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ARTICLE

Sufism vs. Monism in ʿAzīz-i Nasafī's Works

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While the 7th/13th-century Persian Muslim scholar of the Mongol era ʿAzīz-i Nasafī actively engaged with Sufi traditions in his writings, he also introduced an overlooked distinction by drawing a line between Sufis (*ahl-i taṣavvuf*) and monists (*ahl-i vaḥdat*), aligning himself with the latter. This paper argues that Nasafī's clear differentiation between these two groups reflects broader transformations in the intellectual landscape of the Persianate Mongol world. These changes marked the emergence of new modes of thought not easily explainable by the established linguistic conventions of classical Sufism. Consequently, Nasafī's works serve as a window into the intellectual and linguistic challenges faced by Muslim intellectuals as they endeavored to shape the pre-modern and early modern Islamic cosmopolis (7th/13th–9th/15th centuries), revealing points of convergence and divergence with their intellectual predecessors.

Keywords: Sufism; Persianate Mongol world; ʿAzīz-i Nasafī; *waḥdat al-wujūd* (*vaḥdat-i vujūd*); Islamic intellectual history

ʿAzīz-i Nasafī and Persianate Sufism

ʿAzīz-i Nasafī emerged as a prominent Muslim intellectual of the Persianate Mongol world in the 7th/13th century, garnering recognition throughout the Muslim world. Nasafī's writings were translated into languages such as Latin and Turkish, gaining readership not only in the Persianate world but also reaching as far as the Ottoman Empire and Europe.[1] Nasafī lived in a distinct intellectual era, serving as an observer of the rise of the Persianate Mongol world and the decline of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate.[2] He also witnessed the emergence of new intellectual orientations in Islamic spirituality, as exemplified by influential figures such as Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and Nasafī's mentor, Saʿd al-Dīn Ḥammūya (d. 650/1260), among others.[3] However, Nasafī's writings have received relatively little scholarly scrutiny, and his views and ties to the Sufi tradition have not been critically examined.[4]

[1] For the reception of Nasafī's works, see Mohammad Amin Mansouri, "ʿAzīz-i Nasafī (fl. 7th/13th c.), Hierarchies, and Islamic Cosmopolitanism" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2022), 54–59. As James Morris writes, Nasafī's *Maqṣad-i aqṣā* "for several centuries constituted one of the few translated sources on Sufism in Europe." James Winston Morris, "Ibn ʿArabi and His Interpreters Part II: Influences and Interpretations," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 4 (1986): 745.

[2] Regarding Nasafī's account of Mongol assaults on Bukhārā, see his *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, ed. ʿAlī Aṣghar Mīrbāqirī-fard (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Sukhan, 1391/2013), 4.

[3] For a recent study on Ḥammūya, see Cyril V. Uy II, "Lost in A Sea of Letters: Saʿd al-Dīn Ḥamūya (d. 1252) and the Plurality of Sufi Knowledge" (PhD diss., Brown University, 2021).

[4] For studies on this figure, see Hermann Landolt, "Le soufisme à travers l'œuvre de 'Azîz-e Nasafî: étude du Ketâb-e Tanzîl,"*Annuaire de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Section Sciences Religieuses* 103 (1996): 227–29; Hermann Landolt, "Le

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This paper examines Nasafī's engagement with Sufism, contending that, although he incorporated a wide range of Sufi concepts into his writings, he consistently strived to distinguish between monists (*ahl-i vaḥdat*) and Sufis (*ahl-i taṣavvuf*) and aligned himself closely with the former.[5] The boundary between these two groups in Nasafī's writings is indicative of his intellectual endeavor to theorize the broader developments of his era and their relation to or derivation from earlier currents in Islamic thought. As discussed in this paper, Nasafī's preference for monism over Sufism finds a parallel in the work of Timurid scholar Ibn Turka Iṣfahānī (d. 835/1432), who replaced Sufism with lettrism as the universal form of knowledge and most reliable metaphysical model. While other Muslim thinkers such as Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. *ca.* 787/1385) strived to uphold Sufism as the universal expression of Islamic spirituality, examples such as Nasafī and Ibn Turka underscore Sufism's limitations as a universal category and its contested status in pre-modern and early modern Islamic intellectual history.

Sufism boasts a rich and enduring tradition in Islamic history. Although there is no agreement among scholars as to how to define Sufism, William Chittick describes it as "the living spirit of the Islamic tradition" and "Islam's living heart."[6] Carl Ernst has argued that the word "Sufism" was a construct of British Orientalists aiming to identify and highlight the mystical aspects of Islamic traditions that appealed to their European taste.[7] Historically, the earliest Sufis had their roots in urban hubs like Basra and Kufa in Iraq, where groups such as ascetics (*zuhhād*), renouncers (*nussāk*), and worshippers (*ʿubbād*) emerged in the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries. These groups would soon be recognized as Sufis, eventually spreading to Baghdad.[8] Among these, early figures such as Maʿrūf al-Karkhī (d. 200/815), al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 11/728), Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910), and Rābiʿa al-ʿAdwiyya (d. *ca.* 185/801) are better known, primarily via later sources that documented statements attributed to them.[9] These early figures did not formulate structured intellectual frameworks, and Western observers have frequently characterized them as ascetic and renunciatory due to their deliberate detachment from worldly pleasures and material indulgences.[10]

Sufism quickly spread to the eastern regions of the Islamic world, notably Khurāsān. ʿAzīz-i Nasafī originated from Nasaf, a prominent city in Transoxiana, which neighbored Khurāsān.[11] By Nasafī's era, Sufism in Khurāsān had already matured and reached its zenith.[12] Starting

paradoxe de la 'face de Dieu': ʿAziz-e Nasafī (VIIe/XI- IIe siècle) et la 'monisme ésoterique' de l'Islam," *Studia Iranica* 25, no. 2 (1996): 163–92; Hermann Landolt, "ʿAzīz-i Nasafī and the Essence-Existence Debate," in *Consciousness and Reality: Studies in Memory of Toshihiko Izutsu*, ed. Sayyid Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī, Takashi Iwami Matsubara and Akiro Matsumoto (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 387–95; L.V.J. Ridgeon, *Azīz Nasafī* (Richmond: Curzon, 1998); Shafique N. Virani, "The Dear One of Nasaf: ʿAzīz Nasafī's 'Epistle on love'," *Iran and the Caucasus* 13, no. 2 (2009): 311–18.

[5] Hermann Landolt translated *ahl-i vaḥdat* to monists. See Landolt, "Le soufisme," 228.

[6] William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* (New York: Oneworld Publications, 2011), 24, 28. For a wide range of definitions of Sufism, see Reynold A. Nicholson, "An Historical Enquiry Concerning the Origin and Development of Sufism," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* 38 (1906): 303–48.

[7] See Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997); Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 218–19.

[8] Alexander D. Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 6–7. For early Sufism, see Knysh, *Sufism*; Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Fritz Meier, *Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); John Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam: Spirituality and the Religious Life of Muslims* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012); Marijan Molé, *Les mystiques musulmans* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965); Mark Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essentials* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2000); Michael Anthony Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Miraj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: the Vision and Practice of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 164–207.

[9] For the challenges that understanding these figures through later sources presents for chronological approaches to Sufism, see Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 25–26.

[10] See Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Knysh, *Sufism*.

[11] For the challenges of Sufism in Nasaf, see Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 70.

