. For an excellent explanation of *bay‘at* and its related issues please see the article: “Observations on the Meaning of Bay‘at” by Hajj Dr. Nur’Ali Tabandeh (Majdhub’Ali Shah) published in *The Sufi Path*, (Tehran: 2001).

belief was the holy words and the rulings of the Messenger of God. ‘Ali, peace be upon him, also according to the Messenger’s recommendation and order, gave Imam Hasan the position of Imamate (leadership); also Imam Hasan [transferred this position] to Imam Husayn, and Imam Husayn to Imam Sajjad, [and so on] to the end.

Considering the fact that God in the Qur’an said: “*Verily, We sent down the reminder, and verily, We are its protector.*” (15:9), the Shi‘ites have assumed that the survival of the religion [is based] on the continuation of this chain of spiritual authorization [succession]. They have believed that there is continually a guide and a leader present in the world, who is assigned to this position by the “previous hand.” Of course, the continuation of the chain of authorization for spiritual guidance is one of the instances of the above verse: “*Verily, We sent down the reminder, and verily, We are its protector.*” (15:9), although the wording of this verse refers to the Qur’an itself, which is the only heavenly book that, praise be to God, has remained guarded from the tampering of enemies.

The issue of Imamate continued until the time of the twelfth Imam who disappeared from view. His occultation [disappearance] was also in accord with divine wisdom. There is certainly wisdom for us to fathom in the occultation. Although we do not believe in reasons or causes for divine decrees and commands, we can try to comprehend the wisdom. One aspect of the wisdom behind the occultation was that the Imam went out of the reach of the oppressive caliph. In the future too, spiritual leaders wouldn’t be within the reach of governments that would cause them trouble or would destroy them. Another aspect of this wisdom one may consider is that during the time when the Imam was present, the Shi‘ites and their sincere followers would bring all their inquiries and refer whatever problem they had to the Imam, without using their minds themselves or giving themselves the trouble of problem solving. Whatever the Imam would say would be taken as valid and to be acted upon. And thus this matter could have prevented the intellectual growth of the Shi‘ite community and Shi‘ism. But once the Imams said that all religious problems were propounded and stated in the Qur’an and *sunnah*, and we have previously explained them too, the Shi‘ites became certain that the solution to all of the religious problems, until the Resurrection Day, could be found in previous reports about the Imams. Hence, they should find the answers to their problems by thinking on their own. Accordingly, the subject of *ijtihad* came about and the *Usuli School* of jurisprudence was formed along these lines.<sup>6</sup>

Here a question is posed. Since contacting the Imam is not available for all Muslims and the Shi‘ite community, what duty do people have? For example, during the occultation, what is the duty of the Muslims regarding *bay‘at ma‘navi* (spiritual) or *bay‘at walayati*,<sup>7</sup> which was one of the fundamentals of the holy *shari‘ah* (divine law) of Islam and was made part of *shari‘ah* at the time of the Messenger and became a rule for which no verse of the glorious Qur’an, and for

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<sup>6</sup> *Ijtihad* is the derivation of the rules of Islamic law from their sources: the Qur’an, *hadiths*, reason and consensus. The *usuli* school of jurisprudence believed that scholars must practice *ijtihad*, while their opponents of the *akhbari* school believed that all juridical questions could be answered directly through the Qur’an and *hadiths*.

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 2.

which no order has been reported regarding its cancellation, considering that early on the Imams also used to personally take *bay'at* [initiating followers], and even the oppressive Caliphs used to take *bay'at*?

