

Ostad Elahi, the Ahl-e Haqq, & Islam: A Study on Sayr-e Takāmol

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Dedication

For my husband Ramzi in hopes that our Love will continue to grow, *be omīde Haqq...*

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Abstract

OSTAD ELAHI, THE AHL-E HAQQ, & ISLAM: A STUDY ON SAYR-E TAKĀMOL

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This thesis explores the impact of certain terms, categories and approaches, such as orthodox, heterodox, *ghulāt* (Shi'i extremists), and syncretism, on the field of Islamic Studies and maintains that these classifications result in normative and exclusive understandings of Islam that greatly limit the scope of academic inquiry. Specifically, this study examines the work of the Kurdish mystic and philosopher, Nūr 'Alī Elahī (Ostad Elahi) and aims to demonstrate that Ostad Elahi's text *Ma'refat ol-Ruh (Knowing the Spirit)*, an elucidation of the Ahl-e Haqq belief in *sayr-e takāmol*, has been largely ignored in the field of Islamic Studies as a result of the existing parameters. The study makes the case that *Ma'refat ol-Ruh* is a text that is simultaneously Muslim and Ahl-e Haqq and should be examined by scholars of Islamic Studies as a work on Islamic eschatology.

Review of Literature

This study is an examination of the eschatological treatise, *Ma'refat ol-Rūh* (*Knowing the Spirit*) by Nūr 'Alī Elahī (Ostad Elahi), his elucidation of the notion of *sayr-e takāmol* (journey of perfection [of the spirit]), and its relation to the field of Islamic Studies. This literature review will be organized thematically and will only address those sources used that are central to the study at hand.

Two texts are used in this study to provide a theoretical framework. Ahmet T. Karamustafa's text, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Middle Period 1200-1550*, is a groundbreaking work on antinomian dervish groups of the medieval period. Karamustafa's work challenges the commonly used binary of high and low Islam, high referring to normative, literate expressions of Islam versus the low, popular, illiterate, and antinomian expressions. He argues that this binary approach has led to a lack of scholarly attention to these groups as they are perceived as unappealing and beyond the pale. Karamustafa also argues that dependence on this dichotomous view of Islam leads to the instinct to explain away seemingly foreign elements through syncretism. This text provides a comfortable theoretical approach for this study. Although this study is not about medieval dervish groups, *Ma'refat ol-Rūh*, the text at the heart of this study comes out of a tradition to which Karamustafa's analysis applies.

Markus Dressler, in agreement with the perspective in *God's Unruly Friends*, builds on Karamustafa's argument in his own text, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam*. This study makes use of Dressler's prescriptions for approaching and writing about marginalized groups in Islam in a way that accounts for plurality. A unique text, *Ma'refat ol-Rūh* is categorized in such a way that marginalizes it both as an Ahl-e Haqq text and as a text on Islamic eschatology. Meaning that Dressler's prescriptions for approaches that account for plurality, need to be applied in both the Ahl-e Haqq context and the context of Islam. Dressler's recommendation for use of the categories *charisma-loyal* and *scripture-loyal* is used to situate Ostad Elahi and *Ma'refat ol-Rūh*, within both the Islamic tradition and the Ahl-e Haqq tradition.

This study also situates Ostad Elahi's text within the broader tradition of Shi'ite Islam, with which he also identifies, and discusses his doctrine of the "journey of perfection" within the particular theological constructions of Shi'ite Islam. On the subject of Shi'ism, two particular texts are used to examine the attitudes and approaches found both in a primary source on Shi'i doctrine and in a secondary source on Shi'ism—both written by scholars whose work is considered authoritative, despite the fact that they come from an insider and outsider perspective, respectively. *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam*, by Ayatollah Ja'far Sobhani, is used to explore the traditional Twelver Shi'i position on particular fringe groups, historically referred to as *ghulāt*. This is then compared to the perspective found in Heinz Halm's *Shi'ism*. Halm's survey text is a staple reference text on Shi'ism that is critiqued in this study for its presentation of the Ahl-e Haqq and its use of words like *ghulāt*, as an analytical category or term. By using this term, in the manner

that he does, Halm reinforces traditional use of such language and categories to dismiss certain Shi'i esoteric groups as beyond the pale of Islam. Ayatollah Sobhani's doctrinal text is used to better understand how the central themes in *Ma'refat ol-Rūh* relate to an official version of Twelver Shi'i doctrine.

The Ahl-e Haqq beliefs that pertain to this study are drawn primarily and intentionally from the primary source material authored by Ostad Elahi, an important authority in the Ahl-e Haqq religious community. This study is concerned with the Ahl-e Haqq inasmuch as the text at the heart of it and its author emerge from the Ahl-e Haqq tradition; it is not a study of the Ahl-e Haqq as a whole. Secondary source material on the Ahl-e Haqq, with the exception of an article by S.C.R. Weightman, is only used as it relates specifically to the subject of this study, namely Ostad Elahi's doctrine of *sayr-e takāmol*.

Among the three primary sources used for this study of the doctrine of *sayr-e takāmol* are *Borhān ol-Haqq* (1963) and *Ma'refat ol-Ruh* (1969), both written by Ostad Elahi. *Borhān ol-Haqq* is a compendium of Ahl-e Haqq beliefs and rituals that serves as a textbook for adherents and researchers alike. It represents the first and only complete textual presentation of Ahl-e Haqq beliefs and rituals, in Persian, written by an authority from within the order. This particular source is used for textual support and for the demonstration of Ostad Elahi's charismatic authority. This text has not been translated and was accessed in the original Persian for the purpose of this study.

Ma'refat ol-Ruh, the text at the heart of this study, is an eschatological treatise that elucidates the notion of *sayr-e takāmol* (journey of perfection [of the spirit]) while

setting it distinctly apart from *tanāsokh* (transmigration of the soul). James Morris' translation of *Ma'refat ol-Ruh, Knowing the Spirit*, was published in 2007 and is used for analysis in this study. The original Persian language text is only used for additional clarification and for questions regarding specific words as they originally appear.

Āsār ol-Haqq (Traces of the Truth) is a different type of text as it is the collected sayings of Ostad Elahi, compiled by his son Dr. Bahram Elahi. *Āsār ol-Haqq* comes in two volumes. Volume I is a thematic collection of Ostad Elahi's oral discourses was compiled and published by his son, Dr. Bahram Elahi, in 1977. Volume II, published in 1991, was also compiled by Dr. Elahi and organized chronologically. This text, also not translated in full, was referred to throughout the course of research for this study to provide more context and as an aid in understanding more complex or ambiguous portions of *Ma'refat ol-Ruh*. The text of *Āsār ol-Haqq*, because of its nature and compilation, is wonderfully accessible and easier to understand, in terms of language. The excerpts from *Āsār ol-Haqq*, used in this study, are translations, unless specified otherwise, by James Morris from *Knowing the Spirit*, "Ostad Elahi and Hajji Ne'mat: Master and Disciple, Father and Son," or from Jean During's *The Spirit of Sounds: The Unique Art of Ostad Elahi*, which is heavily relied on for the biographical sketch of Ostad Elahi.

Although it is not used greatly in the actual text of this study, Jean During's "A Critical Study on Ahl-e Haqq Studies in Europe and Iran," was referred to and is a very helpful source in terms of finding one's bearings with regard to materials on the Ahl-e Haqq. It is a valuable resource for researchers of the Ahl-e Haqq and related topics.