[12] For the developments of Sufism in Khurāsān, with a focus on the notion of love, see Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qur'an Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 107–23.

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with early Khurāsānī Sufis such as ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Sulamī (d. 412/1021) and culminating with figures such as Ḥakīm al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074), we witness Sufism's gradual evolution in Khurāsān, along with the emergence of the term *ahl al-taṣawwuf* to describe medieval Sufis.[13] Khurāsānī Sufism played a crucial role in shaping Nasafī's path, as many Sufis in this area had already employed Persian to compose a diverse array of Sufi literature, contributing significantly to the broader trend of Persian's ascendance as a dominant cultural and literary medium across the Islamic sphere. As Leonard Lewisohn writes,

> The "New Persian" language that developed under the Persian Sāmānid dynasty (reg. 262/875–388/998), which contained a composite vocabulary of Middle Persian or Pahlavi, and Arabic, and after a few decades, became the main administrative and literary language of Central Asia and Transoxiana, soon rivalled Arabic in importance, and subsequently became the lingua franca of all Middle Eastern high culture.[14]

Historian Marshall Hodgson also highlights the enduring influence of the Persian language and culture on the Islamic world, especially from the $4^{th}/10^{th}$ to $10^{th}/16^{th}$ centuries. He emphasizes that, in this period, Persian became the language of refinement and scholarship in much of the Islamic world, serving as a model for the development of other languages in the literary realm and forming the foundation of many cultural traditions referred to as "Persianate."[15] Khurāsānī Sufism, in particular, played a significant role in Persian's ascent to becoming the lingua franca of the intellectual elite throughout Persia. The renowned *Kashf al-maḥjūb* by ʿAlī Hujvirī (d. *ca.* 465/1071–72) is, for example, frequently acknowledged as the earliest comprehensive guide to Sufism written in Persian.[16] To expand this roster, one can also include other notable individuals such as Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. *ca.* 520/1126) and Khwāja ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1088), who played significant roles in diffusing Persian as the standard language of Sufism. Similarly, Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (fl. early $6^{th}/12^{th}$ century) emerged as another significant figure from this period, contributing, through his commentary, to the establishment of the Sufi and mystical tradition of Qurʾanic exegesis in the Persian language.[17]

Persian poetry also played a significant role in shaping Islamic spirituality and Sufism in Khurāsān during this era. Sanāʾī Ghaznavī (d. *ca.* 1087/1130), who originated from Ghazna in the eastern part of Khurāsān, holds paramount importance in this regard, as he served as a trailblazer in incorporating Sufi and mystical ideas into Persian poetry. Sanāʾī also skillfully wove these elements into shaping his conception of an ideal ruler, effectively establishing a connection between sainthood and kingship.[18] Equally significant in this context was the celebrated Persian poet ʿAṭṭār (d. *ca.* 618/1221), who was born in Nishāpūr, a key cultural center and hub in Khurāsān. ʿAṭṭār indisputably stands as the epitome of utilizing Persian in both poetry and prose, serving as another medium for articulating Sufi and mystical creations.[19]

[13] For example, see Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd ibn al-Sharīf (Qom: Bīdār, 1374/1992), 401–402.

[14] Leonard Lewisohn, "Overview: Iranian Islam and Persianate Sufism," in *The Heritage of Sufism: The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism (1150–1500)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 28.

[15] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago 1974), 293.

[16] ʿAlī Hujvīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, ed. Valentin Zukovsky (Leningrad: Maṭbaʿa-yi Dār al-ʿUlūm-i Ittīḥād-i Jamāhīr-i Shurawī-yi Susiyālīstī, 1344/1926). For its English translation, see ʿAlī Hujvīrī, *The Kashf al-Maḥjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Leyden: Brill, 1911).

[17] See Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics*.

[18] See Parisa Zahiremami, "Cosmopolitanism, Poetry, and Kingship: The Ideal Ruler in Sanāʾī's (d. 1131 or 1135 CE) Poetry" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2021), 193–225.

[19] For a recent thematic study of the works of ʿAṭṭār in terms of diversity and pluralism, see Nicholas John Boylston, "Writing the Kaleidoscope of Reality: The Significance of Diversity in the 6th/12th Century Persian Metaphysical Literature of Sanāʾī, ʿAyn al-Quḍāt and ʿAṭṭār" (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2017), 336–442.

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The synergy of Persian poetry and Islamic mysticism achieved a new zenith in the works of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), the prominent icon of Persian poetry, who hailed from Balkh in the eastern part of Khurāsān.[20] Notably, ʿAzīz-i Nasafī was acquainted with the writings of these three Persian poetry masters and incorporated their verses into his works, further anchoring himself in the intellectual milieu of Persianate Khurāsān.[21] Indeed, Nasafī's works feature poems from a diverse array of poets, including Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, Bābā Afżal Kāshānī (d. 7th/13th century), Niẓāmī Ganjavī (d. 605/1209), Avḥad al-Dīn Muḥammad Anvarī (fl. 6th/12th century), Kamāl al-Dīn Iṣfahānī (d. *ca.* 635/1237), Saʿdī-yi Shīrāzī (d. 691/1292), and Avḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī (d. 635/1238).[22] These engagements place Nasafī's works not only within the Persianate Sufi tradition of Khurāsān, but also within the broader context of Persian literature, showcasing his familiarity even with his contemporary Persian poets.

Thus, by Nasafī's era, Persian had already established itself as a standard language of the Islamic mystical canon. He, in particular, inherited the legacy of the Sufis of Khurāsān and continued their tradition of employing Persian as a language of Sufi expression. Much like Shihāb al-Dīn Suhravardī (d. 1191/587), Nasafī also incorporated elements from ancient Iranian mythology into his writings.[23] For example, he utilized metaphors such as the universe-reflecting mirror (*āʾīna-yi gītī-namā*) and the world-reflecting goblet (*jām-i jahān-namā*) to explain the concept of the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*), further enriching Sufi and mystical thought with Persian influences.[24]

The ideas put forth by the renowned Muslim philosopher and mystic Ibn al-ʿArabī also transformed various principles and doctrines in Islamic spirituality during Nasafī's era. Al-Shaykh al-Akbar's impact on the wider fabric of Islamic thought during this period is noteworthy, and Nasafī's testimony provides insight into the magnitude of this influence. Describing the elevated position of sainthood (*valāyat*) over prophethood (*nubuvvat*), a concept extensively explored by Ibn al-ʿArabī in his body of work, Nasafī recalls that this discourse held sway in his native town and throughout Transoxiana.[25] He also mentions that he observed, while visiting his master Saʿd al-Dīn Ḥammūya (d. 650/1252), that Ḥammūya and his students were actively participating in this ongoing debate; a debate that continued among Ḥammūya's students even after his passing.[26] This narrative aligns with our understanding of the development of the Akbarian school of thought in the Persianate world, as various Iranian Sufis and mystics—such as Muʾayyad al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 700/1300), ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 736/1335), and Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī—played pivotal roles in introducing and propagating Akbarian ideas and doctrines.[27] Nasafī himself,

For a new study of ʿAṭṭār, see Austin O'Malley, *The Poetics of Spiritual Instruction: Farid Al-Din 'Attar and Persian Sufi Didacticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

[20] For a useful examination of Rūmī's link to Sufism, see William C. Chittick, "Rūmī and waḥdat al-wujūd," in *Poetry and Mysticism in Islam: The Heritage of Rumi*, ed. Amin Banani, Richard Hovannisian, and Georges Sabagh (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70–111.

