Javād Nūrbakhsh and the Ni‘matullāhī ‘Khaniqahī’ Order

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1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the designation of Ṣūfī Master Javād Nūrbakhsh (1926–2008) and the Ni‘matullāhī ‘Khaniqahī’ Order or Khāniqāh-i-Ni‘mat Allāhī as sectarian. Within the field of Islamic Studies, or even the broader scope of the study of Islam, there is no sufficient term that equates with ‘sect’ or ‘sectarian’. Generally, Islamic history—from early on—is replete with examples of divisions between political alliances/parties (for example, *shī‘at ‘Alī* or *shī‘at Mu‘āwīya*) pertaining to leadership (*imāma*) and schools of thought (*madhhab*) and to methods of reading and practicing the religion. Yet it has to be cautioned that none of these are tantamount to the ‘church-sect typology’ as set out in the sociology of religion for the Western Christian context. Max Weber (1922) and Ernst Troeltsch (1912) used the typology as a heuristic tool. In their theorising, the church was equated with the larger bureaucratic state-sponsored organisation that ministered to the general population, whilst the sect was the smaller evangelical group that adopted a radical stance towards the state. Bryan R. Wilson (1959, 1992) later modified the typology to define sects by the way in which they positioned themselves in opposition to social values or demonstrated their indifference to societal norms. In this sense, it has been more about a study that assists in the categorisation of dissention and along with it claims about the return to true religion. As such, and despite my own reservations about the application of ‘sectarian’ to groupings within Islam, one point of entry into the debate might very well be the combined issue of the interpretation of religion and legitimation of rule that both dominated early debates and forced Muslims to pick sides. Obviously, Muslims gradually became aware of partisanship, dissention, apostasy (*ridḍa*), and secession (*khawārij*), although more sharply once a sense of orthodoxy had begun to take shape.

Historically, the Ṣūfīs are no strangers to intrigue and controversy regarding their allegiance to orthodoxy. Although Ṣūfism was never collectively viewed as heterodox or heretical, certain aspects of its belief system and praxis were

held in suspicion by those stalwart defenders of conventional Islam. Early Šūfism made the attempt to demonstrate itself as part of orthodoxy, and Šūfis claimed that they were representative of 'real' Islam, wanting to avoid being branded as different or apart. The entry point, then, into the debate about sects in Islam—in particular with a view to Šūfism—can be based on the Latin 'to follow', as in a prescribed view deemed to be authentic and not necessarily as a break-away group or movement. It is specifically in this sense of the term that I conceptualise Javād Nūrbakhsh and the Ni'matullāhī 'Khaniqahī' Order. The way I proceed to define this further is by creating a framework wherein Nūrbakhsh is discussed as a sectarian in the generic sense of a nonconformist (even revisionist), and the Order as a sect is read as 'a following' whose partisanship is defined by its adherence to the figure of Nūrbakhsh.

Javād Nūrbakhsh became the leading *pīr* (master) of the Ni'matullāhī 'Khaniqahī' Order from 1956, and remained its figurehead until his death.¹ He was known by the sobriquet, Nur 'Alī Shāh, upon succeeding his Master, Mūnis 'Alī Shāh Dhū l-Riyāsatayn, in the line of the Munawwar 'Alī Shāhī branch of the Ni'matullāhī Order. The Ni'matullāhī Order with which he was associated is by far the most widespread and significant Šūfī Order in Iran, since the time of its inception in the fourteenth century (Algar 2012). The Order survived harsh persecutions and enjoyed periods of patronage, but all in all, it is well-established with roots deeply embedded in Iranian society. The secret of its success is likely related to its dynamic style and transformative nature, but also in its peculiar ability to have managed the tension between Sunnī and Shī'a sensibilities in its earlier manifestations.

In its early history, the Order had undergone several transformations: from Sunnī to Shī'a, moving from Iran to the Deccan, and inaugurating a revival of passionate Šūfism at a time of Shī'a scholastic ascendancy. The most recent transformation, however, was initiated by Javād Nūrbakhsh with the Order's expansion beyond Iran. It has to be said that the role of Javād Nūrbakhsh in the history of the Order is of special note, since it was he, in particular, who adapted the branch of the Order that came under his directorship to the present day conditions of Western society and culture (Lewisohn 2006: 52). Most importantly, the Ni'matullāhī Masters were generally men of erudition and all of them were prolific figures (Algar 2012). Nūrbakhsh was no exception.

The legacy of Javād Nūrbakhsh—as a pronounced figure in the recent history of the Ni'matullāhī—is no less controversial. Here, we discuss Javād Nūrbakhsh as a tacit sectarian in that the unnoticed effort of his career as a

1 However, his son, Alireza Nūrbakhsh was being groomed to succeed Javād Nūrbakhsh from early on.

leading Šūfi figure had been to demonstrate Šūfism as something other than Islam. This relates to what I have called "Nūrbakhshian Šūfism" (Milani 2018: 124) propagated through the Ni'matullāhī brand. In effect, Nūrbakhsh never outwardly proclaimed the Order a sect, nor did he reject Islam outright. His was a 'silent' revolution of an unspoken majority. Whilst the Ni'matullāhī Khaniqahi cannot be labelled sectarian, the philosophy and praxis of Javād Nūrbakhsh warrants a rethinking of his outlook on Šūfism as a sectarian movement. What we find in the writings of Nūrbakhsh is that the Šūfis began as a covert group of Iranian converts to Islam who developed Šūfism in order to protect themselves from persecution and preserve their pre-Islamic identity. In this sense, then, Šūfism, represented the merger of old Iranian customs and the new religion of the Arabs. Specifically, it consisted of a synthesis of the chivalric ideal and the religious notions of love and unity. In Nūrbakhsh's view, as time passes, the Šūfi identity is developed more indiscriminately with Islamic identity, and as such differences became, over time, increasingly more difficult to discern.

In this chapter, I will refer to the overall historical context of Nūrbakhsh's rise to a position of influence, taking into consideration his works within the nexus of social, political and cultural aspects of his time. I will primarily draw on his Šūfi writings, which include books, poems, and discourses, as well as a final interview with a documentary film maker (Smith 2008a, 2008b).² I treat Nūrbakhsh as a genuinely perceived charismatic figure who wielded significant influence over a large nationwide (and eventually global) community of initiates.

In the task of studying Nūrbakhsh and his works, I have primarily worked within the framework of a multidisciplinary approach, particularly that of religious studies, through which I have drawn on history of ideas and Islamic history perspectives in working through problems pertaining to historical interpretation and the utilisation of key ideas over time. In my own theorisation of Nūrbakhsh and his works I have taken an approach inspired by both Martin Heidegger and Pierre Bourdieu. Heidegger's hermeneutics is especially relevant because we are examining how meaning arises in a given historical circumstance based on the retrieval of what is (or might be) still available from the past.³ There is a relationality that is central to a study which examines an

2 My own observations and interviews with group members are not extensively dealt with in this chapter, but they do on occasion inform the basis of my assertions, and I will indicate this where relevant (whilst preserving the anonymity of interviewees). Some aspects of these interviews have, however, been analysed from a sociological perspective and published elsewhere (cf. Milani and Possamai 2016).