S.C.R. Weightman's article, "The Significance of *Kitāb Burhān ul-Haqq*," is an interesting source as it was written in 1964, one year after the publication of *Borhān ol-Haqq*. While Weightman's article is valuable in its translations of *Borhān*, it also reflects the typical problems found in scholarship of its time. Weightman relies, exclusively on European sources for textual references, but seems to have conducted some sort of ethnographic research in Iran, amongst the Ahl-e Haqq, as well. This makes it difficult to determine how much of Weightman's analysis is colored by his fieldwork and exposure to different ideas amongst the Ahl-e Haqq. This article is used in an examination of *Bor'hān ol-Haqq* in an attempt to determine the degree to which the text was authoritative amongst the larger body of the Ahl-e Haqq.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini produced a handful of different works on the Ahl-e Haqq in the 1990s. These works include, an article titled "Inner Truth and Outer History: The Two Worlds of the Ahl-e Haqq of Kurdistan" (1994), a second article titled "Redefining Truth: The Ahl-e Haqq and the Islamic Republic" (1994), a chapter in *Kurdish Culture and Identity* (1996) titled "Faith, Ritual and Culture among the Ahl-i Haqq," and a final chapter in the text *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East* (1997) titled, "Breaking the Seal: the New Face of the Ahl-e Haqq." These works have been the subject of some discussion due to some of Mir-Hosseini's assertions about the alleged reformist tendencies of the group within the Ahl-e Haqq associated with Hajj Ne'mat Jayhunabadi and his son, Ostad Elahi, whose work *Ma'refat ol-Rūh (Knowing the Spirit)* is the subject of this study. These positions of Mir-Hosseini and her work, which has been the subject of controversy, are not addressed directly in this paper.

Mir-Hosseini's article, "Inner Truth and Outer History: The Two Worlds of the Ahl-e Haqq of Kurdistan," is engaged in this study only for its representation of the Ahl-e Haqq concept of *dūnaādūnī* (successive lives) as it compares to Ostad Elahi's doctrine of *sayr-e takāmol*. Her work alongside another semi-ethnographic work is critiqued for its lack of citations when referring to specific concepts and beliefs. The study that is examined alongside her work is an article by Mansur Khaksar, titled, "Reincarnation as Perceived by the 'People of the Truth [*Ahl-e Haqq*].'" (2009) Khaksar's reliance on field notes and anthropological methods lead to a work, similar to Mir-Hosseini's, that does not lend itself to use for research purposes, as the information therein can not be traced or verified. As aforementioned, these two sources are not used as much for their content but to demonstrate problems that exist in approach and methodology with regard to their work on the Ahl-e Haqq.

Introduction

Conceptions of the movement of the soul from one earthly body to another, typically referred to as reincarnation, transmigration or metempsychosis, have appeared at some point in nearly all religious or spiritual traditions. When appearing in particular strains of Abrahamic traditions, religious authorities have, historically, strongly resisted and suppressed the notion. One does not find open belief in such concepts in mainstream Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, but this does not mean that the beliefs do not exist in a variety of forms in contemporary Jewish, Christian, or Muslim communities. When such ideas do come into the open, religious authorities typically deny their origin within the religious tradition itself, and argue that these beliefs have made their way into these communities from elsewhere, usually via Greek or Hindu influences. In the case of Islam, such arguments are made both in traditional religious and in academic scholarship.

The *ulama*, traditional religious scholars in Islam, have long dismissed the possibility of transmigration or metempsychosis. In the Islamic tradition, this notion is referred to as *tanāsokh*. Citing specific verses from the Qur'an, the *ulama* have maintained the impossibility of the return of a particular soul to the realm of the living, after death. Any such notion that has made its way into different Muslim communities, therefore, must have come from outside of Islam; and Muslims who subscribe to such beliefs are questionable at best. Because these particular beliefs have historically

appeared within the Shi'i milieu, a new category, that of the *ghulat*- exaggerators or extremists, emerged. The word *ghulāt* emerged, as a pejorative term, from within the Shi'i community near the end of the first century of Islam, during the period of 'Abbasid rule; the term was used by early Muslim heresiographers, who were Shi'i or sympathizers, to condemn the so-called *ghulāt* while distancing the greater Shi'i community from their beliefs.¹ The term continued to be used in such a manner, into the present, to contain Muslims who upheld these and other beliefs found to be outside the normative bounds of Islam.

In the academic realm, specifically in the field of Islamic Studies, many of the existing categories and classifications mirror those found in traditional religious scholarship. Although the two realms seem at odds with one another, academia has done much to reinforce the clerical position on questions relating to the movement of the soul. Academic descriptions (and dismissals) of such movements as "syncretic" perpetuates and promotes the argument of foreign influence when encountering beliefs within Muslim communities that are considered to lie beyond the pale of Islam, and allows the category of *ghulāt* to comfortably persists. If and when any beliefs in the movement of the soul are examined, even simply between different realms of existence, it is done within these parameters and in a manner that reinforces the traditional stance on the matter.

¹ Wadād al-Qādī, "The Development of the Term *Ghulāt* in Muslim Literatures with Special Reference to the Kaysāniyya," *Atken des VII Kongresses fur Arabistik und Islamwissenschaft* 15, no. 22 (August 1974): p. 302-303.

Nur Ali Elahi (1895-1974 CE), referred to henceforth as Ostad Elahi, was born into a prominent family in the Kurdish mystical order called the Ahl-e Haqq. The Ahl-e Haqq order is amongst those groups who have consistently been labeled as *ghulāt* and whose belief systems were shrouded in mystery until the latter part of the 20th century. Ostad Elahi's metaphysical treatise, *Ma'refat ol-Rūh (Knowing the Spirit)*, on the movement of the soul and the concept of *sayr-e takāmol* (journey of perfection), was first published in Tehran in 1969. *Sayr-e takāmol*, very generally, refers to the concept of successive lives that occur with very specific direction and with the goal of perfection and the ultimate Return. Despite a clear articulation by Ostad Elahi of how and why the conception outlined in his text is not "transmigration" (*tanāsokh*), this particular belief of the Ahl-e Haqq continues to be referred to as such by clerics and academics alike. While the *ulama*'s acknowledgment of such a text and its arguments is certainly not expected, it is rather puzzling that the text has been so consistently ignored by academics.

Given the issues mentioned above, this study aims to delineate the categories, concepts, and definitions used by academic scholars to approach the specific subject of the movement of and embodiment of the soul as it relates to the notion of *sayr-e takāmol*. The study further aims to highlight the limitations of these categories, concepts, and definitions and demonstrate that they do not allow for the full range of possible conclusions. Following a review of relevant literature, the study will consist of four chapters. In Chapter One, particular categories, such as the *ghulāt*, and particular concepts, such as syncretism, will be problematized and the chapter will begin to demonstrate that terms and concepts like these have served as a hindrance to

comprehensive research. Chapter Two will present a short biography of Ostad Elahi to give the reader a better sense of the context out of which *Ma'refat ol-Rūh* emerged. A brief introduction to some of Ostad Elahi's other works, particularly *Borhān ol-Haqq*, will be used to demonstrate that Ostad Elahi's work is fully situated in both the Islamic and Ahl-e Haqq traditions and that for Ostad Elahi, the two are inextricably connected to one another. In Chapter Three, will aim to present a summary of the heart of *Ma'refat ol-Rūh*, which is Ostad Elahi's detailed articulation of *sayr-e takāmol*. Chapter Four will consist of an in depth look at the term *tanāsokh*, its definition and the application of said definition, by different scholars, in different contexts. Loose definitions and sweeping understandings of the term *tanāsokh* have resulted in misrepresentations, potential and actual, of the positions held by Muslim philosophers throughout history. This chapter will examine specific cases in which this has happened with respect to the work Mulla Sadra (d.1641 CE) and Ostad Elahi.

There are technical limitations that affect the scope of this study and those are, namely, language limitations. A number of texts relating to the Ahl-e Haqq are written in French; however, because this study is not particularly focused on the Ahl-e Haqq, this lack of access did not present a major problem. There are also Arabic texts by Mulla Sadra, pertaining to the subject of this study, which have not yet been translated to English. The study is therefore limited, by language and scope, to the works that have been translated and very specifically, to works that pertain in an immediate way to the subject at hand. With acknowledgment of this limitation and the large body of work that has not been examined in this study, the aim is to reorganize the parameters of the

discussion and to raise questions that can and should be addressed by capable scholars in the field.