[21] For Nasafī's use of Sanāʾī's poetry, see *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 151, 216, 232. For Nasafī's use of ʿAṭṭār's poetry, see Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 81, 157, 172. For Nasafī's use of Rūmī's poetry, see ʿAzīz al-Dīn ibn Muḥammad Nasafī, *Majmūʿa-yi rasāʾil mashhūr bi kitāb-i al-insān al-kāmil*, 3rd ed., ed. Marijan Molé (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Ṭahūrī, 1371/1993), 114, 375, 385; Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 146.

[22] Instances of such citations include: For Bābā Afżal's poetry, see Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 24; Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 146, 228; for Niẓāmī Ganjavī's poetry, see Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 183; for Anvarī's poetry, see Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 194; for Iṣfahānī's poetry, see Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 217; for Saʿdī's poetry, see Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 302, 337; for Kirmānī's poetry, see Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 383.

[23] For this aspect in the works of al-Suhrawardī, see John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardī and Platonic Orientalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 51–64.

[24] Mansouri, "ʿAzīz-i Nasafī (fl. 7th/13th c.), Hierarchies, and Islamic Cosmopolitanism," 192–209.

[25] For Ibn al-ʿArabī's exploration, see Michel Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des saints: prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn Arabî* (Paris, France: Gallimard, 1986), 129–79.

[26] Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 316.

[27] For the development of the Akbarian school of thought, see Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); James

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in conjunction with these authors, made significant contributions to the development of monist philosophy or *waḥdat al-wujūd*, to the development of monist philosophy or waḥdat al-wujūd as a distinctive feature of pre-modern and early modern Islamic intellectual history.[28]

While Nasafī was not simply an Akbarian thinker, he played a major role in transmitting a wide range of Akbarian ideas in Persian, making them accessible to a wider readership across the Persianate world.[29] Nasafī is undoubtedly the most prominent student of Saʿd al-Dīn Ḥammūya and, as Nasafī states, he "was under the shadow of his spiritual nurturing" (*dar sāya-yi tarbiyat-i vay mī-bāshīdam*).[30] Ḥammūya was also the disciple of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 618/1221), the eponymous founder of the Kubravī Sufi order.[31] Although Kubrā's followers were proficient and produced scholarly works in Arabic, many of them also demonstrated excellence utilizing Persian to articulate their thoughts. Certainly Kubrā's disciples, including ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla Simnānī (d. 736/1336) and Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 654/1256), who authored the renowned *Mirṣād al-ʿIbād*, a foundational and highly esteemed work in Persian prose, as well as Ḥammūya himself, had already created noteworthy works in Persian.

Nasafī, however, did not have a formal association with the Kubravīs, maintaining his status as an autonomous and innovative thinker. Yet, his intellectual connections with them provide further insight into the influence of the Persianate Sufi tradition on him. Nasafī's works are also laden with discussions of Sufi ideas and practices. He wrote separate treatises on practices commonly found in Sufi circles, such as solitude (*khalvat*), spiritual audition (*samāʿ*), poverty (*faqr*), Sufi hospices (*khānaqāh*), asceticism (*zuhd*), and reliance on God (*tavakkul*).[32] Hence, Nasafī's selection of the Persian language and his incorporation of a diverse array of Sufi concepts and practices mark a pivotal juncture in the evolution of Persianate Sufism during the Mongol era.

Nasafī between Sufism and monism

Throughout his writings, Nasafī focuses on three distinct groups that embody different approaches to Islamic thought: the people of Sharia (*ahl-i sharīʿat*); the people of wisdom (*ahl-i ḥikmat*), who encompass Muslim philosophers; and the people of unity or monists (*ahl-i vaḥdat*).[33] Although Sufis or *ahl-i taṣavvuf* make appearances in Nasafī's works, they do not hold as central a position as the first three groups. For instance, while these three

Winston Morris, "Ibn ʿArabi and His Interpreters Part I: Recent French Translations," *American Oriental Society* 106, no. 3 (1986): 539–51; James Winston Morris, "Ibn ʿArabi and His Interpreters Part II: Influences and Interpretations," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 4 (1986): 733–56. For the development of Ibn al-ʿArabī's ideas in the Persianate world, also see Seyyed Shahabeddin Mesbahi, *Ibn ʿArabī and Kubrawīs: The Reception of the School of Ibn ʿArabī by Kubrawī Mystics* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2019).

[28] For the history of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, see William C. Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mohammed Rustom, Kazuyo Murata, and Atif Khalil (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 71–88.

[29] For Nasafī not being simply an Akbarian thinker, see Landolt, "Le paradoxe," 188.

[30] Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 371.

[31] It should be mentioned that, as Devin Deweese has demonstrated, the term Kubraviyya as a collective identity does not emerge in primary sources until around the 15th century. See Devin DeWeese, "ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla Simnānī's Religious Encounters at the Mongol Court near Tabriz," in *Politics, Patronage and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th–15th Century Tabriz*, ed. Judith Pfeiffer (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 37; Devin DeWeese, "Spiritual Practice and Corporate Identity in Medieval Sufi Communities of Iran, Central Asia, and India: The Khalvatī/ Ishqī/Shaṭṭārī Continuum," in *Religion and Identity in South Asia and Beyond: Essays in Honor of Patrick Olivelle*, ed. Steven Lindquist (London: Anthem Press, 2011), 251–52. For this Sufi order, also see "Sayyid 'Ali Hamadani and Kubrawi Hagiographical Traditions," in *Studies on Sufism in Central Asia* (Farnham: Ashgate Variorum, 2012), 121–58; Devin Deweese, "The Eclipse of the Kubravīyah in Central Asia," *Iranian Studies* 2, nos. 1–2 (1988): 45–83; Marijan Molé, "Les Kubrawîya entre sunnisme et shîʿisme aux huitième et neuvième siècles de l'hégire," *Revue des Études Islamiques* 29, no. 1 (1961): 61–142.

[32] Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 327–41. For spiritual audition (*samāʿ*) specifically, see Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 101–110.

[33] For a useful analysis of these groups, see Landolt, "Le paradoxe de la 'face de Dieu'," 163–92.

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groups are frequently mentioned in Nasafī's *Bayān al-tanzīl*, *ahl-i taṣavvuf* are mentioned only three times in this text, as a distinct group and separate from the rest.[34] In Nasafī's *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, a work dedicated to explaining the views of various Muslim factions, we encounter additional information about the Sufis or *ahl-i taṣavvuf*, but they still receive notably less attention than the other three groups.[35]