3 For background see Thomas Sheehan (2015).

agent of history and historical data for the purpose of examining how meaning arises and is understood in that context. As such, Bourdieu's theory of field and habitus are especially important for appreciating the value of an agent's habitus in relation to the conditions that define a particular field.⁴

2 Overview and Considerations

The Ni'matullāhīyya or Ni'matullāhī Order is representative of a number of branches and sub-branches of which the 'Khaniqahi' is a recent twentieth century development under the leadership of Javād Nūrbakhsh. The Ni'matullāhī take their name from the fourteenth century Sunnī Ṣūfī saint of Syrian descent, Shāh Ni'matullāh Walī. (1330–1431), whom they claim as their founder. Shāh Ni'matullāh gained a large following in Timurid Samarqand, where he seems to have become the subject of intrigue and forced to resettle in Kerman (Algar 2012). The Order was later moved to Muslim India in the fifteenth century and then returned to Iran in the eighteenth century, during the twilight of the Ṣafavid period, to lead a renaissance of its Ṣūfī style. The Order had by now showed itself as truly Shī'a, and its Ṣūfī figureheads preferred the sobriquet 'Kings' (Shāh) after their 'King', Ni'matullāh Walī no doubt, but with particular reference to 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib', known in Persian popular culture as the 'King of [True] Men' (Pers. *shah-e mardan*). The 'Kings' of this branch of Ṣūfism, however, suffered heavy persecution at the hands of extremist Twelver Shī'a 'ulamā' who had won favour with the Ṣafavid Kings.⁵ Yet the Order endured, outlasting the Ṣafavids to find its own patronage under the Qājār and Pahlavi dynasties. The Order once again came under suspicion with the rise of the fundamentalist state of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 and experience a new period of suppression and harassment, but not before finding refuge in the West.

The process of exporting Ni'matullāhī Ṣūfism to the West was initiated by Nūrbakhsh in the years immediately preceding the 1979 Iranian Revolution. There, the 'Khaniqahi' label became the name of the Order abroad, known in English as the 'House of Ṣūfism', and that aspect of Ni'matullāhī Ṣūfism that becomes directly associated with the teachings of Javād Nūrbakhsh. In 1974, he visited the United States at the request of American devotees and in 1975 two Houses of Ṣūfism were established in San Francisco and New York by his senior disciple, Mr Niktab (1918–2003), and also in London by Nūrbakhsh (Lewisohn

4 For background see Robert Grenfell (2012).

5 For an extended discussion on the heritage and history of the Ni'matullāhī Kings see Pourjavadi and Wilson (1978).

2006: 51). From 1976–1978, further Houses of Šūfism were established in the United States (Washington DC and Boston); in 1979 Nūrbakhsh emigrated to the United States, and in 1983 he settled in England (Lewisohn 2006: 51). It was in the years following the Revolution that the Order was particularly defined by Javād Nūrbakhsh in the Western context. This differed, at least outwardly, quite significantly from the way it was practiced and defined in Iran, where it particularly emphasised the Order's Persianate roots and the inward aspect of religious observance over the external.

In light of this, a cautionary proviso is needed regarding Nūrbakhsh and the Ni'matullāhī Order (broadly speaking, and even the Khaniqahi, more specifically). That is, the two—Nūrbakhsh and the Ni'matullāhī—are not synonymous, despite typically being treated as such. I would go so far as to differentiate between the 'mission' of Javād Nūrbakhsh and the Ni'matullāhī Order and, further still, in relation to the Khaniqahi as well. The reason is that the written works of Nūrbakhsh—as well as his live discourses, some of which were published under the same titles—do not always, or consistently, represent the views of the participants of the House of Šūfism. As such, a careful distinction has to be made in any study of the Ni'matullāhī Khaniqahi between what I will call, for the sake of simplicity, 'attendees' and 'adherents': a difference between those who are initiated, but are not aware of the Nūrbakhshian agenda, and those initiates who subscribe to it. Of course, all those initiated into the Order were seen as disciples of their Master (Nūrbakhsh), yet they were not all treated as equally holding the 'right' understanding of the Path. Nūrbakhsh would on occasion relay the sentiment, although in more nondescript terms, in what he categorised as the difference between 'Šūfi' and 'Darvish' (Nūrbakhsh 2005–6: 30). The Šūfi simply takes the oath of initiation and becomes a seeker (*salek*), while the Darvish arrives at the station of becoming 'nothing' (Pers. *heečh*) (see Nūrbakhsh 1996: 55). There were indeed concentric circles within the domain of the Order that indicated who was in the know, and who was not, so to speak.

The Ni'matullāhī teachings of Javād Nūrbakhsh gain greater traction through its spread in the West (as they are translated into numerous languages) and where the Order begins to flourish on democratic soil, primarily in the United Kingdom and North America. Ni'matullāhī teachings in Iran continued to maintain a conservative countenance, but in the West, headed by Nūrbakhsh during the 1980s and 1990s, it showed itself as a global spiritual phenomenon for all humanity, irrespective of religious belonging. Though not quite Inayat Khan's Universal Šūfism, Nūrbakhsh was more invested in the Iranian legacy of mysticism (*farhang-e irani*) and its wisdom tradition (*hikmat-e khosravani*) (Milani 2014: 219–220). This meant that the Order, as mentioned earlier, was made up of layers of hidden initiation (in addition to the formal initiatory rite),

which seemed more or less reserved for Iranians or those able to penetrate its linguistic and cultural barriers. Nūrbakhsh's chauvinism was pronounced, even in his writings, because he based himself squarely and solely on his Iranian Šūfi protagonists such as Bāyazīd, Ḥallāj, 'Irāqī, Kharaqānī, Abū Sa'īd, as well as the poets Sa'dī and Ḥāfiz, whom he considered to have been real Šūfis. They all portray a sense of antinomianism to which Nūrbakhsh related, and was fond of, but also, they were seen as being part of the Malāmātiyya (the seekers of blame), a tradition of Šūfism that Nūrbakhsh himself followed.⁶

From 1979 until 9/11 marks the period of the Western transformation of Šūfism under Nūrbakhsh where he propagated a distinct shift in his attitude toward the formal Islamic identity attached to traditional Šūfism. What can be gleaned from his writings and his final interview is that Nūrbakhsh distances himself further still from an identifiable Islamic identity. Moreover, from this time onward, the obligatory prayers ceased to be performed at the Khaniqah abroad (though not prohibited), and the terms 'Šūfi' and 'Darvish' (the latter being the preferred among Persian speaking members) came to represent mystical morality rather than religiosity.