The ultimate object of this study is to challenge normative approaches and understandings of the subject at hand. As will be demonstrated, it is not appropriate or useful for academics to fall back on the same categories and methods of traditional scholars. While it is not the responsibility of academics to necessarily challenge religious authority, it is their responsibility to further knowledge in any given area of research, ethically and honestly. The phenomenological approach and consideration that is currently encouraged and utilized in Islamic Studies, which is the same approach that has in recent years allowed scholars to move away from Sunni-centric and Arab-centric understandings and representations of Islam, should continue its reach. Now that there is some attention paid to Shi'ism as something other than a heterodoxy, this attention should be extended to the so-called fringe groups and their beliefs, according to their own self-identification. This means that if a particular group identifies as Muslim, it is neither the responsibility nor the right of the academic scholar to confirm or deny that identity. It is because of the continued use of outdated language and lenses that scholarly developments in particular areas, such as the one addressed in this study, have stagnated.

Due to the marginalization of devotional communities labeled as *ghulāt*, a process that has been accepted and perpetuated in the field of Islamic Studies, a 20th century text like *Ma' refat ol-Rūh* has gone largely unnoticed in the field and certain obvious connections and important clarifications have therefore been ignored. Although there has been nothing like Ostad Elahi's complete articulation of *sayr-e takāmol*, conceptions of

this type of movement of the soul have existed throughout Islamic history and have been alluded to over the centuries. These allusions and references are not only found in the works of obscure mystics, philosophers and theologians, but even in the works of renowned figure like Mulla Sadra. For fear of losing a towering figure in the field of Islamic philosophy and mysticism like Mulla Sadra to the *ghulāt*, academic works have cast a spotlight on his rejections of *tanāsokh*, employing readings and arriving at conclusions that require revisiting. Based on Ostad Elahi's case in *Ma'refat ol-Rūh*, this study aims to show that the rejection of *tanāsokh* does not necessarily indicate a rejection of a very specific type of movement like *sayr-e takāmol*. The doors should be re-opened for an honest re-examination of Mulla Sadra's writings on this issue, in light of the definitions and explications found in Ostad Elahi's *Ma'refat ol-Rūh*.

Chapter One: Orthodoxy, the Ghulāt & Syncretism

Authenticity and legitimacy are extremely important factors in the domain of religion, particularly to adherents of a given religious tradition whether they be from the general body of believers or from the religious authorities. This chapter will examine the use of categories such as orthodox, heterodox, and *ghulāt* and briefly explore the notion of syncretism as it applies or does not apply in the field of Islamic Studies. While the use of particular language and categories may be justified when employed by the *'ulama* or other religious or spiritual authorities, this chapter aims to demonstrate that reliance on the same language and categories in academia creates problematic discourses and can hinder complete and nuanced understandings of the individuals, groups, or beliefs that are examined.

Up until very recently, it was still acceptable and standard procedure, in the field of Islamic Studies, to refer to the Sunni tradition as orthodox and the Shi'i tradition as heterodox. Through the work of scholars like Seyyed Hossein Nasr, this categorization is now largely perceived as invalid. On this matter, Nasr writes:

There is no magisterium in Islam, as there is in Catholicism, to determine the correctness of doctrine, and on the level of belief and doctrine Islam has been less stringent than Catholicism in determining what is orthodox. Usually acceptance of the testifications of faith, that is, 'There is no god but God' and 'Muhammad is His Messenger,' has sufficed, even if opposition has been made to other beliefs and interpretations of a particular person or group. Like Judaism, Islam has insisted more on the importance of orthopraxy than orthodoxy. Although it has been lenient on the level of orthodoxy as long as the principle of *tawhīd* and the messengership of the Prophet have been accepted, it has been more stringent on the level of practice of the daily prayers, fasting, pilgrimage, and so forth; in observing dietary laws such as abstention from pork and

alcoholic drinks; and in following moral laws dealing with sexual relations, theft, murder, and so on.²

As far as orthodoxy and heterodoxy are concerned, S.H. Nasr maintains that, “Certainly on the formal and exoteric level all the four schools of Sunni Law, Twelve-Imām Shī’ism, Zaydīism, as well as those two sides of the central bands of the spectrum, whether they be Ismā’īlīs or ‘Ibādīs, as long as they practice the *Sharī’ah*, belong to the category of Islamic orthodoxy, as does of course all normative Sufism that bases itself on *Sharī’ite* injunctions. In fact, because of the centrality of orthopraxy one could say that Muslims who practice the *Sharī’ah* belong also to Islamic orthodoxy as long as they do not flout the major doctrines of faith such as the Prophet being the seal of prophecy, as do the Ahmadiyyah.”³ Scholars like Seyyed Hossein Nasr are responsible for greatly expanding the boundaries in the field of Islamic Studies. The mention of Catholicism in the quote above points to the historically constant attempts in Religious Studies to, at best, draw parallels between Islam and Christianity and at worst, paint Islam as a monolith. Dr. Nasr and scholars like him are credited with opening up the Islamic Studies venue through extensive publications on Shi’ism, Sufism, and so much more. This being said, the excerpts above reflect a desire to draw clear lines as to who constitutes a Muslim and what is or is not Islam proper.

Other scholars, for the sake of furthering academic discourse, seem less concerned with this issue. For example, Hamid Dabashi argues that the terms orthodox

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 85.

³ Nasr, *Heart of Islam*, 86-87.

and heterodox are polemical in nature and do not function hermeneutically.⁴ The terms certainly bear a lot of weight; orthodox is understood as authentic, legitimate, and traditional whereas heterodox is understood as schismatic, subversive and deviant. Ahmet Karamustafa addresses a similarly dichotomous approach to religion in his book *God's Unruly Friends*. Regarding dervish piety in the Islamic Middle Period (1200-1550) he writes, "The operative assumption here has been that there was a watertight separation in premodern Islamic history between high, normative, and official religion of the cultural elite on the one hand and low, antinomian, and popular religion of the illiterate masses on the other hand."⁵ In his work, Karamustafa challenges this dichotomous framework and the results that have come from its application in academia. He quotes historian Mehmed Fuad Köprülü (d. 1966 CE) and Islamic studies scholar Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988 CE), demonstrating how the "two-tiered" model manifested itself in their analysis of the Middle Period dervish groups and argues that their condemnation of these groups is directly connected to the lack of scholarly attention paid to them.⁶ Köprülü is quoted:

If we consider that these men were in general recruited from the lower classes and were incapable of [comprehending] some very subtle mystical observations and experiences, it becomes quite obvious that their undigested 'pantheistic' beliefs would naturally lead to beliefs such as incarnation and metempsychosis and, in the final analysis, to 'antinomianism.' ...As a general principle, beliefs that could only be digested by people who possess a [high degree] of philosophical capacity and who are susceptible to mystical experience always lead to consequences of this sort among people of feeble intellect.⁷

Rahman is quoted:

⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Authority in Islam: From the Rise of Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 71.

⁵ Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period, 1200-1550* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 5.