Nasafī categorizes traditional Sufis, such as ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), as belonging to *ahl-i taṣavvuf*.[36] According to Nasafī, the term Sufi (*ṣūfī*) derives its origins from wool (*ṣūf*) or purity (*ṣafvat*), encompassing a broad spectrum of meanings within, such as solitude (*ʿuzlat*), companionship (*ṣuḥbat*), obedience (*imtithāl*), asceticism (*taqvā va parhīzkārī*), giving other people ease (*rāḥat*), maintaining anonymity (*gumnāmī*), and other related concepts.[37] Nasafī outlines a general framework for Sufism, which consists of four levels. The initial stage involves aspiring (*irādat*) to become a disciple (*murīd*) under the guidance of a master (*shaykh*) and being entirely receptive to the master's teachings, emptying oneself of all else. The second level entails dedicating time to serve (*khidmat*), while the third level is embarking on a spiritual journey (*sulūk*). The fourth level of Sufism diverges into two paths: one involving companionship (*ṣuḥbat*) with others and the other embracing solitude (*ʿuzlat*). These two represent distinct approaches within Sufism—one emphasizing inner contemplation and the other focusing on worldly activities.[38] Here, Nasafī is likely referring to two dominant modes in Sufi tradition, identified by Ahmet Karamustafa as "world-embracing" and "world-rejecting attitudes."[39] As Karamustafa argues, many Sufis gradually disapproved of the latter and "principles of asceticism, such as seclusion (*khalvat*, *ʿuzlat*) abstinence (*jūʿ*), and silence (*ṣamt*), were transformed into mere techniques of spiritual discipline."[40]

While references to *ahl-i taṣavvuf* are rather limited in Nasafī's works, we frequently encounter *ahl-i vaḥdat* in his oeuvre, introduced as the embodiments of the unity of being (*vaḥdat-i vujūd,* Arabic *waḥdat al-wujūd*). He seems to be the pioneer in employing this terminology in its technical sense.[41] As one of the earliest Muslim thinkers to employ the concept of monism in its technical sense, Nasafī not only used it to refer to the ideas of Ibn al-ʿArabī and his followers, but he also viewed this notion as *hiéro-histoire*, a sacred school of thought that transcends time.[42] This school encompasses a diverse range of individuals who contributed to the understanding of the unity of being, including Shihāb al-Dīn Suhravardī and Khwāja ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī.[43] While Nasafī explicitly counts these figures as *ahl-i vaḥdat*, he also includes statements from a wide range of earlier figures such as Abū Bakr Shiblī, Junayd al-Baghdādī, and the first Shiʿi imam ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, as their alleged statements

[34] ʿAzīz al-Dīn ibn Muḥammad Nasafī, *Bayān al-tanzīl*, ed. Sayyid ʿAlī Aṣghar Mīrbāqirī-fard (Tehran: Anjuman-i Āṣār va Mafākhir-i Farhangī, 1379/2000), 191, 225, 226.

[35] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 111, 116, 173, 177, 180, 181–82, 185, 195, 199, 234, 237, 238.

[36] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 224, 226.

[37] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq* 173–74.

[38] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq* 174–75.

[39] Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period, 1200–1550* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 25.

[40] Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*, 30. It is noteworthy that Nasafī also looked askance at renunciatory practices. He writes, "O dervish! Do not assume that the freeman [referring to the perfect free human, who is freed from material attachments] does not have a house, palace, garden, or orchard. The freeman may have a house and palace, garden and orchard, or rulership [*ḥukm*] and kingship [*pādishāhī*], but if he is endowed with kingship, he does not become joyful and if the kingship is taken away from him, he does not become sad as he is indifferent to these titles. He is indifferent about whether people reject or accept him. If he is accepted [as the king], he does not state, 'I do not want it,' and if he is rejected [as the king], he does not say, 'I want it.' This is what maturity, contentment, and submission mean. 'Blessing to those who have' [*har kih dārad mubārakash bād*]." Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 139.

[41] Chittick, "Rūmī and *waḥdat al-wujūd*," 84. Also, see Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 82–83. For *ahl-i vaḥdat* introduced as the embodiments of the unity of being, see Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 221–34.

[42] For this term in Corbin's works, see Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard and Philip Sherrard London (London: Kegan Paul International, 2006), 61–68.

[43] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 224, 226.

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uphold monism.[44] Nasafī was one of the earliest figures who contributed to the formation of monism as an independent intellectual school, particularly through articulating the people of unity or *ahl-i vaḥdat* as the upholders of this doctrine. He maintained that *ahl-i vaḥdat* represent the highest form of monotheism (*tavḥīd*), allowing people to live peacefully and harmonically with the world:

> O dervish! There is a unity that precedes multiplicity (*kathrat*) and there is a unity that supersedes it, which takes a great deal of work to accomplish. If seekers successfully attain this advanced unity, they reach the state of being a monotheist (*muvaḥḥid*) and are liberated from the act of associating partners with God (*shirk*). Philosophers (*ḥukamāʾ*) are aware of the first unity but they have no share of the latter...
>
> O dervish! Those who reach the end of monotheism have a certain sign. Although they see Nimrūd and Abraham at war or Pharaoh and Moses as enemies, they see and perceive them as one. This is the latter form of unity, and when monotheism reaches its end, the stage of unity appears...[45]

This passage emphasizes two forms of unity. The first form is a unity that comes before multiplicity, indicating an understanding of the inherent oneness and unity preceding the diversity of the world. The second form of unity is characterized as one surpassing multiplicity, demanding effort for its attainment. True monotheists represent this higher form of unity. The relevance to unity is particularly evident in the passage above: those who reach the end of monotheism perceive conflicting figures, such as Nimrūd and Abraham or Pharaoh and Moses, as one. Nasafī's emphasis on viewing conflicting figures as a singular entity, despite their apparent discord, underscores a superior form of unity transcending differences and conflicts. It demonstrates that true monotheists embody monism and peace, exemplified by Nasafī's statement that those with true knowledge of God "reach peace with the entirety of humanity in an instant" (*bā khalq-i ʿālam bi-yikbār ṣulḥ kard*).[46] *Ahl-i vaḥdat*, therefore, attain the elevated form of unity, serving as the cornerstone of Nasafī's distinctive intellectual contribution to a peace-centric and monist interpretation of monotheism. In short, Nasafī embraced the concept of *ahl-i vaḥdat*, the people of unity, as a distinct collective to articulate a model that integrates monotheism, monism, and peace through their ideas.

Nasafī distinguishes between *ahl-i vaḥdat* and *ahl-i taṣavvuf* in his works, separately explaining their views on matters such as the journey (*sulūk*) or spiritual audition

[44] ʿAzīz Nasafī, "Maqṣad al-aqṣā," in *Ganjīna-yi ʿirfān*, ed. Ḥāmid Rabbānī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Ganjīna, 1352/1974), 277. As an illustration, Nasafī attributes the following statement to ʿAlī, whom he contends represents a monist worldview: "I do not worship a Lord whom I have not seen." This hadith is documented in early Shiʿi sources such as Ibn Bābawayh's (d. 381/991) *Kitāb al-tawḥīd*: "O the Commander of Believers! Have you beheld your Lord while you worship Him? To this, he replied, 'Woe to you! I do not worship a Lord whom I have not seen.' Someone inquired, 'Then how did you see Him?' He responded, 'Woe to you! He is not perceived by the eyes through visual observation, but He is perceived by the hearts through the realities of faith. He cannot be comprehended through analogy or perceived through the senses. He cannot be compared to humans, defined by signs, or understood through indicators, and His wisdom precludes any injustice. He is God, and there is no deity besides Him.'" See Muḥammad ibn Bābawayh, *al-Tawḥīd*, ed. al-Sayyid Hāshim al-Ḥusaynī al-Ṭihrānī, reprint ed. (Qom, Muʾassasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1430/2009), 105–106. For the depiction of ʿAlī in Shiʿi tradition, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Ali. The Well-Guarded Secret: Figures of the First Master in Shiʿi Spirituality*, trans. Francisco José Luis and Anthony Gledhill (Leiden: Brill, 2023); Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Muḥammad the Paraclete and ʿAlī the Messiah: New Remarks on the Origins of Islam and of Shiʿite Imamology," *Der Islam* 95, no. 1 (2018): 30–64; Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "ʿAlī and the Quran: Aspects of the Twelver Imamology XIV," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 98, no. 4 (2014): 669–704; Sean W. Anthony, *The Caliph and the Heretic: Ibn Sabaʾ and the Origins of Shīʿism* (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2012), 195–239.