2.1 *Šūfism in the Shī'a Context*

One detail that needs to be underlined in the study of the Ni'matullāhī Order, even in the case of Javād Nūrbakhsh, is that it is a Šūfi tradition steeped in the Shī'a context. Of the traditional Šūfi orders, the Ni'matullāhī Order is a cardinal Šūfi order in Shī'a history. It is a Shī'a form of Šūfism and one that thrives in its historical heartlands. This is important to note because Šūfism is historically a Sunnī phenomenon. It was in many ways a reaction to the exteriority of dynastic religion in an effort to derive the true meaning of Islam as preserved in the Revelation of Muḥammad and passed down to his closest Companions. Today, its mysticism is rooted in the exercise of austerities by which the movement earned its name *Šūfi* (that is, from the Arabic noun *suf*, referring to those who practiced the wearing of wool). The Šūfi were also defined by their devotion to the contemplative life (for example, as per the

6 The outlook of Javād Nūrbakhsh on Šūfi history has been analysed by Leonard Lewisohn (2006: 56–61) who explained (away) their value in connection to Orientalist influenced Iranian scholars. For instance, the Ni'matullāhī publications of Parviz Nawruziyan who utilised the well-known works of Abdul-Hussain Zarrinkoub were the product of nationalist chauvinism and a revival of later shunned theories of Orientalists such as F.R.D. Tholuck, E.H. Palmer, Reinhart Dozy, and Richard Hartmann. Such reductionism, however, fails to take into account the phenomenological value of Javād Nūrbakhsh's challenge to the status quo. For discussion on this see Milani (2014: 219–221).

systematic methodology of al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī who died in 857), developing extensive techniques and terminology to explain their manner of aspiring to intimacy with the divine.⁷ In this, they read the Qur’ān for its inner meaning and made effort to imitate Muḥammad—though not for the sake of exteriority of his habits—but because he was the recipient *par excellence* of Revelation. It is impossible to determine the precise relationship between the Shī’a *imāms* and the Ṣūfī movement, but we do know that the *imāms*, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq in particular (as well as all the *imāms* of the Twelver tradition up until the eighth *imām*, ‘Alī al-Riḍā), were commonly mentioned as figures of significance for the Ṣūfīs (see, for example, Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s *Tadhkirat al-awliya* where Ja‘far is listed as a principal figure in a list of mystic saints). What becomes clear is that the developing Shī’a tradition possessed its own school of *ma‘rifa* (sacred knowledge) and thus had no need of the Sunnī developed *taṣawwuf* tradition, although the Shī’a did more than their fair share of appropriating mystical teachings of grand masters such as ibn Sīnā, ibn al-‘Arabī, and Rūmī (all of whom were in fact Sunnī) when it was suitable.⁸

In the Shī’a context, Ṣūfī identity is demarcated by its own specific terminology and technical methodology. The Shī’a generally played down the Sunnī tradition of *taṣawwuf* as meaning ‘Ṣūfism’ and instead replaced it with *‘irfān*. The distinction for the Shī’a was based on their take on Ṣūfism: a mysticism as opposed to Sunnī asceticism. Ṣūfism as *‘irfān*, understood in the Shī’a context, was determined by an elevated form of knowledge, since *‘irfān* was indicative of someone who was an *‘arif* (possessor of sacred knowledge), but also someone instinctively attuned to the sacred, able to perceive the inner most secrets (*bāṭin*) of divine communication. For the Shī’a, Ṣūfism was not only a kind of spiritual athleticism but also, and especially, an exercise of the active intellect (*‘aql*). Ṣūfism in the Shī’a context, therefore, represents a keen balance between Sunnī mysticism and Shī’a gnoseology, and it becomes a form of esotericism that is different to the Ṣūfism found in the Sunnī context as *taṣawwuf* (mysticism).

7 Several manuals were produced to this effect, which include the Ṣūfī manuals of instruction of Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (*Kitāb al-luma* or ‘Book of Light Flashes’), Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (*Qutb al-qulub* or ‘Nourishment of Hearts’), and ‘Alī al-Hujwīrī (*Kashf al-mahjoub* or ‘Revelation of Secrets’).

8 See for instance the work of Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201–1274); for background, refer Black (2001: 145–53).

3 New Directions in Şūfism: Khaniqahi Şūfism Under Nūrbakhsh

Javād Nūrbakhsh took Şūfism in a new direction. His radical approach to the religio-political hegemony in Iran produced the kind of Şūfism that can be arguably perceived as being free of Islam. This is not original to Nūrbakhsh; Inayat Khan and Meher Baba had accomplished the same end in their exploits with Şūfism in the West.⁹ What is unique about Nūrbakhsh is how, despite the apparent rift, he nevertheless maintained the synaptic link to tradition, albeit, reinterpreted in the light of Iranian historicising. It is Irano-Islamic tradition (and not the Islamic per se) that is represented as tradition in the Khaniqahi Ni'matullāhī context. In the narrative, Iranians are the champions of chivalry and morality that are the basis of spirituality, mysticism and, of course, the core of religion. This is a view akin to the influence of the position of *philosophia perennis* (or Traditionalist School) that was advocated in Iran by the towering figure of Hussein Nasr.¹⁰

The perennialists believed all religious traditions shared a single metaphysical truth, which produced the esoteric and exoteric knowledge and doctrine. Nūrbakhsh, however, had a greater appetite for modernisation and change. A liberal, Nūrbakhsh took this reading further in interpreting religion as the meaningless outer garb of what it all means internally, whereby, religion must in end be dispensed with. It sounds radical, yet it is a view—albeit loosely construed—not far removed from the traditional Şūfi schema of certain medieval authors. For instance, authors of early manuals such as Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 988) and Abū Tālib al-Makkī (d. 996) wanted to portray that Şūfism was the 'real' Islam as practiced by the *tābi'ūn* (successors) in perfect accordance with *shar'ā* and *kalām*, and not conceived as its mystical dimension. To be truly Muslim and abide by the *sunna* of Muḥammad was to be a Şūfi. They imagined the path of Islam as one of literally travelling (*seyr*), in which the wayfarer (*salek*) would go from the outer toward the inner heart of faith: from *shar'ā* (the religious prescriptions) to *ṭarīqa* (the path) to *ḥaqīqa* (ultimate truth). Al-Makkī himself had two manuals of Şūfism: one for the lay ('Nourishment of the Hearts') and one for the initiated ('Knowledge of the Hearts') (Knysh 2000: 122–123).

It might seem reasonable to think of Nūrbakhsh in the light of New Age philosophy, as has been suggested elsewhere (Lewisohn 2006: 59, n. 73), but

9 The creed of the Universal Şūfism (Inayat Khan) and Şūfism Reoriented (Meher Baba) are highly pluralistic systems without a central Islamic identity (Milani 2012: 670).

10 Nasr and Nūrbakhsh were acquaintances in the known circles of Tehran society. They also appear together on publications relating to Şūfism. See, for example, Lewisohn (1999).

I would argue that urge is best resisted. Nūrbakhsh did not invent tradition, but rather redirected it from alternate readings of the past. This is an important distinction in that a new direction must draw and build on the past in order to move forward. Also, there is an important tension for Nūrbakhsh between the past and the present whereas this tension does not exist for Inayat Khan and Meher Baba, who liberated Šūfism from historical traditional baggage to the point where it is actually difficult to tell whether *it is* still Šūfism being referred to. The 'invention of tradition' is not the same as the activity of retrieving possibilities for interpreting tradition by reading the past for new understandings, of which Nūrbakhsh was instructive. Such a tension does not exist in Nasr or the Traditionalists either, since they too had taken the failings of modernity as a foregone conclusion.¹¹ Nūrbakhsh's conceptual categorisation is defined by his adaptation of classic Šūfism as a modern, and what he provides is a distinct identity that both breaks with traditional understandings and hauls Šūfism into the present, giving it a modern form. In this we can make a case to speak about his approach as, *mutatis mutandis*, sectarian.