⁶ Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

This phenomenon of popular religion very radically changed the aspect of Sūfism even if it did not entirely displace its very ideal. For practical purposes Islamic society underwent a metempsychosis. Instead of being a method of moral self-discipline and elevation and genuine spiritual enlightenment, Sūfism was now transformed into veritable spiritual jugglery through auto-hypnotic transports and visions just as at the level of doctrine it was being transmuted into a half-delirious theosophy...This, combined with the spiritual demagoguery of many Sūfī Shaykhs, opened the way for all kinds of aberrations, not the least of which was charlatanism. Ill-balanced *majdhūbs*...parasitic mendicants, exploiting dervishes proclaimed Muhammad's Faith in the heyday of Sūfism. Islam was at the mercy of spiritual delinquents.⁸

The relevant uses of these full quotations for the purpose of this study are twofold. First, it must be noted that the harsh personal judgment present in the position of both scholars is problematic. As aforementioned, this type of judgment or condemnation is what one expects to see in a clerical treatise, not in the work of an academic. Second, these quotes, and the language and accusations in them, connect directly to the next category to be examined. In the Shi'ī milieu, accusations of pantheism, belief in incarnation and metempsychosis, and antinomianism are reserved for a category of people called the *ghulāt*. In his survey text titled, *Shi'ism*, Heinz Halm writes, "Since its inception the Shi'a has included a trend which, although basing itself on the Imams, has been judged as heretical and attacked as 'exaggeration' or 'extremism' (*ghulūw*) by the orthodox Imamiyya [Shi'a]. In particular, the 'extremists' are said to have committed three acts of heresy: the claim that God takes up his abode in the bodies of the Imams (*hulul*), the belief in metempsychosis (*tanasukh*), and the spiritual interpretation of Islamic law which thereby loses its obligatoriness and no longer needs to be followed literally- that is to say, open antinomianism (*ibaha*)."⁹

⁸ Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*, 8-9.

⁹ Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism*, 2nd ed, trans. Janet Watson and Marian Hill (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 154.

Halm's use of the language of orthodoxy is interesting here. It is rarely used, here or elsewhere, intentional or unintentional, unless it is to the detriment of the group that falls outside the proposed orthodox bounds. Rather than resort to the term heterodox, Halm uses the far more derogatory and openly dismissive category of *ghulāt*. On this subject, in his *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam*, Ayatollah Ja'far Sobhani writes the following:

The word *ghulūw* in the Arabic language means going beyond the limit...After the death of the Prophet, certain groups likewise went beyond the bounds of truth in respect of the Prophet and some of the members of the *ahl al-bayt*, ascribing to them degrees of eminence that are the preserve of God alone. Thus they were given the name *ghālī* or *ghāliyān* [in Persian], as they had exceeded the bounds of the truth...Their outward profession of Islam is thus valueless, and the religious authorities regard them as disbelievers.¹⁰

The last portion of Ayatollah Sobhani's words is the most critical to this study and the most demonstrative of why the category of *ghulāt* is not appropriate for academic use. According to this, the word *kāfir* (disbeliever) could easily be used in lieu of *ghālī*. Is it even imaginable for an academic to have a section in a study on Islam dedicated to the *kāfirūn*? The problem is that the category of *ghulāt* is very comfortably utilized in academic scholarship relating to Islam and particularly Shi'ism. No group that falls within that category, whether they fully identify as Muslim or not, would refer to themselves as *ghulāt*. It is not a term that any group identifies itself with and yet its academic use continues. Furthermore, when a category is used that immediately identifies a group as far beyond the "orthodox" pale, it gives license to scholars to be very careless and unfortunately rather sloppy in the little attention that they give said group and their beliefs.

¹⁰ Ayatollah Ja'far Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam: A Compendium of Imami Beliefs and Practices*, trans. and ed. Reza Shah-Kazemi (Qom: Imam Sadeq Institute, 2003), 175-176.

In the Halm text, with a four page chapter dedicated to the “extreme Shi’a”¹¹ a page and half of which is dedicated to “The *Ghulāt*-sects of today: Ahl-i Haqq and Nusayrīs (‘Alawīs),”¹² Halm reduces the Ahl-e Haqq history and belief system to two sentences. He writes, “Basically, the religion of the Ahl-i Haqq is a superficially Islamicised polytheistic mythology of Indo-Iranian extraction. The Islamic veneer, however, is definitely extreme-Shi’ite, as shown by their beliefs about metempsychosis; here the influence of the nearby Iraqi lowlands is probably discernable.”¹³ In addition to leaving the door open for weak and/or misleading representations, the use of *ghulāt* as a category perpetuates the persecution of these communities by mainstream Muslim authorities and neighboring mainstream Muslim communities. Of course the word needs to be defined in contemporary scholarship and its origin understood, but if orthodox and heterodox can be classified as polemical terms, then *ghulāt* most certainly falls into that category as well. Again, its use by clerics and their devotees will naturally persist, but this term has no place as a category for academic use.

Halm’s use of the phrase “superficially Islamicised polytheistic mythology of Indo-Iranian extraction” clearly amounts to a charge of syncretism applied to the Ahl-e Haqq. In the world of Islamic Studies, mention of the Ahl-e Haqq only happens in the context Shi’ite Studies in reference to the *ghulāt*, as demonstrated by Halm and also seen in other survey texts like Moojan Momen’s *Introduction to Shi’i Islam*.¹⁴ The few studies of the Ahl-e Haqq that exist appear more often in the field of Middle East Studies, and

¹¹ Halm, *Shi’ism*, 154.

¹² *Ibid.*, 156.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 156-157.

¹⁴ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

usually in the even more narrow subfield of Kurdish Studies. In either case, the notion of syncretism is regularly employed. As we see in the Halm example, in the realm of Islamic Studies the accusation of syncretism is used to further delegitimize these groups from an Islamic perspective. The Middle East/Kurdish Studies angle also seems intent on breaking through the “Islamic veneer” that these groups are assumed to have adopted, though not for the sake of defining the limits of Islamic “orthodoxy,” but rather for the purpose of elevating Kurdish culture and tradition.

Returning to Ahmet Karamustafa’s critique of the two-tiered approach as it relates to the subject of syncretism, he writes:

It is a measure of the methodological poverty of the two-tiered model of religion that it not only fails to generate such an explanatory analysis but even obscures the obvious need for one by denying popular religion a historical dimension. The vulgar, it is understood, is timeless. Reliance on a dichotomous view of Islamic religion thus opens the way for the preponderance of externalistic explanations such as ‘survival of non-Islamic beliefs and practices under Islamic cover.’ Indeed, the ascendancy of popular religious practice during the Middle Periods is usually, if at all, explained through recourse to the time-honored ‘survival’ theory.¹⁵

This approach is employed down to the letter by Philip G. Kreyenbroek in his chapter titled “Religion and Religions in Kurdistan” in the edited volume *Kurdish Culture and Identity*. Kreyenbroek writes:

It will be argued here that those Kurds who are most exposed to the dominant cultures of the region, which tend to uphold mainstream forms of Islam, probably do not differ profoundly from their non-Kurdish neighbours as far as their beliefs and practices are concerned. On the other hand communities which are more insulated from outside cultural influences have often preserved customs and beliefs, and even developed entire religious systems, which contain elements alien to mainstream Islam. A number of characteristic features of traditional Kurdish life play an important role here. The largely non-literate nature of traditional culture in Kurdistan, for example, led inevitably to an understanding of religious truths which was different in many ways from that fostered by the highly literate traditions of Sunni or Twelver Shi’ite Islam.¹⁶

¹⁵ Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*, 10.

¹⁶ Philip G. Kreyenbroek, "Religion and Religions in Kurdistan," in *Kurdish Culture and Identity*, ed. Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Christine Allison (London: Zed Books, 1996), 85.

Kreyenbroek goes on to assert that, “In the religious milieus where popular religion flourishes unchecked by the authority of official Islam there is often a tendency for syncretistic elements to appear, so that features of older cults are preserved and blended with those of Islam in a variety of ways.”¹⁷ Kreyenbroek devotes a great deal of attention to examining all the potential foreign influences on Kurdish religions and religiosity, expressing enthusiasm for and certainty of syncretic elements where he finds them present.