[45] Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 179.

[46] Nasafī, *al-Insān al-kāmil*, 447.

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(*samāʿ*).[47] The following passage is a sample of how Nasafī distinguishes these two in his work:

> Regarding the discourse of *ahl-i taṣavvuf* concerning the spiritual states (*ḥāl*) experienced by dervishes during the spiritual audition (*samāʿ*) and sermons (*vaʿẓ*):
>
> *Ahl-i taṣavvuf* assert that this state arises due to either profound contemplative thoughts (*fikr-i qavī*) or a fragile disposition (*żaʿf-i mizāj*). Certain individuals possess contemplative thoughts to the extent that these thoughts overwhelm them, rendering them temporarily incapable. At times, these thoughts manifest during prayer, causing individuals to remain immersed in prayer for one or two days. On other occasions, these thoughts may emerge while eating, causing food to linger in their mouths or hands for a day or two. These individuals may undergo comparable experiences.
>
> Some individuals possess a fragile temperament, easily thrown off balance by either extreme joy and delight or profound pain and fear. In such instances, the spirit enters from an external source into their body, causing them to lose touch with their senses, their bodies growing cold, and their vitality nearing the brink of death. Certain individuals, particularly those with such delicate temperaments, such as the infirm or women, may indeed succumb to these conditions. An unmistakable indicator that this spiritual state arises from contemplative thoughts is that affected individuals refrain from producing unusual sounds or exhibiting atypical movements, swiftly returning to normalcy when engaged by someone speaking to or moving them.
>
> Conversely, when this state results from a weak temperament, those experiencing it produce unusual sounds, exhibit atypical movements, and resist returning to their usual state through the aforementioned means. They remain oblivious to their surroundings, impervious to even the most forceful gestures or shouts directed at them. Many dervishes perform practices such as weeping during spiritual audition, displaying atypical movements, or manifesting convulsions in their limbs, and they are often rooted in their frail temperaments. Nevertheless, they attribute these manifestations to a spiritual state or stage, leveraging them to claim the title of Shaykh. This wretched has encountered many such cases.
>
> Regarding the discourse of *ahl-i vaḥdat* concerning the spiritual states experienced by dervishes during spiritual audition (*samāʿ*) and sermons (*vaʿẓ*):
>
> Know that *ahl-i vaḥdat* assert a single underlying cause for the manifestation of a spiritual state. This phenomenon is attributed to the entry of the spirit from an external source into the body, resulting in a temporary disruption of the senses, akin to a state of slumber. On occasion, when the spirit enters the body, it tends to congregate in a specific region, causing a chilling sensation in other parts, resembling a fainting episode. There are four primary triggers for this occurrence. Firstly, it can be brought about by feelings of exhaustion, weariness, or sheer boredom commonly referred to as a state of sleep. Secondly, a contemplative thought or meditation can induce this spiritual state, often described as "my private communion with the divine" (*wa-lī maʿ Allāh waqt*). Thirdly, extreme joy and delight can also lead to this phenomenon. Finally, it can result from intense pain and fear, both of which are categorized as fainting episodes.[48]

In this passage, Nasafī discusses the distinctions between *ahl-i taṣavvuf* and *ahl-i vaḥdat* regarding the spiritual states experienced during spiritual auditions and sermons. According to *ahl-i*

[47] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 197–99, 199–201.
[48] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 199–201.

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taṣavvuf, these states can arise from either deep contemplative thoughts or a fragile disposition. Seekers may be overwhelmed by thoughts, leading to prolonged absorption in prayer or other activities. Fragile temperaments, influenced by extreme emotions, can also result in trance-like states, with some Sufis exhibiting irregular sounds and movements. Nasafī's narrative in this context carries a critical undertone, as he asserts that many Sufis, especially those with sensitive temperaments, leverage these manifestations to acquire the prestigious title of Shaykh. However, Nasafī's depiction of *ahl-i vaḥdat* refrains from any criticism. He states that they attribute their spiritual states to a single cause—the entry of the spirit from an external source into the body. This results in a temporary disruption of the senses, similar to a state of slumber. The four primary triggers for this occurrence include exhaustion or boredom, contemplative thoughts, extreme joy, and intense pain or fear. As evident from this passage, Nasafī presents *ahl-i taṣavvuf* and *ahl-i vaḥdat* as distinct groups and delves into their individual perspectives on the spiritual audition, demonstrating that they represent two different approaches to Islamic spirituality. Nevertheless, there are instances illustrating that even though these two groups are distinct in Nasafī's works, some of their ideas bear striking resemblance to each other. For instance, Nasafī interprets the principle of annihilation within annihilation (*fanāʾ dar fanāʾ*), which he attributes to *ahl-i taṣavvuf*, as completely synonymous with the perspective of *ahl-i vaḥdat*. As he writes:

> Know that there are four stages for those engaged in spiritual invocation (*z̄ākirān*). When a seeker attains the fourth stage, they transcend worries and preoccupations. The veil of constant thinking is lifted, allowing them to perceive the beauty of contemplation, which marks the initial stage of Sufism. Now, it is incumbent upon the seekers to purify their hearts from all but God, allowing the light of God to shine through them and illuminate their beings...[49]
>
> Know that the first stage is occupied by individuals who verbally recite invocations but remain unaware of their deeper significance. Many people find themselves in this category. They engage in private prayer, but their minds wander towards mundane matters such as business transactions, marketplaces, gardens, and worldly pleasures, or even towards forbidden deeds and sins. This is a common state for ordinary individuals when they beseech God, and those who do not experience such distractions can hardly be considered part of the common populace. Exercising patience in the face of sin is a hallmark of this stage...
>
> In the second stage, individuals vocalize their invocations to God, yet they struggle considerably to maintain their heart's focus on God, albeit for brief intervals before distractions intervene. This is the manner in which pious individuals (*ṣāliḥān*) often pray and engage in spiritual invocations. Exercising patience and avoiding even entertaining thoughts of sin are hallmarks of this stage.
>
> The third stage is characterized by individuals whose tongues and hearts are synchronized in invoking God, with God reigning supreme in their hearts, providing them with profound serenity, and they find it challenging to concentrate on other matters... Only a select few attain this elevated stage, and those should treasure it, safeguarding it from the influence of those with lesser spiritual aspirations. These ascetic people consistently maintain this elevated state during all forms of prayer and invocations. Exercising patience in devotion to God is a hallmark of this stage.
>
> The fourth stage is characterized by individuals in whom the invoked (*maz̄kūr*) holds a dominant presence within their hearts, much like how invocation (*z̄ikr*) was paramount in the hearts of those in the third stage...[50]

[49] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 235.
[50] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 235–37.