The successors of the Messenger, the holy Imams, were always under pressure and were silenced. As such, numerous stories have been mentioned in historical works about the severe suppression during the time of the holy Imams, particularly after the time of Imam Reza (peace be upon him). For example, from the time of Imam Ja'far Sadiq (peace be upon him) whose "*akhbar-e 'irfāni*" [reports related to Sufism] and *ahkam-e shari'ati* [rules concerning Islamic law] have been amply reported, it is believed that in response to one of his Shi'ite followers who called him "*Amir al-Mu'minin*" [Commander of the Faithful], he said: "Do not call us '*Amir al-Mu'minin*', this title is specifically for our forefather, Imam 'Ali." But this same Imam, due to the extreme oppression of the times, and the fact that Mansur, the Abbasid caliph, summoned him several times in order to kill him, found no choice but to call Mansur "*Amir al-Mu'minin*." Even if you refer to the stories written in *Mafatih al-Jinan*,<sup>8</sup> you will find the evidence of this extreme oppression. For example, in the time of Imam 'Ali Naqi (peace be upon him), one of the Shi'ite followers who was enthusiastically waiting to visit with him said, "The Imam was under surveillance in his own home. I reached him in a hurry. Only a minute had passed, when he told me to leave immediately because [by staying there] I would get in trouble." Numerous stories such as this have been reported.

Thus, if the caliphs were to find out that the Imams were taking *bay'at* with their followers, the life of the Imam, and even the lives of all the Shi'ites around them would be in danger—regardless of the fact that the *bay'at* was not for governance or gathering supporters. Hence, the caliphs were constantly watching the Imams. And accordingly, the Imams had to specify representatives to take *bay'at* on their behalf, and these representatives in turn were also often authorized to assign representatives [of their own]. Similarly, Imam Ja'far Sadiq assigned Bayazid Bastami as his agent for taking *bay'at*. Shaykh Ma'ruf Karkhi, who was the disciple of Ja'far Sadiq, obtained his authorization and permission later on during the time of Imam Reza. Due to the oppression at that time and lack of access to the Imam, Ma'ruf Karkhi obtained authorization to specify a successor for himself, as well. It is quite obvious that, the successor had to be verified by the Imam of the time. Thus, with the approval of the Imam, Shaykh Ma'ruf Karkhi appointed Shaykh Sarri Saqati. Also Sarri Saqati, again with the approval of the Imam, appointed Junayd Baghdadi. Junayd was authorized by the living Imam, the twelfth Imam, for *bay'at manavi*. He had authority and permission to specify a successor during the time of the Occultation. Thus, he specified a successor who was Shaykh Abu 'Ali Rudbari.

The issue of specifying the successor in Sufism is a fundamental principle, that is, no one without being authorized by the previous *pir*,<sup>9</sup> can reach the stage of guidance, and even the training of each *salik* [traveler on the path] depends upon the fact that he or she submits

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8 A book mostly containing a collection of supplications, in Arabic, primarily reported from the Imams, collected by Hajj Shaykh Abbas Qumi.

9 Literally, in Persian *pir* means *elder*. Among the Sufis it is used to designate the spiritual master.

wholeheartedly<sup>10</sup> to the *pir*. This succession and sequence of authorization of masters and spiritual guides in Sufism has been commonly termed *silsilah*. Of course, during the course of history, these spiritual representatives, who take *bay'at* have been called by different names, such as, *qutb*, *shaykh*, *pir*, *murshid*, and others.

In this chain of spiritual authorization or *silsilah*, whenever one of the shaykhs has had a prominent characteristic, the *silsilah* has become popular through his name. For example, the *salasil-e Ma'rufiyah* are those orders that originated from Shaykh Ma'ruf Karkhi. Or since Shah Ni'matullah Vali found a prominent position and significance in the history of Sufism, the Ma'rufiyah *silsilah* came to be called the *silsilah Ni'matullahi*. Similarly, along the same lines, towards the end of the thirteenth century (A.H.) [approximately early twentieth century], the late Hajj Mulla Sultan Muhammad Baydukhti Gonabadi, titled "Sultan 'Ali Shah," held a special social, spiritual, and scholarly position. Thus, the *silsilah* after him was called "Ni'matullahi Gonabadi."