It must be noted that this study does not claim that there is never mixing and influence, intentional or unintentional, between religious communities. This is a reality that cannot be denied. However, the instinct to cry syncretism as soon as shared elements are seen is a problem. It does not take into account a devotional community’s self-perception and it allows for a loose approach to understanding communities that usually does not go beyond the surface. Seemingly foreign elements are reduced to evidence of syncretism and Muslim identities, language, and sensibilities are reduced to survival. Even in Kreyenbroek’s chapter, which in its effort to demonstrate diversity provides a very lite survey of Kurdish religiosity, the quest for purity or rather mission to show impurity one way or the other is quite evident. “If it is true that the attitudes and traditions of the latter [traditional Kurdish culture] influenced Kurdish Islam in many ways, there is also no doubt that there is hardly a religious group in all of Kurdistan whose views have not been permeated, directly or indirectly, by the official teachings of Islam.”¹⁸ There is nothing malevolent in Kreyenbroek’s tone or his actual statement, no indication that he

¹⁷ Kreyenbroek, *Kurdish Culture*, 92-93.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

means to invalidate any particular group or anything of the sort; nevertheless the approach and expression is problematic. This is how ideas, practices, and even people fall through the cracks. Neither here nor there, at best means nowhere in terms of scholarly attention, and at worst means very poor and careless scholarship because no one is paying attention. The example of *Ma'refat ol-Rūh* will demonstrate this in chapters three and four of this study.

Having problematized many of the standard categories and approaches, what constitutes an appropriate framework and potentially useful categories for the purpose of this study? Markus Dressler, building on the work of Ahmet Karamustafa, proposes the following in his recent book *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam*:

The goal has to be, I fully agree with Karamustafa, to discuss the plurality of Islamic discourses and practices in a historicizing way that gives nonelite and marginalized groups and currents a proper place in the historical, sociological, and/or anthropological description. With this objective in mind I have previously suggested differentiating between Islamic orientations with respect to the authorities that they draw on in their religious practice. Accordingly, I distinguished ideologically between *charisma-loyal* and *scripture-loyal* Muslim orientations. While the former category emphasizes an Islam that is organized around the authority of charisma based on ability to mediate between ordinary believers and the divine (such as Sufi sheikhs/Muslim saints) or on lineage (actual or figurative), the latter privileges authority derived from the scriptural tradition of Islam (in the first place the Koran and the Hadith), and the law (sharia). The differentiation between different kinds of authority models, which should not be understood as mutually exclusive, is but one suggestion for a less normative, more descriptive way of conceptualizing inner-Islamic plurality.¹⁹

Dressler's categories will be employed in the following chapter on Ostad Elahi, the Ahl-e Haqq, and Islam. This study provides a unique opportunity to apply the classification of *charisma-loyal* and *scripture-loyal* as it will be demonstrated that both apply to Ostad Elahi and *Ma'refat al-Ruh*.

¹⁹ Markus Dressler, *Writing Religion: The Making of Turkish Alevi Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 270-271.

Chapter Two: Ostad Elahi, the Ahl-e Haqq, & Islam

This chapter aims to provide a biographical account of Ostad Elahi's life and to historically and culturally contextualize *Ma'refat ol-Ruh (Knowing the Spirit)*. This biographical sketch and brief examination of some of Ostad Elahi's other works and teachings will serve as an opportunity to address some problematic approaches that are currently being utilized in related research, with the aim of redirecting the scholarly discourse toward more useful approaches. The chapter will further demonstrate that Ostad Elahi, in addition to being a philosopher and mystic, was a charismatic master whose teachings resulted in a community of believers who are both charisma-loyal and scripture-loyal. Ostad Elahi's teachings emphasize the authority of the Ahl-e Haqq *kalāms* (religious epics), the Qur'an and hadith, as well as the vital importance of following religious law (*shari'at*). Ostad Elahi's position that the Ahl-e Haqq and Islam are not distinct from one another²⁰ is one that defies the academic desire to conveniently keep the two separate. Because of this compartmentalization, Ostad Elahi's work has always flown under the radar of Islamic Studies. With the exception of James Winston Morris, whose translations of and commentary on Ostad Elahi's work is groundbreaking and exceptional, there has been no engagement with Ostad Elahi's thought and writing in the Islamic Studies field. This chapter will demonstrate that *Ma'refat ol-Ruh*, on its own

²⁰ Ostad Elahi, *Borhān ol-Haqq*, 7th ed. (Tehran: Sahāb, 1987) 271.

and as an extension of Ostad Elahi's other work, *Borhān ol-Haqq (Demonstration of the Truth)*²¹, should be engaged as a text that is both Ahl-e Haqq and Muslim in its expression, as Ostad Elahi characterizes the Ahl-e Haqq as "one of the mystical orders of the *shari'at* of Mohammad."²² These works, while being the product of great and thorough research, do not rely solely on this fact for their authority. The community of believers who turn to these texts for guidance do so out of reverence and devotion to Ostad Elahi's charismatic authority.

In order to properly contextualize Ostad Elahi's *Ma'refat ol-Ruh*, it is important to look at, not only the life of Ostad Elahi himself, but also that of his father Hajj Ne'matollāh Jayhunābādī (1871-1920). James Morris refers to the biographical account of Ostad Elahi's life in Jean During's *L'Âme des sons: L'art unique d'Ostad Elahi (1895-1974)* (2001) as "the most detailed biographical study to date."²³ As a result, the biographical portion of this study relies heavily upon the English translation, *The Spirit of Sounds: The Unique Art of Ostad Elahi*. About Ostad Elahi, Jean During writes:

Ostad continually defies the traditional models: an accomplished mystic, he renounces the renunciation of the world, decides to live in the midst of society, performs the functions of a judge out of a sense of duty, does not seek to make himself known or to establish a brotherhood, respects all religious beliefs, and devotes himself passionately to music. Examining the life of Ostad, however, one is struck as much by the singularity of its trajectory as by a certain number of elements that perfectly conform to the canonical traits generally associated with the representation of sainthood in the East, such as the announcement of his arrival, his vocation made manifest from childhood, predictions, the transmission of his philosophy and teachings, and his posterity. The figure of Ostad thus has something disconcerting about it: on the one hand, it would not be fair to isolate him in his singularity, since he is inscribed at least in part within the continuity of a mystical tradition, but on the other hand, he occupies a special place in the religious culture he inherited. All things considered, the qualification of 'Master' (Ostad), understood in its root sense,

²¹ *Borhān ol-Haqq* was accessed in the original Persian, all references to this text, unless otherwise specified are my own reading and understanding of the text. Unless in quotations, the references are loose translations or paraphrasing of the specific text that is referred to.

²² Elahi, *Borhān ol-Haqq*, 6.

²³ James Morris, trans., *Knowing the Spirit* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 118.

seems most appropriate to the style that was his own in the spiritual domain, and likewise aptly characterized his way of making and thinking about music.”²⁴

Ostad Elahi’s father, Hajj Ne’matollāh Jayhunābādī (Hajj Ne’mat) was born in the Kurdish village of Jayhūnābād in Western Iran, in 1871. Born into a notable family to his father, Mirzā Bahrām, Hajj Ne’mat lost both parents and was orphaned by the age of ten. Hajj Ne’mat’s lineage went back to the *Jald*, a semi-nomadic Kurdish tribe. “The Jald were Sunni Muslims, but a branch of the tribe broke away to adopt the Shiite faith, and of these a certain number subsequently followed the path of the Ahl-e Haqq.”²⁵ Ostad Elahi was born, like his father, in Jayhūnābād on September 11, 1895, the eldest of the three surviving children of Hajj Ne’mat.²⁶ At the age of twenty-nine, Hajj Ne’mat renounced worldly life and answered the call to devote himself to the spiritual. Although she was given the option of returning back to her family, Ostad Elahi’s mother, Sakina chose with strong conviction and devotion to remain at her husband’s side.²⁷ Despite the desire to remain unknown, Hajj Ne’mat was soon recognized as a mystical pole to whom “1,145 men and five hundred women made vows of obedience.”²⁸ During this time, over a period of forty days, Hajj Ne’mat, in an inspired state, dictated his magnum opus the *Shāhnāme-ye Haqīqat*. Hajj Ne’mat’s epic spiritual poem, which was dictated in Persian, was a departure from the *kalām* literature of the past.²⁹ “The writings and teachings of

²⁴ Jean During, *The Spirit of Sounds: The Unique Art of Ostad Elahi*, trans. Albert Gastaldi (Cranbury, NJ: Cornwall Books, 2003), 22.