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> Know that *ahl-i taṣavvuf* often occupy this stage, where the invoked holds such dominance in their hearts that they become oblivious to anything or anyone other than the Divine. For some, this experience is so intense that their senses may temporarily cease to function, and they become wholly absorbed in God's presence. This absorption can endure for varying durations, ranging from hours to days, and even up to ten days. Exercising patience with God's divine workings is a hallmark of this stage...[51]

> Now that you have familiarized yourself with these preliminary explanations, understand that when seekers progress to this stage, they become utterly oblivious to everything and everyone except the Divine. They reach the threshold of the realm of non-being and annihilation (*fanāʾ*), a term used by *ahl-i taṣavvuf*. If they go further and forget even their own selves, it is referred to as annihilation within annihilation (*fanāʾ dar fanāʾ*), embodying the essence of "die before your natural death arrives." In this phase, all distinctions and multiplicity dissolve, revealing the unity of God to the seekers. It marks the inception of the stage of monotheism, where seekers perceive nothing but the Divine. Therefore, seekers attain this stage and behold nothing and no one except the Almighty, even losing sight of their own selves.[52]

Nasafī outlines the four stages of spiritual invocation (*ẕikr*). In the first stage, seekers verbally recite invocations but remain unaware of their deeper significance. The second stage involves seekers vocalizing invocations to God but struggling to maintain focus. In the third stage, seekers synchronize their tongues and hearts in invoking God, experiencing profound serenity in His presence. The fourth stage is marked by the dominant presence of the invoked (*maẕkūr*) in the hearts of seekers. This stage is associated with *ahl-i taṣavvuf*, where the invoked holds such dominance that seekers become oblivious to anything other than the Divine. *Ahl-i taṣavvuf* regard this stage to be one of annihilation (*fanāʾ*). Should seekers advance beyond this point, they may even forget their own selves, a state known as annihilation within annihilation (*fanāʾ dar fanāʾ*). At this point, all distinctions dissolve, revealing the unity of God to the seekers. Thus, Nasafī asserts that the Sufi concept of annihilation within annihilation underscores the notion that seekers should ultimately attain a state in which they not only perceive nothing and no one except God but also lose their sense of self, becoming entirely one with Him. This view is identical to the *ahl-i vaḥdat*'s approach to the world:

> Know that *ahl-i vaḥdat* affirm the existence of a singular being, which is that of God—The Mighty and Sanctified. God's being is necessary and singular, eternally without a commencement or end, devoid of multiplicity or constituent parts. Apart from His being, nothing else exists, nor can it ever exist. This is because if there were another being apart from His, it would imply the existence of an entity akin to God's, acting as an equivalent, partner, opposite, and counterpart to God's being to His being, and none of these possibilities can apply to God: "There is no opposite (*ḍidd*), counterpart (*nidd*), equivalent (*shabah*), and partner (*sharīk*) for God."[53]

While the conventional understanding of monotheism typically involves belief in a single God and the rejection of other deities, Nasafī's interpretation of monism goes beyond this definition. For Nasafī, monism signifies not only the impossibility of the existence of other deities but also the absence of any other being alongside God. In other words,

[51] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 237.

[52] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 238–39.

[53] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 219. Interestingly, a similar statement is attributed to the first Shiʿi Imam, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), in *Nahj al-balāgha*: "There is no opposite [*ḍidd*], counterpart [*nidd*], equal [*ʿadl*], and match [*mithl*] for God." See Sharīf al-Raḍī, *Nahj al-balāgha*, 8 vols., ed. al-Sayyid Ṣādiq al-Mūsawī (Beirut: al-Muḥaqqiq, 1426/2005), 2:380.

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Nasafī's monism asserts that God's existence is the sole reality, leaving no room for any other independent existence or entity. This analysis of monism dovetails with *ahl-i taṣavvuf*'s views of annihilation within annihilation, as Nasafī takes both narratives to mean that all existence is absorbed and unified in the Divine, with no independent or separate entities apart from God. In this analysis, the worldviews of *ahl-i vaḥdat* and *ahl-i taṣavvuf* align quite closely and do not represent entirely distinct approaches.[54]

This example illustrates that *ahl-i taṣavvuf* and *ahl-i vaḥdat* possess some points of overlap, but it should not be concluded that these two groups are entirely indistinguishable. Nasafī's decision to employ two distinct names for these groups is not merely a matter of semantic and linguistic variation, but more indicative of substantial intellectual differences. This is because, as previously discussed, Nasafī distinctly separates these two groups in his writings and places significantly greater emphasis on *ahl-i vaḥdat*, with comparatively less focus on *ahl-i taṣavvuf*. Additionally, there are instances in which Nasafī clearly places *ahl-i taṣavvuf* in a less favorable light than *ahl-i vaḥdat*, further demonstrating that *ahl-i taṣavvuf* and *ahl-i vaḥdat* do not represent identical groups in his work, and should be understood as such. A useful example is the following passage:

> Know that both the people of fire (*aṣḥāb-i nār*) and the people of light (*aṣḥāb-i nūr*) affirm the concept of true being (*vujūd-i ḥaqīqī*), whether they are in a state of spiritual intoxication or sober reflection, and they consider it the ultimate stage for seekers. However, *ahl-i taṣavvuf* can only acknowledge the notion of virtual unity (*vaḥdat-i majāzī*) when they are in a state of spiritual intoxication, and they view it as the highest attainment for seekers...[55]

In this context, Nasafī recognizes *ahl-i vaḥdat* as those who possess a proper understanding of the cosmos and *ahl-i taṣavvuf* as attaining only a virtual form of unity, implying they remain entangled in the ontological multiplicity that *ahl-i vaḥdat* have transcended. There are also other instances where *ahl-i taṣavvuf* are depicted as holding beliefs of a lower rank than *ahl-i vaḥdat*. For instance, when explaining the four ranks of the world, Nasafī employs the metaphor of the sea (*daryā*).[56] He explains that the first sea represents the essence of God, akin to a hidden treasure (*ganj-i makhfī*).[57] The second sea corresponds to the related spirit (*rūḥ-i iżāfī*) or the First Intellect (*ʿaql-i avval*), while the third and fourth seas signify the angelic world (*malakūt*) and the kingship world (*mulk*).[58] According to Nasafī, *ahl-i taṣavvuf* believe that these four worlds unfold sequentially in both temporal (*zamānī*) and external (*khārijī*)

[54] We find a similar narrative in Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, who aimed to transform monotheism into a monist model of thought. As he writes, "The purpose of all prophets, from Adam to Muhammad, peace be upon them, was solely to invite people to divine monotheism. This calling aimed to transition individuals from a conditioned god to the Absolute God, liberating them from apparent disbelief [*al-shirk al- jail*]. Similarly, the appearance of all saints, from Adam to al-Mahdī, the lord of time, peace be upon them, served the purpose of inviting people towards ontological monotheism. This calling aimed to transition individuals from a conditional being to the Absolute Being, liberating them from hidden disbelief (*al-shirk al-khafi*) that corresponds to it." Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, *Jāmiʿ al-asrār wa-manbaʿ al-anwār bi-inḍimām risāla naqd al-nuqūd fī maʿrifat al-wujūd*, ed. ʿUthmān Ismāʿīl Yaḥyā and Henry Corbin (Tehran: Anjuman-i Īrānshināsī-yi Farānsa va Shirkat-i Intishārāt-i ʿIlmī va Farhangī, 1347/1969), 85. In both Nasafī's and Āmulī's works, we see a clear tendency to present a monist reading of monotheism. See also, Mohammad Amin Mansouri, "The Sea and the Wave: A Preliminary Inquiry into Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī's Criticism of Ibn al-ʿArabī's Ontology," *Journal of Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society* 68 (2020): 75–116.