Other problems abound regarding the categorisation of Nūrbakhsh with the neo-Šūfism label, which has been typically defined as 'reform' and/or 'renewal', meaning that there is something 'new' that has occurred (as though this is to be indicative of something separate to the past). This is problematic because the modern context of Nūrbakhsh's thinking is predicated on elements from the Šūfi past; and the visible change in his thinking is a necessary part of growth through tradition (and not separation from it). Can we imagine at all a time in which Šūfism did not 'change'? How has Šūfism continued to the present age? If we observe the early (proto-)Šūfi as frontier warriors (for example, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī [d. 728] Ibrāhīm ibn Adham [d. 782]), they actively engaged enemy forces in the holy wars (*jihād*) on the fringes of the Muslim world. This had the dual effect of both affecting and being affected. To be sure, the Šūfi tradition is one that shaped the Islamic, in unprecedented ways, through interreligious exchange with 'the other' outside Islam. Yet, and at the same time, medieval Šūfism had developed systems of practice and belief that pushed the boundaries of normative religious understanding, whilst some even flirted with heresy in their reformulation of creed and the poetic rendering of mystical experience. Indeed, Šūfism served as both the safety net for those losing their faith in Islam as well as a net cast wide to attract new converts. Šūfis freely associated with Christians, Hindus, Zoroastrians, and Buddhists. In other words, that which differentiates the classic Šūfi identity from the modern are simply notions of historicity.

11 See for example, Hahn et al (2001: chapter 6).

Nürbakhsh is no exception to this rule, because what he had fulfilled throughout his tenure was to both establish a connection to the West and manage the lifeline of traditionalism in relation to it. His open resistance to a traditional religious framework and its conventional theological underpinnings was the key to transforming Šūfism, making it palpable for the present time. Notwithstanding, classic and modern Šūfism have in common the project of mysticism that started in the medieval Islamic.

Nürbakhsh indeed problematised the interpretation of Šūfism (and as most do), citing a medieval Šūfi by the name of Būshanjī who is made famous for his saying: “*taṣawwuf* [Šūfism] was a reality without a name and now a name without a reality.”¹² By this example, Nürbakhsh clearly demonstrates a break with the past whilst maintaining its importance. Aptly, the definition of Šūfism is kept by the paradox. There are three distinctive qualities which articulate the activity of mysticism: subversion, creativity, and connection with the times. From the time he became the head of a traditional Šūfi order, Nürbakhsh worked to break the monopoly of traditionalists over Šūfi identity. He focused on praxis as the fulcrum for change. In this, Nürbakhsh found inspiration from masters of the past and ideas latent in classic Šūfi sources such as Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s *Mantīq al-ṭayr* and Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī’s *Mathnawī*. In these works, conventional Islamic practice is overshadowed by subtle, nuanced, and intuitive forms of exercise.

In his endeavour, Nürbakhsh is by all accounts to be seen as a sincere Šūfi who maintained his roots in one of the oldest and traditional Šūfi orders dating back to the fourteenth century. The Ni‘matullāhī style generally favoured a non-partisan (that is, Shī‘a/Sunnī) approach to religion and followed the habit of its founder, Shāh Ni‘matullāh Walī, in advocating the Akbari principle of Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) over historical partisanship. Nürbakhsh gave this a modern twist in his Khaniqahī Šūfism. It is ironically this very classical root of the idea that underpins the ‘modernity’ of Nürbakhsh in positioning Šūfism in the face of contemporary political discord and sponsorship politics. Not bowing to the pressures of choosing sides (that is, Islamic or apostate), he extemporaneously became the sectarian, that is, he chose to stand apart by not partaking in partisanship as other traditionalists had done. In contrast, the Gonabadi branch of the Ni‘matullāhī, for instance, had reverted to the original position of Shī‘a quietism during the rise of the Islamic Republic, and as such

12 This saying of Būshanjī (my translation) is oft quoted in many books and articles on Šūfism, and is paradoxically as much a cliché as it is key to unlocking medieval Šūfi thought as Ḥallāj’s theophanic locution: *ana al-ḥaqq* (“I am the truth!”).

they had fallen back into a traditionalist position as historically practiced by the *marja'* (model scholars).

Nūrbakhsh primarily drew upon the full repertoire of the Iranian cultural heritage and the legacy of notable Šūfi ecstasies and seekers of blame (*mala-mat*) to make the point that Šūfism was always the Islamic façade of Persian mystical antiquity, and that it is squarely based on the principles of chivalry (*javanmardi*) and etiquette (*adab*), embodied by antinomian attitudes (Milani 2013). Now, this was not like the Chishti—another ancient traditional Šūfi order—which renovated Islam from within by way of Šūfism (Milani and Adrahtas 2018); what Nūrbakhsh achieved through Khaniqahi Šūfism was to go further still. He undermined Šūfism *by* Šūfism, leaving very little to be said that could be described as Šūfism: “whatever comes into words is not Šūfism” (*aanche dar gofteh aayad dar tašawwuf neest*) (Smith 2008), he had said. For ‘Šūfism’ was synonymous with ‘Truth’, and drawing on Aṭṭār’s metaphysic, he concluded that there is nothing that can be said that would capture the Truth (*ḥaqq*). As such, the way to be ‘Šūfi’ is to become nothing because “Šūfism is to become and not something to hear about” (*darvishi shodanist na shaneedani*) (Smith 2008).

The case study of Khaniqahi Šūfism is demonstrative of Nūrbakhsh’s intentions to build on what he saw as the ecstasies’ representation of Šūfism as the other within Islam, and to go further still in revealing a mysticism radically uncontained by Šūfism and without Islam. Yet it was the general tenor of the Khaniqahi Šūfi style—as an authentic traditional Šūfi—that was best known to its followers and it is what attracted hundreds, especially those abroad, to its doors. People were drawn by the idea of a real traditional mystical teaching that was rooted in the distant past that liberated individuals from formalistic religion.

3.1 *Nūrbakhsh and the Traditional Islamic Identity of Šūfism*

The Khaniqahi branch of the Ni‘matullāhī order is a globally established Šūfi network due to the efforts of Javād Nūrbakhsh. It is the only branch of the Ni‘matullāhī Order that has had the greatest success in expansion and development outside Iran, and Nūrbakhsh is the principal force behind the Ni‘matullāhī initiative to adapt, expand, and grow in light of challenges faced in the twentieth as well as those in twenty-first century. The twentieth century, from the time of his ascension to the role of Master (*pīr*) and on to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, was largely about sidestepping political tensions. The twenty-first century involved strategic decisions in circumventing the stigma of being Islamic in an age of Islamophobia. These were significant factors in what ultimately defines Nūrbakhsh’s positioning as one distinct from the

other traditional Ni‘matullāhī branches (not to mention, other traditional Šūfi orders) that retained a clear connection with Islamic identity. For Nūrbakhsh, Islamic identity was defined through the tradition of interpretation that had been dominated by the ‘ulamā’ class over the centuries. The battle between the Šūfi and ‘ulamā’ was an old one and it became epitomised in Šafavid Iran with the return of the Ni‘matullāhī to their native country as the battle between “Mullahs and Kings” (Pourjavadi and Wilson 1978: 136).