²⁵ During, *Spirit of Sounds*, 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁹ Jean During, "A Critical Study on Ahl-e Haqq Studies in Europe and Iran," in *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, ed. Tord Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga and Catharina Raudvere (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), 106.

Hajj Ne'mat are situated in the continuity of the canonical Ahl-e Haqq texts, even while they represent a renewal of tradition.”³⁰

At age nine, Ostad Elahi entered a twelve-year ascetic retreat with his father in which “he spent almost all his time, stringing together periods of continuous fasts in forty-day increments, with a break of ten to fifteen days in between.”³¹ Completely removed from the outside world, Ostad Elahi emerged from this twelve-year period not knowing “that it was possible for someone to lie, cheat, or act in an immoral way.”³² Two years later, upon the passing of Hajj Ne'mat, Ostad Elahi faced hardships springing up from within the Ahl-e Haqq community.

Certain religious Ahl-e Haqq (*seyyeds*), seeking to benefit once again from the advantages they used to derive from their followers, were upset that the aura of Haj Ne'mat had been detrimental to their prerogatives. Although they had undertaken no action against him because of his numerous supporters in the region, after his death they thought that the moment had come to get rid of his son in order to consolidate their authority and guarantee the privileges that came along with it. The youth and inexperience of Ostad made him appear all the more vulnerable, and after multiple threats the *seyyeds* went as far as an assassination attempt. The dervishes of Haj Ne'mat, frightened by this maneuver and convinced that the spiritual pole that had united them had been dissolved with the loss of their master, all defected. Suddenly Ostad found himself alone, responsible for his mother, his eleven and thirteen year old sisters, his young wife and his newborn. But his confidence in God was unshakable, and he did not allow himself to be affected in the least by the hostility directed at him or by the danger he was in.³³

Despite Ostad Elahi's decision not to take on disciples in the traditional form of master-discipleship, he found devotees waiting everywhere he went and was soon given the title Nūr 'Alī Shāh.³⁴ In a very interesting reversal of Hajj Ne'mat life trajectory, Ostad Elahi came out of years of asceticism and became fully engaged in society,

³⁰ During, *Spirit of Sounds*, 25.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³² During, *Spirit of Sounds*, 30.

³³ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

spending 27 years dedicated to public service.³⁵ Ostad Elahi first worked at the Bureau of Land Registration and Public Acts in Kermanshah³⁶ and spent the remainder of the years, until retirement in 1957, working as judge and jurist in many different provinces of Iran.³⁷ Ostad Elahi dedicated the rest of his years to research, writing, and of course music.³⁸ Jean During's entire book, *The Spirit of Sounds*, is dedicated to Ostad Elahi's magnificent, world-renowned gift for playing the tanbour. Ostad Elahi was known as a prodigy in his very young childhood³⁹ and his style of playing the tanbour was highly original and considered unmatched in the world.⁴⁰ In the following decade, three of Ostad Elahi's works were published: *Borhān ol-Haqq* (1963), *Hāshiye bar Haqq ol-Haqāyey* (1967) a commentary on Hajj Ne'mat's epic poem published alongside a re-edited version of *Shāhnāmeye Haqīqat*, and *Ma'rifat ol-Rūh* (1969).⁴¹ Ostad Elahi passed away on October 19th, 1974 at the age of seventy-nine.⁴² *Āsār ol-Haqq (Traces of Truth)*, a thematic collection of Ostad Elahi's oral discourses was compiled and published by his son, Dr. Bahram Elahi, in 1977. Volume II of *Āsār ol-Haqq*, published in 1991, was also compiled by Dr. Elahi and organized chronologically.⁴³ On his written works, namely *Borhān ol-Haqq* and *Ma'rifat ol-Rūh*, Ostad Elahi said the following:

There are a great many secrets in (my book) *Ma'rifat al-Rūh [Knowing the Spirit]* that I haven't even mentioned to you my children, who are nearer to me than anyone. Only after I'm gone will people understand the real lasting value of *Ma'rifat al-Rūh*, *Burhān al-Haqq*, and the other books I've written. The more people's level of knowledge increases the more they'll discover in those

³⁵ Ibid., 42.

³⁶ Ibid., 39.

³⁷ Ibid., 41.

³⁸ Ibid., 42.

³⁹ During, *Spirit of Sounds*, 29.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 45.

⁴¹ Ibid., 48.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 49.

writings....Their importance will increase with each passing century....I investigated each subject until I had completely mastered it and there was nothing left that I didn't know about it: that is my way of inquiry. [*Āsār*, 2076]⁴⁴

Borhān ol-Haqq serves as a textbook for Ahl-e Haqq history, doctrine, and rituals.

While the Twelve Imāmī Shi'i aspects of *Borhān* are not accepted by all of the Ahl-e Haqq *khāndāns*, it is nonetheless, as the only written documentation of Ahl-e Haqq practices coming from within the tradition, a staple text for researchers.⁴⁵ In addition to being a source for researchers, Jean During argues that it serves as a reference, even for the Ahl-e Haqq and scholars who attempt to challenge its authority.⁴⁶ Although this study is specifically about *Ma'refat ol-Rūh*, Ostad Elahi's unambiguous corrective statements in *Borhān ol-Haqq* have been the subject of much discussion in recent years, and going as far back to 1964, one year after *Borhān ol-Haqq* was published. In 1964, S.C.R. Weightman, wrote a journal article titled, "The Significance of *Kitāb Burhān ul-Haqq*." In it Weightman sets up a dichotomy that has been carried, almost identically, into the contemporary discourse by anthropologists like Ziba Mir-Hosseini. Weightman urges exercising "considerable caution" when approaching the text and his concerns are two-fold. He writes:

There are two reasons why we should not be too hasty in attributing absolute authority to this work, based ultimately as it is on early tradition and free as it is from the influence of the later Ātesh Begī sources with which Western Orientalists are mostly familiar. The first of the reasons is that Nūr 'Āli Ilāhī has been very strongly influenced by the doctrinal reforms of his father, which have been set out in *Furqān ul-Akhhār*. I myself have heard Nūr 'Alī say that he regarded his book as a summary of the main conclusions of his father's work. Thus we are seeing the oldest traditions through the eyes of a reformer- a reformer, moreover who was not at all well received by the A H sayyids and sheikhs who lived in his locality. The second reason is that this book is an orthodox apology of the A H for the general public. *Taqiyya* is still a religious virtue in Iran and

⁴⁴ Morris, *Knowing*, 120.

⁴⁵ During, *Alevi Identity*, 106.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

we must not expect to see anything in this book which might offend religious susceptibilities of the orthodox Shi'a Muslim.⁴⁷

Weightman's assertion that Ostad Elahi is a reformer and that *Borhān ol-Haqq* is based on the "reforms" of Hajj Ne'mat, is problematic in that it is unclear on what basis he makes this claim, a claim that was brought back into the academic fore by Ziba Mir-Hosseini in her works on the Ahl-e Haqq that were published in the 1990s. Weightman's article cites only works by European Orientalists and a claim of reform, which relies more on secondary source material than primary source material, could be considered problematic.⁴⁸ Furthermore, it seems that at least some of Weightman's deductions come from his travels in Iran and time spent among different groups within the Ahl-e Haqq. This is demonstrated in footnotes that read very much like the Orientalist travelogues of the slightly more distant past. These anecdotal references are not limited to footnotes, but make their way into the body of Weightman's text when, as an argument for the reforms of Ostad Elahi, he writes, "The first of the reasons is that Nūr 'Āli Ilāhī has been very strongly influenced by the doctrinal reforms of his father, which have been set out in *Furqān ul-Akhhbār*. I myself have heard Nūr 'Alī say that he regarded his book as a summary of the main conclusions of his father's work."⁴⁹ This line of argument would be absolutely unacceptable in contemporary scholarship, which leads back to the point that it is unclear how Weightman arrives at his conclusions. On this matter, Jean During writes:

There is no reason for accepting the statement of some scholars that a 'reformist Islamic movement' was initiated by H. Ne'matollāh Jeyhunābādi (d. 1921), an author quoted in all the studies on the Ahl-e Haqq. A short glance at the treatise published by Edmonds shows that a

⁴⁷ S.C.R. Weightman, "The Significance of *Kitāb Burhān ul-Haqq*," *British Institute of Persian Studies*, Iran, no. 2 (1964): 85. JSTOR (4299554).