The true *salasil*, which were numerous in the past, all trace their authorizations back to Imam 'Ali. This is due to the fact that the principle of Sufism is based on the fact that each successor must be authorized by the previous hand. This chain of authorization of the shaykhs, according to the beliefs of the true followers of Sufism, continues until the day of resurrection. However, only the orders that are traced to an Imam are valid, and these orders all trace back to 'Ali (peace be upon him), because all the orders have originated from 'Ali who had permission from the Messenger himself. Basically, no one after the Messenger made any claim regarding a special authorization from the Messenger. Even Abu Bakr, with all his greatness and the high position he held among Muslims, never claimed that the Messenger appointed him as his successor. However 'Ali (peace be upon him), from the beginning announced that he was the true successor and caliph of the Messenger.

Thus, in regard to Shah Ni'matullah Vali a question is posed that requires much discussion and analysis, as to whether he was a Shi'ite or a Sunni.

First we should consider who is a Shi'ite? Who is a Sunni? During the course of history in every dispute among people—whether religious, political, or social—always the group that for whatever reason was more powerful and overcame its opponents found pejorative titles and nicknames for the defeated side; and every possible negative characteristic that could be thought of is normally summed up in these names. For example, in the history of Islam the words *mulhid*<sup>11</sup> and *malahida* were taken to signify all of the negative qualities that people could associate with a word, so that they could easily and at once defeat a person or a group of people by calling them "*mulhid*." Of course, there might have been some characteristics that fit, but they were not certain and should not have been generalized.

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<sup>10</sup> What is meant here is that the *salik* should make *bay'at* with the *pir*.

<sup>11</sup> The term *mulhid* (pl. *malahida*) is used to signify those who deny religious truths; atheists, disbelievers.

The words “Shi‘ite” and “Sunni” were also coined on the basis of the disputes between the two groups. Every day they increased the differences between them, they even added issues that are irrelevant to being Shi‘ite or Sunni. For example, while at the beginning there were no disputes about the date of birth, death, and migration of the Messenger, and even in the book *Usul al-Kafi*<sup>12</sup> regarding the Messenger’s biography it is stated that the birth and death were on the twelfth of Rabi‘ al-Awwal, but later on, in the course of history, other differing narrations were reported, so that the Shi‘ites, since then, have taken note and acted upon those reports, which called the birth on the seventeenth of Rabi‘ al-Awwal, because they considered these reports more credible. Of course, there is nothing to prevent different historians from reporting the dates of historical events differently; this has been a feature of history writing, at least among the early historians. For example, if you refer to books on the history of literature, you will find many disputes among historians regarding the birth and death of poets as well, although the dispute is irrelevant to the character of the poets themselves or their poetry. Accordingly, believing in the birth of the honorable Messenger to be the seventeenth of Rabi‘ al-Awwal does not necessarily classify one as a Shi‘ite, or if someone says it is the twelfth of Rabi‘ al-Awwal, he does not necessarily become a Sunni—this argument has no relevance to being a Shi‘ite or a Sunni. The main and primary difference between Shi‘ite and Sunni is what Shi‘ites believe: the successor of the Messenger, and essentially, the successor of the representative of God is always assigned. That is, succession is based on the selection of the prior representative, whereas Sunnis say the leadership of the *ummah* must be left for the review and election of experts and influential people. In any case, whoever believes in ‘Ali as the successor of the Messenger, even though he has no choice but to accept the historical fact that Abu Bakr became the Caliph, is regarded a Shi‘ite, for although ‘Ali did not oppose the government openly, he was against this kind of practice.

Of course, later on with regard to issuing of religious precepts and rulings on matters of jurisprudence there were disagreements among the Shi‘ites and the Sunnis and even occasionally, among the Shi‘ite *mujtahids*<sup>13</sup> or among the Sunni *mujtahids*. In the early centuries there were more differences of opinion among the Sunni jurists about matters pertaining to religious precepts. As history books indicate, at one time there were five hundred *mujtahids* in Baghdad each of whom would issue his own legal opinion. Hence, the caliphs of the time decided to reduce or eliminate these widespread differences. Accordingly, among the greatest jurists who had larger numbers of followers, six were accepted as *mujtahids*: Abu Hanifa, Shafi‘i, Malik, Ahmad Hanbal, Tabari, and Abi Dawud. It was announced that every one should only follow them. Gradually, Tabari and Abi Dawud were cast aside and the leaders of the Sunnis were limited to these four persons. However, Islam is not just precepts and is not limited to them. Islamic law is one of the pillars of Islam, but another important pillar is dogma.