As such, Nūrbakhsh’s active promotion of Šūfism for a Western audience requires careful attention. Ni‘matullāhī Šūfism is historical, culturally rich, and guided by a genealogy of spiritual leaders that have been at the heart of Persianate society since the fourteenth century. On the one hand, Nūrbakhsh’s positionality was demonstrative of a clear break with both Islamic identity and traditional Ni‘matullāhī Šūfism. Yet, on the other hand, it was not in defiance of Ni‘matullāhī identity. Nūrbakhsh was ever in tune with the Ni‘matullāhī identity as a historical phenomenon that was defined by the challenges that it had faced. Upon their return to Šafavid Persia, the Ni‘matullāhī faced their oppressors with what was, in the words of Antonio Gramsci, a passive revolution. The new Ni‘matullāhī of the Šafavid era were Shī’a, where they embodied a fusion of Šūfism and *Imāmi* expectations that had a protreptic function: a Shī’a-messianic-Šūfi formula about the return of justice against despotism, social tyranny, and religious fanaticism. This same spirit was once again conjured by Nūrbakhsh for the moderns and with a modern sensibility in his writings.

The sectarianism of Javād Nūrbakhsh is, therefore, a product of the overt manoeuvrability of what it means to be Šūfi across a minefield of historically laden religio-political challenges. Nūrbakhsh navigated the dangerous waters of religious institutions and government politics, while retaining both the order’s strong cultural ties to the Iranian homeland and demonstrating an acute awareness of the importance of being present in the contemporary setting. Thus Nūrbakhsh helped to properly situate the Ni‘matullāhī Order in modern society and to keep in touch with the modern lifestyle of its initiates. Abroad, Khaniqahi Ni‘matullāhī Šūfism was especially accommodating of the needs of its non-Muslim, non-Iranian converts. For instance, the weekly ‘sermons’ of Nūrbakhsh, delivered in Persian, were always translated immediately into English by his son, Alireza Nūrbakhsh. This would be the case whether delivered live or if recorded for production.¹³

13 Javād Nūrbakhsh always and primarily communicated his message in Persian, which was his way of keeping the mainstay of the Order’s ancestral roots, but he permitted and encouraged translations into languages other than Persian. Indeed, the bulk of his books

Nūrbakhsh's ambitions for the Ni'matullāhī Order to be a modern Ṣūfī order, combined with keeping a distance from both Iranian politics and the West's politics of Islam, gave it a distinct sectarian feel. But this was couched in an esoteric demeanour. Whatever Ni'matullāhī Ṣūfism entailed, it did not self-identify with the 'theology' (or ideology) of Islamic regimes, yet it never overtly disavowed its Islamicness. The notion that the order was Islamic was never withdrawn, nor denied, but what it meant *to be Ṣūfī* was certainly based on a (Ni'matullāhī) version of Islam, at the very least, which was prominent among the few Ṣūfis that were seen to have been apostles to the 'true' message of historical Ṣūfism as the *real* Islam. For Nūrbakhsh, these were the heroes of the past such as Bāyazīd and Ḥallāj. By the time of the Republic, Iranians generally perceived Islam as being synonymous with the newly risen Islamist state; and by the time of 9/11, Nūrbakhsh wished to avoid having Ṣūfism confused with the negative image of Islam embedded in the West's War on Terror.¹⁴ The events that played out in Iran as field, and the West as field, resulted in Nūrbakhsh showing that the habitus of Ṣūfism was something not at all tied to Islam, irrespective of how that was defined. One thing for certain was that he had to bypass the geopolitics of both the Middle East and the West in their formulations of Islam (as either a force championing justice against foreign corruption or undermining the peace of liberal society).

Comparatively speaking, Nūrbakhsh is presented as reflecting the Order's fourteenth century founder, Shāh Ni'matullāh Walī, as an 'enlightened' figure during what has been portrayed as a dark and despotic time when most Ṣūfis, apart from the protagonist and his following, had reverted to narrow-minded religious dogmatism (Graham 1999a; cf. Calder et al 2003: 262–268). Accordingly, Shāh Ni'matullāh's character was not the kind that would flee from danger, nor was he someone able to be coerced; rather he made the choice to leave Transoxiana on account of a point that he wanted to make: that he, unlike his rivals, did not cling to possessions or status; he left town to give way to the worldly pretenders (implicating the rival Naqshbandī Ṣūfī order) who were jealous of Shāh Ni'matullāh's reputation and following (Calder et al 2003: 262). Shāh Ni'matullāh travelled for some time before finally settling in Mahan, just outside Kerman. Admired by the Bahmanid sultan, Ahmad Shāh, Shāh Ni'matullāh was invited to the Deccan. Yet it was his son and successor who took up the offer of invitation to relocate and remain there for two and a half centuries. The return to their native Persia by the end of the eighteenth

have been translated into English (as well as other European languages where the Houses of Ṣūfism are located) to ensure wider access.

14 This was confirmed by an anonymous source well connected to the Order.

century is what Terry Graham has noted as a renaissance of Ni‘matullāhī Ṣūfism (Graham 1999b: 167–168). The intensity of the Ni‘matullāhī revival was defined both by state persecution as well as internal fractures. The order gradually divided into three distinct sub-branches: the Ṣafī ‘Alī Shāhī, Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāhī (or Gonabadi), and the Munawwar ‘Alī Shāhī, the third branch being the one inherited by Javād Nūrbakhsh.

Shāh Ni‘matullāh was a prolific author of prose and poetic works. As mentioned, he followed the doctrine of unity of being as espoused by the ibn al-‘Arabī school of thought in Iran, but did so in combination with the theme of intense divine love as found in Rūmī’s poetry. More importantly, Shāh Ni‘matullāh considered *sharī‘a* as secondary to *ṭarīqa*. These are comparable facets that underline Nūrbakhsh’s approach. We can see that Nūrbakhsh instigated his own Ni‘matullāhī revival in the Iran of the Shāh through a process of modernisation and liberalisation of Ni‘matullāhī Ṣūfism for an educated populace previously disillusioned with the stagnating traditions of bygone Ṣūfism. A psychiatrist by profession, he was well known among influential circles in Tehran, which enabled him to leave his mark through the Ṣūfism he espoused. He envisaged Ṣūfism as a ‘progressive spirituality’, which both attracted and detracted followers. In truth, his innovations had greater success abroad. Despite the regime change in Iran, Nūrbakhsh demonstrated his commitment to modernisation and what would be indelibly the Ni‘matullāhī renaissance of the age (Milani 2018: 120f).