⁴⁸ Weightman, "Significance," 83.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

Kâkâ'I from Iraq born around 1870 share the auto-definition and the views expressed in 1963 in the *Borhân ol-haqq* of Ostâd Elahi.⁵⁰

When Weightman writes, “we should not be too hasty in attributing absolute authority to this text” (emphasis added), he is presumably referring to academics. He is correct in his caution that this text should not be presumed authoritative for all Ahl-e Haqq, but should also exercise caution not to strip a text of its absolute authority, for those that it serves as such. Of course it must be noted that no amount of scholarly critique or speculation would ever strip a text of spiritual authority in the heart and minds of those who hold it authoritative. According to the standards suggested in this study, it would be more appropriate to say that while this text serves an authority for the students of Ostad Elahi’s school, it is not accepted as authoritative by all the Ahl-e Haqq *khandans*.

In the event that there are disagreements within a greater devotional community, care should be taken not to assign legitimacy to one group over the other. Contending viewpoints or narratives should not be approached in an adjudicative manner. Emphasis should be placed on bringing to the fore the beliefs of each group and those beliefs should be explored and allowed to speak for themselves. An example of this would be the Shi’i-Sunni divide. A researcher could choose to focus on all of the disagreements between the two groups and end up as a polemicist for one or the other or could focus on the worldview of each, as they stand, while noting that a particular belief or set of beliefs does not represent the other group.

⁵⁰ During, *Alevi Identity*, 118.

Regarding the authority of the text, a question was posed to Ostad Elahi about a rumored upcoming revision of *Borhān ol-Haqq*. The person asking the question relates that since the publication of *Borhān ol-Haqq*, he or she has been following the injunctions therein to the letter. The question is: shall followers wait for such a revision or continue following the current text, as it exists? Ostad Elahi replies that any revision would be only for further explanation of certain matters and that as far as the heart of the matter is concerned, absolutely no changes or modifications will be made “because the principles of *Borhān ol-Haqq* come from the *Kalām-e Saranjām* of Soltan Sahāk and are impervious to change.”⁵¹ In addition to Ostad Elahi’s firm response regarding the nature of *Borhān ol-Haqq*, the inquirer’s commitment to the text is rather meaningful. Ostad Elahi, in numerous places, refers to the meticulous standards and depths of research that he employed when preparing any of his works. But can such absolute commitment to a text, as seen in the inquirer above, come solely out of respect for its author’s intellect and processes? As transmitted in *Āsār ol-Haqq*, Ostad Elahi recounts the passing of Hajj Ne’mat and the transmission of spiritual authority and knowledge that took place. Here, and in many other places, we see reference to Ostad Elahi’s inherited spiritual authority:

When my father was dying, my mother asked him: ‘What will become of the children?’ My father answered: ‘I’m happy with Nūr ‘Alī. I entrust him to God, provided he doesn’t leave the path I’ve traveled.’ Then he called me to him and put a drop of his saliva in my mouth. My state was completely changed, and I saw that I had become a different person. He died a quarter of an hour later, and from that moment on I alone had permission to give spiritual guidance, because that was a trust from God that my father had passed on to me, until I would hand it on later to whomever God should command me to do so.

If someone doesn’t have the right to give spiritual guidance, but nonetheless offers such guidance without being aware of its Source, then he is considered guilty by God, even if that guidance is

⁵¹ Elahi, *Borhān ol-Haqq*, 247.

[outwardly] correct. As for myself, even now, whenever I tell someone something, I refer immediately to the authoritative sources....[*Āsār*, 1888]⁵²

This study's presentation of these accounts is to demonstrate Ostad Elahi's charismatic authority in relation to his devotees. Considering this type of authority, it seems misplaced to deem Hajj Ne'mat or Ostad Elahi "reformers." They have never referred to themselves as such and their followers would not and do not characterize them as such. On the contrary, as will be demonstrated below, there is a clear intention to return back to what they deem the proper and authentic Ahl-e Haqq system of belief. However much this caused waves amongst the other Ahl-e Haqq *khāndāns*, it is still not grounds for the label of reformist, indicating the introduction of new ideas or innovations. In this particular case, this is not a classification that aids in nuanced understanding, but rather a qualitative category that seems to judge between authentic and inauthentic.

Lastly, Weightman's mention of *taqiyya* (religious dissimulation) is rather perplexing. First of all, it is strange to refer to *taqiyya* as an Iranian religious virtue. But beyond this, who is Weightman speaking for here? What is the import and intention of such a statement? When a text such as *Bor'hān ol-Haqq* refers repeatedly, as demonstrated below, to the Ahl-e Haqq as Muslim and, specifically, Twelver Shi'i, it is quite a claim to allege religious dissimulation with no evidence cited to support it. In addition to providing a record of beliefs and rituals that are particular to the Ahl-e Haqq, it is repeated over and over again in *Bor'hān ol-Haqq* that the Ahl-e Haqq are Muslims

⁵² James W. Morris, "Ostad Elahi and Hajji Ne'mat: Master and Disciple, Father and Son," in *Tales of God's Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation*, ed. John Renard, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 109.

and even further Ithna ‘Asharī Shi’is of the Ja’fari *maddhab*.⁵³ Ostad Elahi refers, throughout the text, both to the Qur’an and hadith and to the *kalāms* and other Ahl-e Haqq sources.⁵⁴

In addition to these references, the text repeatedly comes back to the importance of *shari’at*. Among the deviations of the Ahl-e Haqq, alluded to in the preface, is a disregard for religious law. On this matter, Ostad Elahi states that which has been declared licit and illicit in the *shari’at* is required of those in the stage of *shari’at* one fold, in the stage of *tarīqat* two fold, in the stage of *ma’refat* three fold, and those in the stage of *haqīqat*, the Ahl-e Haqq, must abide four fold as rewards and punishments will be doled out in the same proportions.⁵⁵ The notion that the Ahl-e Haqq see themselves as an elite who are above the requirements of religious law is refuted here. At the very start of chapter eighteen of *Borhān*, in which Ostad Elahi presents the devotional practices of the Ahl-e Haqq, it is reminded very firmly that “the Ahl-e Haqq are Muslim and followers of the commandments of the Qur’an.”⁵⁶ It is further emphasized that the Ahl-e Haqq specific devotional practices are to be done in addition to Islamic religious prescriptions and that the chapter presents those additional practices.⁵⁷

Relating to this, a question was posed to Ostad Elahi about the injunction to follow the twelve Imams and the Ja’farī Twelver Shi’i way and an attempt was made to draw distinctions between the Ahl-e Haqq and Islam saying that a person cannot pick up

⁵³ Elahi, *Borhān ol-Haqq*, 10.

⁵⁴ Elahi, *Borhān ol-Haqq*, 187-244.

⁵⁵ Elahi, *Borhān ol-Haqq*, 15.

⁵⁶ Elahi, *Borhān ol-Haqq*, 138.

⁵⁷ Elahi, *Borhān ol-Haqq*, 138-139.

two watermelons with one hand.⁵⁸ Ostad Elahi replies that in general, it should be known that the Ahl-e Haqq are not a distinct religion such as Christianity, for example, to be separate from the *shari'at* [of Islam] and therefore the implausibility of one hand carrying two watermelons does not apply nor does the inability of following the commands of both [Islam and Ahl-e Haqq]. This is because the Ahl-e Haqq order is the marrow and extracted essence of that very same *shari'at*.⁵⁹ All of these references are meant to demonstrate that *Borhān ol-Haqq*, is both a Muslim text and an Ahl-e Haqq text, as the author does not separate the two.