Therefore, these differences in juridical precepts do not cause differences in the religion of the faithful—as to make one a Muslim and the other a non-Muslim. Thus, when the Shi‘ites are called “*rafidi*,” meaning those who have abandoned religion; certainly if those who were known

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<sup>12</sup> *Usul al-Kafi* written by an early Shi‘ite writer, Kulayni (d. A.H. 328-9) is one of the four major Shi‘ite collections of narrations.

<sup>13</sup> Experts of Islamic jurisprudence.

as *rafidi* were truly *rafidi*, they would not be accepted by the Shi‘ites or the Sunnis. The truth of the matter is that this word was coined in order to label the Shi‘ites, and declare a Shi‘ite as a *rafidi*, although the person had never abandoned religion.

Shah Ni‘matullah Vali was also in such social circumstances. Among the poetry from his youth or the times of “*irshad*” [guidance] there are many verses in praise of ‘Ali (peace be with him). Of course, the present scholars will certainly talk amply about these poems; and in order to avoid a lengthy speech I will not mention them here. However, during the time that he lived near *Haramayn Sharifayn* [Mecca and Medina] and he was under the training of his master, Shaykh Abdullah Yafi‘i, the Muslim community there required that he formally condemn the *rafidis*. This is the reason he has expressed odium toward the *rafidis* in some poems. Of course, he was a Shi‘ite, but he was not a *rafidi* with the connotation that their opponents used to state. The reason being, that hostility with Caliphs, which according to adversaries was among the characteristics of *rafidis*, is not among the pillars of Shi‘ism.

We all consider Ali’s enemy as our enemy, and we definitely do not accept anyone who has enmity for him. Shi‘ites, and possibly the entire Muslim population of the world, would not accept him. However, the dispute is over who is really an enemy. For example, some people say Abu Bakr was hostile to ‘Ali, and forcefully took away the right of caliphate from him. However, the caliphate was the duty of ‘Ali, not his right. The issue of right exists in our minds when we become worldly and consider material belongings and positions as our right. It is then that we would say the caliphate is the right of ‘Ali, which was taken away from him. Nonetheless, ‘Ali (peace be with him) says, “To me your caliphate is not worth as much as this torn shoe.”<sup>14</sup> Such a person would not fight for that right, which is worth as much as an old torn shoe.

Caliphate was not the right of ‘Ali; it was the nation’s right and was ‘Ali’s duty. That is, after the Messenger, we as Muslims had the right to have ‘Ali as the caliph and successor. Others barred this duty from being performed. Imam ‘Ali did not pay attention to this for years, as well. When the obligation of government was brought up and people persistently pleaded with him to take it up, and to accept the delayed duty, having no other choice, Imam accepted. Thus, one cannot say that caliphate is the right of ‘Ali.

Some historians from the opposing side also say that had ‘Ali become the [first] Caliph, the Muslim community would have fragmented, and others—God willing with good intention—tried to prevent this division. It is obvious that, quite possibly, love of position, or for example, family problems may have also been involved. It is incumbent upon scholars to clarify these issues. In any case, the caliphates of Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthman have been verified in history, and this was the realization of what was written by the pen [of God]. That is how it has been reported in the history books. And we have nothing to do with the goodness or wickedness of others. However, among the companions of the Prophet, we prefer ‘Ali and we follow him. Shah Ni‘matullah Vali was also a follower of that same Imam.

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14 See Sayyid Razi, *Nahj al-Balagha*, ed. Subhi Salih (Beirut: 1980), Sermon 33.