Like its founder, and other Ni‘matullāhī masters, Nūrbakhsh too was prolific. He produced a vast amount of publications (assisted by having his own press: Khaniqahi Ni‘matullāhī Publishing) launching his Ṣūfī modernising project. Simultaneously weaved into these works was the message about distancing Ṣūfism from traditional Islamic identity. As noted, he championed the view that Ṣūfism was innately Iranian and evolved out of native Persian mysticism. He advocated for the humanitarian principles of Ṣūfism that he believed were a “quintessentially Iranian cultural phenomenon” (Lewisohn 2006: 56). Nūrbakhsh’s initial strategy was to nationalise Ṣūfism (in Iran) in order to counter the influence of the *mullās* by producing a picture of the past that showed Ṣūfism having pre-Islamic and Iranian roots. This invoked the spirit of nationalism as represented by the eleventh century literary masterpiece of Firdausi, the *Shāh nameh* or Book of Kings.¹⁵ In his writings, Nūrbakhsh described the history of Ṣūfism as a process of making Islamic the native Iranian mysticism of Persia. He made the point that the designation ‘Ṣūfī’ only mattered when Iranian mystics accepted Islam in the years following the conquest of their

15 For further discussion on the Ni‘matullāhī creed, see Milani (2014: 219).

lands (Nūrbakhsh 1996: 13). The particular focus was the province of Khurasan, home of 'true' Šūfism, which only wore the garb of 'Islam':

Nūrbakhsh understood the non-Iranian elements of Šūfism, such as the doctrine of 'trust in God' (*tavakkol*) and asceticism (*zuhd*), as linked to Egyptian and Syrian Christianity, and explained the 'doctrine of activity' and 'social exertion' (*kasb*, *amal*) as sourced in the pre-Islamic Khurasanian experience.

MILANI 2018: 122¹⁶

It is important to note that Nūrbakhsh's national chauvinism in favouring Iranian heritage as the key to Šūfism was never collectively a Ni'matullāhī concern (Lewisohn 2006: 59). His non-Iranian disciples were largely unaware of the Persian agenda, and most of them even now do not bother with what was Nūrbakhsh's propaganda. Whilst the Ni'matullāhī abroad are generally aware of, and share in the concerns about, the tensions between Šūfī and *mullā*, for them Šūfism is essentially a universal spirituality open to all humanity (Milani 2014).

4 Nūrbakhsh's Reading of Khurasanian Šūfī Identity

Nūrbakhsh made apparent his preference for Khurasan as the historic 'home' of original Šūfism. Khurasan was furthest from the capital in Baghdad. Historically, Khurasan had been a political red-zone from whence the 'Abbāsīd revolt emerged to topple the Umayyads. Khurasan also represented a place with a history of hybrid asceticism that was based on local communities who had converted to Islam. They were a people steeped in old customs and fiercely proud. These groups, of which the most notable are the Karrāmiyya (ninth century) and the Malāmatiyya (tenth century), were ascetics that were eventually swallowed up by the expansion of Sunnī endorsed orthodox Šūfism that came out of Baghdad in the late tenth century (Green 2012: 36f). From about the tenth century, Muslim piety was taking shape in different ways, and it was a time that the hard-defined boundaries that exist today had not yet formed (Melchert 2015). Šūfism itself was still in the process of being defined through competing ascetical and mystical strands, all of which were coming together under the newly evolving umbrella term 'Šūfī'. Baghdad and Khurasan, at that

16 On the explanation of Nūrbakhsh's narrative on Šūfism see Nawruzīyan (1997a, 1997b, 2000).

time, represented two distinctly different schools of thought with two unique outlooks: the 'sober' and the 'intoxicated' method. As Šūfism became more prominent, the Karrāmiyya and Malāmatiyya gradually fell into obscurity.

The Karrāmiyya were known for their rigorous asceticism and literalism and were nicknamed 'mortifiers' based on their strict austerities. Their monastic communities were both influential and important for conversion of the local community of *dhimmis* or those who paid the religious tax to be allowed their prayers (Green 2012: 46, 48). The Malāmatiyya developed in reaction to the Karrāmiyya. They were known as 'the seekers of blame' as per their distinctive practice. It was the latter group that was particularly opposed to the Šūfis from Baghdad. Their main rivalry was, however, with the local Karrāmiyya. The Malāmatiyya criticised the Karrāmiyya for putting their piety on public display, which for the former group was an obstacle to true piety (Green 2012: 46). Nūrbakhsh was not only fond of the Malāmatiyya, but he saw himself as a modern day *malamati*, a seeker of blame. For the Malāmatiyya, the greatest obstacle on the path to God was the public display of piety, because it characterised a hypocritical religiosity. Someone who practiced the *malamati* philosophy would, for instance, deliberately expose themselves to self-humiliating instances that attracted the blame of others. The Šūfis of Baghdad—as instigated by Junayd (d. 910)—also held a disdain for public displays of piety, as the aim of Šūfism was to control the *nafs* and not make a spectacle of oneself for sake of diverting others from their pious obligations. Yet unlike them, the Malāmatiyya believed that the *nafs* could not be destroyed and they argued that saying so was evidence of the victory of *nafs* (Green 2012: 46).

Nūrbakhsh, of course, underlined the charade of 'the religious' in their proclamations and displays of piety and induced the Ni'matullāhī Šūfism with the force of *malamati* attitude. Similar to the Malāmatiyya who were opposed to Karrāmiyya pietism and Šūfi moralising in public, Nūrbakhsh held a disdain for those who would impose their pious status over others. In line with this philosophy, Nūrbakhsh was obstinate in exposing the hypocrisy of religion.

Nūrbakhsh in fact had never openly declared his *malamati* approach—known only to those closest to him—until when it was made public in a final recorded interview (Smith 2008a, 2008b). As mentioned, many of the Ni'matullāhī followers remained unaware of (and thus unaffected by) Nūrbakhsh's more intimate praxis, especially if they did not read or understand Persian (see Lewisohn 2006). Nevertheless, another distinctive aspect of his sectarianism is defined through his espousal of *malamati* philosophy. One could say that Nūrbakhsh had decisively undermined both Islam and Šūfism by employing *malamati* piety. This gave him the spiritual mechanism with which to divorce his mysticism from mainstream religion, but also from the formal and traditional Šūfism that was historically associated with orthodoxy.

5 ‘Nūrbakhshian Ṣūfism’: The Inner Circle of Iranian Mysticism

In their book, *Kings of Love* (1978), Nasrollah Pourjavadi and Peter Lamborn Wilson celebrate the “Ṣūfism of Shāh Ni‘matullāh Walī” as the distinguished methodology of a significant historical figure. He is described as having inaugurated a new era of Ṣūfism, confirmed by the lending of his name to the Order that it formed and which continues to the present day. In this segment, I make the point that the ‘Ṣūfism of Javād Nūrbakhsh’ is in a similar vein, something equally distinct. Indeed, it might be said of Nūrbakhsh that he was the ‘Shāh Ni‘matullāh’ of the age; that he was the *Quṭb* and *Imām* of his time—as was implied of the Shāh Ni‘matullāh (Pourjavadi and Wilson 1978: 40)—though Nūrbakhsh would have undoubtedly denied it about himself (Pourjavadi and Wilson 1978: 242).