[55] Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 234. It is important to note in Nasafī's writings that those classified as the people of fire and the people of light are actually two subgroups in the broader category of the people of unity, rather than representing separate and distinct categories. For example, see Nasafī, *Kashf al-ḥaqāʾiq*, 80–81.

[56] See Mansouri, "'Azīz-i Nasafī, Hierarchies, and Islamic Cosmopolitanism," 154–55.

[57] For this notion in Akbarian thought, see Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, "The Immutable Entities and Time," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabi Society*, accessed October 11, 2023, https://ibnarabisociety.org/the-immutable-entities-and-time-jaakko-hameen-anttila/.

[58] Nasafī, "Maqṣad al-aqṣā," 275.

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ways. He then asserts that this represents an exoteric notion (*ẓāhir*), while the select group among *ahl-i vaḥdat* (*khavāṣṣ-i ahl-i vaḥdat*) hold a more intricate narrative that is challenging to comprehend. In this alternate account, there exists only a single, boundless light—an infinite manifestation of God's essence. This light manifests (*tajallī*) into the lower worlds, residing within them much like the spirit dwells in the body.[59]

In contrast to *ahl-i taṣavvuf*, who conceptually separate God's light from the lower realms, *ahl-i vaḥdat* argue that these lower realms are merely outward and exoteric expressions of this limitless light; they do not constitute distinct ontological realities that surpass or exist independent of the light.[60] That is why, in alignment with the monist perspective, Nasafī asserts that if seekers aspire to comprehend God's essence and attributes, their search should be directed inward, to their own selves. Within oneself, one can discover not only God but the entire macrocosm, encompassing everything from angels and devils to the First Intellect.[61] Hence, Nasafī unmistakably categorizes *ahl-i taṣavvuf* and *ahl-i vaḥdat* as distinct intellectual groups. While *ahl-i vaḥdat* hold a central position in Nasafī's works and are frequently referenced, mentions of *ahl-i taṣavvuf* are comparatively infrequent, as Nasafī regards them as occupying a lower status than *ahl-i vaḥdat*. This illustrates that Nasafī, in his work, substitutes *ahl-i taṣavvuf* with *ahl-i vaḥdat*, portraying them as the new authoritative voice of Islamic spirituality. This group upholds the unity of being as the cornerstone of thought, clearly drawing its intellectual foundation from the Akbarian school of thought, a perspective absent from earlier Sufi writings. In this regard, Nasafī's differentiation between *ahl-i taṣavvuf* and *ahl-i vaḥdat* highlights the significant changes occurring in his era, and this distinction should be viewed within the broader intellectual landscape from which it originated.

Nasafī in the pre-modern and early modern Shiʿi-Sunni cosmopolis

While Sufism is often employed as a universal or blanket term to describe the entirety of mystical, esoteric, and occult dimensions within Islamic traditions, Nasafī's works serve as a compelling case study, offering insight into the intricate ways in which Muslim intellectuals engaged with Sufi tradition in the pre-modern and early modern eras. Nasafī's writings bear the influence of Sufi concepts and practices, but his notable shift away from Sufism towards monism signifies the broader discursive turn of his intellectual milieu. This shift underscores *waḥdat al-wujūd* as one of the fundamental characteristics of Islamic intellectual history in the pre-modern and early modern world. Nasafī's displacement of Sufism represents the gradual ascension of monism as a predominant intellectual model, signifying the rise of competing and diverse intellectual paradigms of Islamic mysticism during this period. These paradigms and various modes of spirituality could not be only encapsulated by Sufism, which served as the dominant form of spirituality in Khurāsān in the $5^{th}/11^{th}$ and $6^{th}/12^{th}$ centuries. In Nasafī's writings, we observe a distinct discursive shift illustrating the nuanced transformations within the intellectual environment of the Persianate Mongol world. Nasafī's works exhibit significant parallels with the Sufism prominent in Khurāsān in the $5^{th}/11^{th}$ and $6^{th}/12^{th}$ centuries. However, this shift sets his works apart from the earlier Khurāsānī tradition in which Sufism remained the supreme form of mystical expression, as Nasafī positions monism at the forefront of Islamic mysticism, often relegating Sufism to a marginalized or lower position in comparison.

Nasafī's approach to Sufism is also similar to the esteemed Timurid thinker Ibn Turka Iṣfahānī (d. 835/1432). While conventionally portrayed as a Sufi and mystic in Islamic esotericism, Matthew Melvin-Koushki has argued that Ibn Turka pursued a distinct project

[59] For the notion of *tajallī* in the Akbarian school, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "God Is Absolute Reality and All Creation His Tajallī (Theophany)," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, ed. John Hart (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 1–11.

[60] Nasafī, "Maqṣad al-aqṣā," 279–81.

[61] Nasafī, "Maqṣad al-aqṣā," 282.

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centered around the establishment of lettrism (*ʿilm al-ḥurūf*) as a new metaphysical framework, as "only the letter [*ḥarf*] encompasses all that is and is not, all that can and cannot be; it alone is the *coincidentia oppositorum* [*taʿānuq al-aḍdād*]; hence lettrism is the only valid form of metaphysics."[62] As Melvin-Koushki further explains, Ibn Turka challenged Sufism's prevailing status as the dominant epistemological force, instead establishing his own lettrist metaphysics as the primary framework, dethroning Sufism from its customary position and ambitiously aiming to establish lettrism as a universal and imperial science.[63] In this regard, both Nasafī and Ibn Turka undertook parallel endeavors to supplant Sufism: Nasafī championed monism and Ibn Turka advocated for lettrism as innovative intellectual frameworks intended to function as universal sciences, capable of deciphering the cosmos comprehensively, from the celestial realms down to the earthly domain. Therefore, the Nasafī and Ibn Turka cases highlight the importance of maintaining a justifiable philological basis when employing the term "Sufism" as an emic epistemological category, allowing for contextual utilization rather than imposing it universally on our sources.[64]

In contrast to Nasafī and Ibn Turka, one can see an attempt to re-throne Sufism in the work of Twelver Shiʿi philosopher Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī.[65] Indeed, throughout his body of writings, Āmulī consistently and methodically endeavors to establish a state of rapprochement between Shiʿism and Sufism, presenting them as two intellectually compatible models. He employs the term Sufism specifically to encompass Sunni spirituality in a broad sense, arguing extensively that Sufis are the true adherents of the esoteric teachings of the Shiʿi imams and highlighting the harmony between their doctrines. As an illustrative example, Āmulī writes:

> Among the various Islamic sects and groups, none exhibit the level of denial towards one another as the Sufis (*al-ṭāʾifa al-ṣufiyya*) and the Shiʿas do, despite their shared origin, foundation, and source. The ultimate source for all Shiʿas, particularly the followers of Twelver Shiʿism, is none other than ʿAlī, the Commander of Believers, peace be upon him, along with his noble children and descendants, peace be upon all of them. He

[62] Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Of Islamic Grammatology: Ibn Turka's Lettrist Metaphysics of Light," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 24 (2016): 60.