Unfortunately in recent times, many great misunderstandings along with biased judgments have been expressed against Shah Ni‘matullah, although he was one of the greatest men of knowledge and Sufism in Iran. Among them is prejudice against the word “shah” in his title, such that in many of the written and spoken material, including books, and at Iranian gatherings held outside of Iran, the word “shah” is omitted, and he is called: “Sayyid Ni‘matullah Vali”. It is true that he was also a *sayyid*,<sup>15</sup> and in his poetry, he takes pride in this. However, he is known throughout the history as Shah Ni‘matullah Vali. Eliminating the word *shah*, when it is part of a name, is not correct. Now if we want to know the true meaning of *shah*, in this context, it is better to study the third volume of the book *Tara’iq al-Haqaiq* in the part regarding the meeting of one of Shah Ni‘matullah Vali’s later devotees, Nur-‘Ali Shah the First, with the famous jurist of the time, Ayatollah Sayyid Mahdi Bahr ul-Ulum. And I refer our friends to that.<sup>16</sup>

Another point, which has been posed as a criticism, although it is not that much related to Hadrat Shah Ni‘matullah, and yet there is room for it to be discussed, is the issue of the implicit objection of Hafiz to Shah Ni‘matullah. Hadrat Shah says:

We alchemically transmute the dust of the path with a glance

We cure one hundred ills with a glimpse.

Similarly, the following is in the poetry of Hafiz:

Those who alchemically transmute the dust of the path with a glance

Would it be to turn a glimpse toward us?

My illness is better hidden from those who claim to be physicians

May its cure come from His hidden treasure.

Some in the position of criticism say that; the second verse of Hafiz’s ghazal in which he has mentioned “those who claim to be physicians,” refers to Shah Ni‘matullah Vali. However, this criticism would be true only if Hafiz had already heard that poem of Shah Ni‘matullah Vali

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<sup>15</sup> One descended from the Prophet.

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad Ma‘sum Shirazi, *Tara’iq al-Haqaiq*, ed. Muhammad Ja‘far Mahjub, Vol. 3 (Tehran: 1365), 199-200.

before, and basically if Shah Ni‘matullah had composed this first, before the time that Hafiz had written this poetry. However, this matter cannot be substantiated at all. Shah Ni‘matullah Vali had composed a lot of poetry about his own spiritual stations, and there was no reason to suddenly make such a claim. Thus, it is possible that Hafiz may have written this poem first, of course, after he had been disappointed by all those who merely claimed to be Sufis, who were famous as “Sufi” only in name, and about whom he wrote where he speaks negatively about Sufis. However, since Hafiz knew that there are definitely people who alchemically transmute dust with a glance, he asked God, “O God! Is it possible that those who can do so might glance toward us?” In the following verse of the same poem, there is a hint that he regrets his own past, as well. He comes to the conclusion, with a view to his past, that those he imagined to be Sufi were in reality pretenders, or in his words, “those who claimed to be physicians.” Thus, he says it is better for his illness to be hidden from all these pretenders, so that it may be cured by the treasure of the Unseen. In fact, after receiving this poem, Shah Ni‘matullah Vali invites Hafiz to come to him by saying: “We alchemically transmute the dust of the path with a glance.”

Now, suppose that is not even the case. It is true that Hafiz was a great man and held a distinguished position in Sufism. But the Hafiz that most people know, including critics of Sufism, is a *rend*<sup>17</sup> and a man of literature who only speaks poetry. The adherence of such a person to Shah Ni‘matullah Vali is no honor to the Sufi Order, regardless.

If all the universe became disbelievers,

Not a speck of dust would fall on the skirt of His grandure.

Maybe it has been for the same reason that Shah Ni‘matullah gave new instructions to his order that were appropriate to his times. These instructions were in consideration of the fact that in those times some people had been known as “Sufis” who were notorious and whose conduct was not in accordance with “*faqir*”<sup>18</sup> and being a dervish. Of course, each *qutb* and leader of *faqir*, according to the requirements of the time, can issue fresh and new instructions. He can even reverse the prior instructions temporarily or permanently.