Javād Nūrbakhsh was a charismatic figure and interviews with his followers indicate that his views had great appeal.¹⁷ Up to this point, we have attempted to locate Javād Nūrbakhsh in his historical context. Now, we turn our attention to the content of his Ṣūfī thought and his picturing of Ṣūfism as a sectarian movement. This takes us beyond the Khaniqaḥi Ṣūfism identity, which is really an outer layer to what is ‘Nūrbakhshian Ṣūfism’, that is, that aspect of Nūrbakhsh’s thought that reveals something authentic about Nūrbakhsh’s Ṣūfī identity. This is a deeper level of the Khaniqaḥi Ṣūfism that rightly belonged to only the closest circle of Javād Nūrbakhsh, and it was certainly not something that was ordinarily or openly shared with the wider audience of the Ni‘matullāhī Khaniqaḥi initiates. Interestingly, the section of this chapter on historical contextualisation was about the clues to seeing Nūrbakhsh as a sectarian, yet the content of his work (as will be seen) reveals the inverse, that Ṣūfism was seen by him as a sectarian movement.

The best place to start is with how Nūrbakhsh defined Ṣūfism. A careful reading of his works will show that he squarely placed the emphasis on moral conduct and service to others. Throughout all his writings (including both his discourses and poetry) this is the central aspect of his message and it is consistently repeated countless times: Spiritual morality always takes precedence over religious duty and the obligation to religious law. This he would occasionally make explicit, but typically enveloped in historical quotes taken and interpreted from Abu Sa’id, Sa’di, or Hafiz. These he would interpret (albeit, without much difficulty) in making his point. For Nūrbakhsh, these regular reference points were not only demonstrative of the antinomian attitude of certain historical Ṣūfis whom he admired greatly, but also, and more importantly, of the kind of Ṣūfism that he espoused. Two distinct quotes to this effect were a

17 For more details see Milani and Possamai (2016).

saying of Abu Sa'id: "If you walk on water, you're no more than a water-bug; if you fly through the air, you're no more than a fly; gain a heart and become a human being" (Nürbakhsh 2000: 44); and another of Sa'di: "Devotional practice is nothing more than serving others; it has nothing to do with rosary, prayer rug or robe" (Nürbakhsh 2004: 36).

Nürbakhsh's attitude toward religion, God, and the Šūfi path is about gradual layers of understanding, and so an important aspect of his methodology was underpinned by what he termed as "Sufism and Psychoanalysis" (Nürbakhsh 1990). These Jungian style layers of consciousness are representative of Nürbakhsh's overall depiction of the Šūfi path (Nürbakhsh 1992). Driven by the apprehension of the 'real', the Šūfi was to traverse beyond the outward description of terms and arrive at inner meaning. Similarly, what it meant to be Šūfi was not about the outward definitions or even the practices, because ultimately it was about the experience. Nürbakhsh thus made the distinction between mystical understandings of God from theological readings, stating on several occasions that Šūfism has nothing to do with religion (Smith 2008a), and by extension the 'God' of the Šūfi similarly has nothing to do with the God of biblical tradition (Nürbakhsh 1996: 32–34). Notwithstanding, he consistently refers to God or a sense of God's presence behind the symbolic language he utilises. At the crux of his writings is a delineation between Šūfism and Islam. His narrative tells the story that Šūfism was never really part of the Islamic religion (Smith 2008a; Forum 2007) and in fact existed before the arrival of Islam, and it is since then that Iranian mystics developed Šūfism as their way of accepting Islam while being able to secretly continue their practice of the ancient spiritual traditions. Secret, not because these ancient traditions were innately profane, but because they were sacredly humane customs of the old world needing to be preserved.

The published *Discourses* of Nürbakhsh (1996) are heavily laden with the ideal of chivalry or what he refers to in Persian as *javanmardi*. Chivalry is a Persian institution and is the hallmark of the heroes of Persia's past. While the actual heroes of the past, such that they appear in the *Shāh nameh* of Firdausi, are Muslims implicitly and they are those who are primarily observant of ancient Iranian customs, Nürbakhsh promotes the virtues of altruism (through them) at the expense of religion. Such a degree of altruism is predicated upon an unrelenting decree of having faith in the 'master', and so goes the infamous quote from Hafez: *be mey sajjadeh rangin kon garat pir-e moghan gooyad* ("stain the prayer rug with wine should the master command you"). Moreover, and taking extracts from numerous poems of Nürbakhsh such as: "Feigning Negligence," "Love's Bazaar," "Love's Treasure," and many others, we see the view reinforced that religion is nothing but a barrier to God, and that

God is not what is conventionally disclosed by the religious (Nūrbakhsh 1980). Most telling is that in his *The Psychology of Šūfism* (1992), a dense and technical book, Nūrbakhsh expounds on his psychological theory of the process of spiritual transformation from a state of ego-centeredness to spirit-consciousness, all the while without recourse to religion. So it would seem, though difficult to ascertain for certain, that Nūrbakhsh's 'theology' does not advocate a transcendent God, but rather the divine presence through humane virtues. For certain, the point conveyed in his exegesis is that Šūfism is about the power of self-realisation through the utter devastation of the ego. The method, as visible throughout all his works, is by way of observing personal etiquette (*adab*) and the practice of service to others (*khedmat*) (Nūrbakhsh 1996: 51).

However, a full appreciation of Nūrbakhsh's view of Šūfism as a sectarian movement requires careful deliberation, because Nūrbakhsh never explicitly denounced Islam but stated that Islam was taken up by Iranians and then made synonymous with their sense of spirituality: "Šūfism is the culture of ancient Iran [...] With the coming of Islam to Iran, Šūfism gradually took its place in the Iranian culture and gave rise to the mysticism of Islam" (Nūrbakhsh 2006: 4). His historical understanding of Šūfism is connected to his definitional understanding of Šūfism. What Šūfism is in practice is what it is historically: "Before Islam appeared, the tradition of chivalry (*javanmardi*) in the Middle East was maintained through the training of men to be chevaliers (*javanmardan*)" (Nūrbakhsh 1996: 13). He described *javanmardi* as involving several key practices that define the substance of a particular kind of person whose very substance as a human being is quintessentially good:

Consideration for others (*morowwat*), self-sacrifice (*ithar*), devotion (*fada-kari*), the helping of the unfortunate and unprotected, kindness towards all created beings, keeping one's word and self-effacement—all qualities that were later to emerge as the noble attributes of the perfect human being from the point of view of Šūfism.

NŪRBAKHSH 1996: 13

The chevalier was in effect an exemplar person, what Nūrbakhsh calls "a true human being" who abided by a "code of etiquette and conventions" that defined *javanmardi*. Šūfism was therefore an accidental occurrence due to the adaptation of chivalry to Islam upon its arrival to Iran. He says:

With the appearance of Islam, these chevaliers embraced the religion of Islam while retaining the conventions of chivalry, thereby founding the creed of Šūfism on the basis of both Islam and chivalry. Thus, the

etiquette of the chevaliers became the part of the practice of the *khanīqah* and of the *Ṣūfis*.