[63] Melvin-Koushki, "Of Islamic Grammatology," 82. See also, Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Imperial Talismanic Love: Ibn Turka's Debate of Feast and Fight (1426) as Philosophical Romance and Lettrist Mirror for Timurid Princes," *Der Islam* 96, no. 1 (2019): 42–86; Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Powers of One: The Mathematicalization of the Occult Sciences in the High Persianate Tradition," *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 5, nos. 1–2 (2017): 153–66, 182–91; Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "The Occult Challenge to Philosophy and Messianism in Early Timurid Iran: Ibn Turka's Lettrism as a New Metaphysics," in *Unity in Diversity*, ed. O. Mir-Kasimov (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 247–76.

[64] As noted by Matthew Melvin-Koushki, this approach to Sufism has resulted in the exclusion of Islamic occult sciences from scholarly discourse, which is why "occultism is thus to be strictly distinguished from sufism and esotericism, for all that scholars from Corbin onward have habitually and perniciously disappeared the former into the latter." Melvin-Koushki, "Of Islamic Grammatology," 52.

[65] For studies on Ḥaydar Āmulī, see Aaron Viengkhou, "Tawḥīd Divided: The Esoteric Orthodoxy of Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. after 782/1380)," *La Rosa di Paracelso* 2 (2020): 27–51; Elisa Tasbihi, "Visionary Perceptions through Cosmographical Diagrams: Mystical Knowledge from Ḥaydar Āmulī's (d. 787/ 1385) Nasṣ al-nusūṣ fī sharḥ Fusūṣ al-ḥikam," *Journal of the Muḥyiddin Ibn ʻArabi Society* 69 (2021): 32–81; Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, trans. P. Sherrard (London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1986), 55–132; Henry Landolt, "Ḥaydar-i Āmulī et les deux miʾrājs," *Studia Islamica* 91 (2000): 91–106; Mansouri, "The Sea and the Wave," 75–116; Mohammad Amin Mansouri, "Walāya between Lettrism and Astrology: The Occult Mysticism of Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. ca. 787/ 1385)" *Journal of Sufi Studies* 9 (2021): 161–201; Mohammad Amin Mansouri, "Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. ca. 787/ 1385) and Ismailism," *Studia Islamica* 117, no. 2 (2022): 171–229; Mohammed Rustom, "Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī's Seal of Absolute walāya: A Shīʿī Response to Ibn ʿArabī," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, no. 1–17 (2020): 1–17; Nicholas Boylston, "Qurʾanic Exegesis at the Confluence of Twelver Shiism and Sufism: Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī's al-Muḥīṭ al-aʿẓam," *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 23, no. 1 (2021): 1–35; Robert Wisnovsky, "One Aspect of the Akbarian Turn in Shīʿī Theology," in *Sufism and Theology*, ed. A. Shihadeh (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 49–62; Peter Antes, *Zur Theologie der Schiʿa; ein Untersuchung des Gamiʿ al- asrar wa-manbaʿal-anwar von Sayyid Haidar Amoli* (Albert-Ludwigs-Uiversität, 1971).

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> represents their origin, foundation, and source. Similarly, true Sufis attribute their knowledge and their sacred robe solely to ʿAlī, his children, and successive generations of their descent…[66]

While Āmulī's ambitious undertaking is frequently celebrated as an endeavor to harmonize Shiʿism and Sufism as two compatible traditions, it can be argued that he also sought to elevate Sufism to the pinnacle, positioning it as the ultimate and most elevated manifestation of esoteric Islam and the rightful *bāṭinī* essence of the teachings of the Shiʿi imams. These examples exemplify the extensive shifts in understandings of Sufism taking place in the pre-modern and early modern eras, which fostered a diverse array of intellectual discourses. Hence, Nasafī's linguistic and conceptual portrayal of monism as well as his inclination to favor it over Sufism serve as significant reflections of the broader evolution in the intellectual landscape of this era; an era that witnessed the gradual ascent of various competing intellectual models, prompting the need for novel theoretical frameworks to accommodate these changes.

Concluding Remarks

Nasafī's examination of Sufis or *ahl-i taṣavvuf* reflects the evolving views about Sufism in the pre-modern and early modern Persianate world. While Sufism experienced a resurgence in Khurāsān, where it thrived and reached its zenith in the late medieval period ($5^{th}/11^{th}$ and $6^{th}/12^{th}$ centuries), we also observe diverse and conflicting narratives emerging in subsequent periods. ʿAzīz-i Nasafī's approach to Sufism is an illustrative example of this phenomenon. In his body of work, Nasafī establishes a pivotal linguistic and conceptual delineation between Sufis or *ahl-i taṣavvuf* and monists or *ahl-i vaḥdat*, which is consistently well-defined and organized throughout his writings. As emphasized in this paper, Nasafī positions *ahl-i vaḥdat* above *ahl-i taṣavvuf*, portraying the former as the paramount embodiment of Islamic spirituality. In his works, Nasafī dedicates notably less attention to *ahl-i taṣavvuf*, resulting in their reduced significance when compared to *ahl-i vaḥdat*, marking a pivotal transformation in the Persianate Mongol world.

Nasafī presents monism as the pinnacle of Islamic spirituality, selecting this group as the vehicle to convey his own monist philosophy, which presents a significant juncture in its consolidation and recognition in the annals of Islamic intellectual history during the pre-modern and early modern eras.[67] Scholarly understanding of the development of monism during this era remains limited, leaving us with significant gaps in our understanding of how Muslim intellectuals of this period perceived monism in relation not only to Sufism, but also to emerging currents in Islamic thought, such as lettrism, or larger imperial undertakings in the early modern Islamic world.[68] Nasafī's writings, however, contribute to a

[66] Āmulī, *Jāmiʿ al-asrār*, 4.

[67] The rise of these new intellectual trends foreshadowed the difficulties Sufism would encounter in the Safavid era, particularly in the 17^{th} century, when religious scholars and Muslim philosophers launched harsh critiques against Sufism. As a result, there was a gradual reduction in Sufi activities and networks throughout Iran, accompanied by the emergence of new intellectual discourses such as mysticism or *ʿirfān*. These new intellectual currents would later dominate the landscape in modern Iran, further pushing Sufism to the periphery. See Ata Anzali, *"Mysticism" in Iran: the Safavid Roots of a Modern Concept* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 24–68. Regarding the forceful suppression of Sufi communities in the modern era, see Reza Tabandeh, *The Rise of the Niʿmatullāhī Order: Shiʿite Sufi Masters Against Islamic Fundamentalism in 19th-Century Persia* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2021).

[68] On this note, see A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Early Modern Islamicate Empire," in *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam*, eds. Armando Salvatore, Roberto Tottoli, Babak Rahimi, M. Fariduddin Attar, and Naznin Patel (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2018), 351–75; Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Astrology, Lettrism, Geomancy: The Occult-Scientific Methods of Post-Mongol Islamicate Imperialism," *The Medieval History Journal* 19, no. 1 (2016): 142–50.

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deeper understanding of the intellectual diversity of this era and the development of novel intellectual paradigms that demanded unique linguistic and conceptual formulations. Rather than attempting to mediate between Sufism and the concept of the unity of being or monism, Nasafī opted to introduce *ahl-i vaḥdat* as an entirely novel epistemological category for the exposition of monist philosophy. Thereby, Nasafī's elevation of *ahl-i vaḥdat* over *ahl-i taṣavvuf* represents a notable discursive shift, facilitating the establishment of the unity of being as a unique conceptual framework; a framework soon to emerge as a dominant intellectual paradigm throughout the Islamic world.

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