Among the instructions Shah Ni‘matullah had given was that the dervishes of the Ni‘matullahi Order should not be without employment and should not beg. Another one was that they should not wear any special Sufi clothing. Of course, this instruction regarding prohibition of dervish vestment was cancelled several centuries later, by one of his successors, Hazrat Reza ‘Ali Shah Deccani regarding two of his authorized shaykhs; Hazrat Mas‘um ‘Ali Shah and Hazrat Nur ‘Ali Shah I, whom he had sent to Iran. These two great men entered Iran wearing

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<sup>17</sup> A *rend* is a rascal who does not care about formalities and religious laws.

<sup>18</sup> Literally *poverty*, it refers to the absolute poverty of man compared to God. It is used as another term for Sufism.

special dervish robes and carrying the *kashkul*<sup>19</sup> and *tabarzin*<sup>20</sup> ; while chanting in praise they toured various cities. The reason had been that since the time of the Safavids there had been very harsh treatment toward all dervish orders, and the masters of the Ni‘matullahi Order had practically all left Iran. It reached the point that in the final years of the Safavids the enemies of the Sufis and dervishes had power in some governmental organizations and exercised influence. Hence, among the general population no one knew what a dervish is, and in this regard everyone was in confusion. The conduct and the unique appearance of these two Sufis attracted attention. After investigations and inquiries they realized that there was something other than what they had been practicing so far, another religious path, which could ensure the tranquility of their hearts.

Particularly after the martyrdom of such great men in the Ni‘matullahi Order as Hazrat Sayyidd Mas‘um ‘Ali Shah, Hazrat Mushtaq ‘Ali Shah, and Hazrat Muzaffar ‘Ali Shah, people paid more attention to appreciate this path. Thus, in Iran, during the time of these two great Sufis, based on the needs of the time, Shah Ni‘matullah’s instructions regarding clothing were annulled. Then later, after Hazrat Nur ‘Ali Shah I, the leaders and *qutbs* of the Ni‘matullahi Order did not behave in this manner. It remained so until the time of Hazrat Rahmat ‘Ali Shah, when some masters such as Hazrat Husayn ‘Ali Shah or Hazrat Majdhub ‘Ali Shah even appeared among the exoteric ‘*ulama*. After the time of Hazrat Rahmat ‘Ali Shah, his successor, the late Sa‘adat ‘Ali Shah was apparently not considered as one of the ‘*ulama*, and did not possess scholarly knowledge. This, on its own, indicates that Sufism has no relationship with exoteric knowledge and education. It is an individual state and spirit. Having considered this, Hazrat Sa‘adat ‘Ali Shah was greatly respected and honored by the great philosopher of the time, Hajj Mulla Hadi Sabziwari. In a meeting, after responding to the inquiries of Hajj Mulla Hadi Sabziwari’s students and novices, and after they had received satisfactory answers, many students, particularly Sultan ‘Ali Shah, conceded to Hazrat Sa‘adat ‘Ali Shah and were initiated to *faqir*. However, Hazrat Sultan ‘Ali Shah Gunabadi, the successor of Hazrat Sa‘adat ‘Ali Shah, was also one of the topmost ‘*ulama* of the time, who similar to Mawlavi (Rumi) had given his hand of discipleship to his master [Shams Tabrizi].

In conclusion, to those who have helped with this symposium, I wish you all success, particularly Dr. Sayyid Mutafa Azmayesh. May this symposium take place successfully, so that those who have not known Shah Ni‘matullah Vali or know little of him get to know him well, God willing. Accordingly, I won’t speak too much and I leave the complete explanation of the subjects to the care of the great scholars who have participated in the symposium, and have submitted articles, or will later deliver speeches. Truly, their expertise in this field has been and will be a lot more than mine.

Al-salamu ‘alaykum wa rahmatullah wa barakatuh.

Nur ‘Ali Tabandeh

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19 A special vessel often made from a dried sea-cucumber.

20 A special axe used by Sufis as a tool and to symbolize the cutting away of worldly attachments.