NŪRBAKHSH 1996: 13

In the course of time, Nūrbakhsh explains, the *Ṣūfi* masters of this tradition placed emphasis on developing ideas such as Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and divine love (*ishq*), which they defined as the central tenets of Islam, and they combined these with their code of chivalry to define *Ṣūfism*. Therefore, the definitional practice of *Ṣūfism* “consisted of focusing one’s gaze in one direction (towards God) through the power of love, and its method was to cultivate a humane code of ethics, which was equated with that of the chevaliers” (Nūrbakhsh 1996: 13).

Nūrbakhsh’s opening chapter in *Discourses* is a direct appeal to his initiates to realise that they are “the standard-bearers of the school of humanity and of the tradition of chivalry” (Nūrbakhsh 1996: 13). Furthermore, these “noble human qualities” that defined *Ṣūfism* are what differentiated those that would call themselves *Ṣūfis* from others in the world today, but which were expected of all fellow humans. In effect, *Ṣūfism*, as a practice of the ‘true’ human being was the key to establishing a ‘spiritual paradise’ discovered here and now within and through the *Ṣūfi* path as opposed to the “material paradise” of those who worshiped externalities (Nūrbakhsh 1996: 13).

6 *Ṣūfism as a Sectarian Movement and the Inner Revolution*

If Nūrbakhsh portrayed *Ṣūfism* as he saw it, the mainstay of his thought, in my analysis of his works, was the need for a modern re-interpretation of *Ṣūfi* history. One does wonder whether and to what extent Nūrbakhsh’s reading of *Ṣūfism* for the modern age was due to the contemporary circumstance of his time. In any case, it is his reframing of *Ṣūfism* for the present time that in my opinion reified the sectarian attitude of Nūrbakhsh about *Ṣūfism*.

Nūrbakhsh received explicit patronage during the modernising reign of the Shāh, because *Ṣūfism* was shown to be something attuned to the modern liberal values of a westernising society. However, after the Revolution that brought to power the Islamic Republic, such a notion could not at all be tolerated, not even by moderates. As such, Nūrbakhsh felt it necessary to leave Iran altogether in order to maintain the sense of freedom of religion that was enjoyed prior to the Islamist regime’s takeover. Nūrbakhsh’s circumstances were, of course, reminiscent the ordeals faced by Shāh Ni’matullāh, and in a

way Nūrbakhsh must have seen himself in the light of the grandmaster, who also practiced self-exile (Graham 1999b). In the *Discourses* Nūrbakhsh makes the point about frustrations with religious authorities, doing so on many occasions, but one in particular is worth noting: "The Ṣūfis celebrate two festivals each breath; spiders celebrate by making feasts of flies" (Nūrbakhsh 1996: 14). The use of 'spider' and 'fly' was a common trope for the '*mullā*' and the 'believer'. What was fast disappearing in the aftermath of the Revolution was what was always most precious to Nūrbakhsh: the means to offer individuals a degree of flexibility and accountability of conscience. It was not that people needed to have religion forced upon them but that they needed to understand the moral imperative to be found in religion. Once discovered, whether religion was needed or not remained a personal choice. Nūrbakhsh never condemned the following of religious laws or the practice of Islamic rituals; this was left up to the individual to decide, but he made sure to remind people of what the real expectation of a 'religious' person was. For example, Nūrbakhsh says (mind you, echoing the saying attributed to Rabea the female saint of Basra): "The Ṣūfi's love of God involves no expectation of reward or fear of punishment, for the Ṣūfi does not have any wishes and demands" (Nūrbakhsh 1996: 21). Again, he says, "Righteous action refers to acting with no thought of merit or reward" (Nūrbakhsh 1996: 16).

Nūrbakhsh's progressive attitude was the stamp of Ṣūfism for the modern individual. Moreover, that Ṣūfism's originality was sourced in Persian antiquity fit perfectly with the paradox of Iranian identity in balancing the old and the new. Nūrbakhsh understood that Iran was a land of many contradictions and the place of many tensions brought about by centuries of religious revolution. As such, he provided the framework for an inner revolution that was powered by the historicity of Ṣūfism as effectively an arcane sectarian movement. Rather than outwardly divorce religion, the Ṣūfi travelled within to shed the layers of outward piety. Even quoting Junayd, the founder of Baghdad School of Ṣūfism, Nūrbakhsh shows just how this mystic of Persian descent was forced to preserve the vibrancy of mysticism in the face of outward jurists and their religious tradition: "For twenty years I have been discoursing only on marginal aspects of Ṣūfism, but of what concerns its profoundest depths I have not breathed a word, for tongues have been forbidden to utter that and hearts not permitted to apprehend it" (Nūrbakhsh 1997: 10).

In a sense, it is clear that Nūrbakhsh had distinctly made the case for Ṣūfism as a sectarian movement which had consistently defied the outward extremities of the religious class. In the course of its inner revolution, sometimes Ṣūfis had to remain silent, and sometimes vocal. On the whole, anonymity was

preferred to outward conflict for the majority of Šūfis, and Nūrbakhsh was no exception. What makes Nūrbakhsh different to other traditional Šūfi figure-heads is that his approach reminds one of the spirit of the antinomianism of classical Šūfism, in that Šūfism (for them and, I surmise, for Nūrbakhsh) was not about acquiescing to tradition, nor was it about foregoing goodness for the sake of observing outward religion.

7 Conclusion

It is never easy to define a person or their ideas in a way that does justice to their intention and purpose. This chapter has attempted to engage with significant aspects of Nūrbakhsh's thinking on the topic of Šūfism within Iran and the West generally as made available through his writings (in Persian and English) and later made public in a final interview (Smith 2008a, 2008b). In such an undertaking there is no claim to having pinpointed either the historical or any ontological sense of the person. Rather, this chapter captures, with due caution, a reading of Nūrbakhsh's outlook—as he reveals it—on Šūfism as a sectarian movement, from as much as can be discerned about his perspective, and a consideration of Nūrbakhsh as an undisclosed sectarian based on the geopolitical conditions of his circumstance. It is of course my own interpretation, in fleshing out from his writings, something about his own view on Šūfism as a sectarian movement historically, and in discerning the Ni'matullāhī Khaniqahī teachings of Nūrbakhsh as sectarian in nature, implicitly.

In this endeavour it would seem that the Ni'matullāhī Khaniqahī Šūfism of Javād Nūrbakhsh presents those who engage with its belief system with something different to what is ordinarily encountered in traditional Šūfi circles. Šūfism of the Ni'matullāhī brand is not Islamic mysticism, but rather in the words of Annemarie Schimmel (1975) the “mystical dimension” of it *tout court*. Javād Nūrbakhsh is certainly seen as a facilitator of such a space/dimension of habitation for those practitioners of mysticism with principal concern for divine mystery *and* for its own sake. In this way he presented a new direction for Šūfism based on a forgotten past.

O Nūrbakhsh, the debate over Truth
And illusion,
Which began long ago,
Now no longer remains.

...

Our intent was to explain the story
 Of the heart
 And its condition in the grief
 Of burning and boiling.

From a kingdom beyond
 All thoughts of the world
 The sovereign of the soul was captured
 By the beauty of the Beloved.

I said that for me it went pleasantly,
 But the heart heard and replied,
 'Do not conceal it—
 Our story burned the soul'

NŪRBAKHSH 1980: 110–111

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