With all of the primary source material written by Ostad Elahi and attributed to him that insist on the primacy of Qur'an and hadith and Islamic religious law as the very pillars of Ahl-e Haqq existence, it is a wonder that Ostad Elahi's works have not received proper attention in, not only the field of Islamic Studies, but even Ahl-e Haqq Studies. With regard to Ahl-e Haqq studies, there are methodological issues among researchers (who are often times anthropologists engaged in field work and embedded with a particular *khāndān*) that at this point seem insurmountable; there is need for a revolutionary change in methods and approaches that would safeguard against discourses which corrupt understanding of the subject matter rather than improve it. This is a subject that is briefly touched upon in this chapter and in the literature review, further engagement of which would detract from the very intention of this study. Because of the lack of attention, for the variety of reasons specified thus far, texts like *Borhān ol-Haqq* and *Ma'refat ol-Ruh* end up neither here nor there, when in reality they are both here and

⁵⁸ Elahi, *Borhān ol-Haqq*, 271.

⁵⁹ Elahi, *Borhān ol-Haqq*, 272.

there, easily situated in Islamic Studies and Ahl-e Haqq Studies. These two categories, according to Ostad Elahi, are not mutually exclusive; rather they are deeply connected to one another, a fraction of which was demonstrated above.

In the epilogue to *Borhān ol-Haqq*⁶⁰, Ostad Elahi writes that a chapter by name of *ma'refat ol-ruh*, relating to the perpetuity of the spirit (*ruh*), the journey of perfection (*sayr-e takāmol*), the intermediate world (*barzakh*), the gathering (*hashr*) and reawakening (*nashr*) of the body and the spirit was intended, but for reasons unspecified, this discussion was left to a later date.⁶¹ As mentioned above, the book *Ma'refat ol-Ruh* was published in 1969, six years after the publication of *Borhān ol-Haqq*. This text and its unique contribution will be the focus of the remainder of this study. In furthering the central thesis of this study, the concern is primarily with attracting the attention of Islamic Studies scholars to *Ma'refat ol-Ruh* as the text could brightly illuminate the related works of Muslim philosophers and mystics of the past.

⁶⁰ Elahi, *Borhān ol-Haqq*, 185.

⁶¹ These terms are translated here, for the purpose of accuracy and consistency throughout this study, in accordance with the translation of James W. Morris in *Knowing the Spirit* (2007).

Chapter Three: Sayr-e Takāmol

This chapter will aim to summarize the eschatological conception of *sayr-e takāmol* (journey of perfection [of the spirit]) as found in Ostad Elahi's *Ma'refat ol-Rūh* (*Knowing the Spirit*). For the purpose of this chapter, the text will henceforth be referred to as *Knowing the Spirit* because of the primary reliance on James Morris' translation; the original text was only referred to for specific terms as they appear in Persian and to occasionally facilitate further understanding of more complicated portions. Despite being a relatively short text, *Knowing the Spirit*, is an extremely dense and powerful treatise. As a result, any attempt to further compact or paraphrase is an extremely daunting and difficult task. As a necessity for the purpose of this study, this chapter attempts to present an even more concise summary of *sayr-e takāmol*.

In the preceding chapter, this study introduced *Knowing the Spirit* as an extension of *Borhān ol-Haqq*, Ostad Elahi's compendium of Ahl-e Haqq history, doctrines, and rituals. Ostad Elahi confirms this connection in his introduction, writing:

As for the rest, this humble servant, Nur Ali Elahi, begins by saying that a group of friends have kept on asking me to write down what was alluded to- but not fully developed- concerning the problem of knowing the spirit at the end of (my book) *The Demonstration of the Truth* [*Borhān ol-Haqq*]. So out of respect for them and their request, and in accordance with my religious duty, I was obliged to undertake this task, since ***properly responding to the religious requests of those who are following a path of spiritual guidance is among the basic religious responsibilities.***⁶²

⁶² Ostad Elahi, *Knowing the Spirit*, trans. James Winston Morris (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 39.

With the connection to *Borhān ol-Haqq*, a text on Ahl-e Haqq history, doctrines, and rituals clearly established, it must be pointed out that *Knowing the Spirit* differs greatly in terms of its voice and approach. While *Borhān ol-Haqq* is an equally descriptive and prescriptive text, *Knowing the Spirit* is a lot more universal and indirect, in ways that will be demonstrated in this chapter and the following. With this in mind, this study does not argue that *Ma'refat ol-Rūh* should be taken as the definitive viewpoint of the Ahl-e Haqq on eschatology. This study makes the case that *Ma'refat ol-Rūh* represents a fascinating and unique articulation of a belief in successive lives with the goal of perfection of the spirit, rooted in the Ahl-e Haqq tradition, based on Ostad Elahi's charismatic authority, and situated in an Islamic eschatological framework that is deserving of serious scholarly attention in the field of Islamic Studies.

With regard to *Knowing the Spirit* Ostad Elahi states the following:

It is obvious that only God truly knows the accuracy and inaccuracy of all this, so (as the proverb has it): 'whatever strange things may reach your ears, at least consider them to be in the realm of what is possible'...The majority of minds will not be able to comprehend many of these subjects, nor will they all be easy for most ears to accept- even to the extent that they can be supported by religious traditions, or can be grasped by arguments and reasonings within the limits of the intellect, or have become clear for certain individuals as a result of their special proximity to God, through the unveiling of the mysteries of the divine realities. That is why, for the spiritual elite, these subjects are considered part of (God's) 'hidden secrets.'⁶³

Knowing the Spirit is indeed a difficult text to approach, not only with regard to the content, but also with regard to its style and voice. There is no obvious point at which Ostad Elahi states, "This is the proper belief." The only time that Ostad Elahi is explicit in pointing out the "falsity" of a particular belief is in chapter eight, where he addresses the beliefs of the *tanāsokhīyūn* (proponents of transmigration); this subject will be

⁶³ Elahi, *Knowing*, 40.

addressed in the following chapter of this study. Throughout the text, the third person voice is used in presenting all of the different beliefs from the perspective of their proponents and thereby requires an extremely careful reading.⁶⁴ Thankfully, there are some clues to Ostad Elahi's key ideas introduced throughout the text. The original text contains underlined emphasis of those points that represent Ostad Elahi's own viewpoints and understanding and the translation presents those phrases in *italic boldface* (as in the quote above).⁶⁵ The italic boldface found in this study is kept as it is found in *Knowing the Spirit*.

In the introduction, the steps required for the goal of knowing the spirit are presented in the following order. First, one needs to “come to know the *Creator* of the spirit.” Next, the spirit needs to be defined and its immortality needs to be established so that the necessity of “its returning [*mu'ād*] (to God) in the realm of the Return [*ma'ād*]” can be established. And finally “the subject of the ‘Gathering’ [*hashr*] and ‘Reawakening’ [*nashr*] (of the spirits) in the physical and the spiritual Returning [*ma'ād*] and the right combination of those two” need to be set forth “to eliminate certain illusions and misunderstandings that are prevalent among both ordinary people [*ām*] and the (learned) elite [*khāss*] in regard to this subject.”⁶⁶

It is important for readers to have a clear sense of the word *ma'refat* (knowing). This term does not refer to a simply intellectual understanding of something. It implies *knowing* on a much deeper level. James Morris defines it as “the technical term

⁶⁴ Morris, *Knowing*, 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁶ Elahi, *Knowing*, 40-41.

traditionally used in Islamic spirituality to specify the necessarily individual, active awareness that is the accomplished fruit of direct, personal spiritual experience and contemplation: that is, the *realized* state of actual spiritual insight and understanding, not the more abstract, conceptual forms of ‘knowledge.’”⁶⁷

The concept of “‘The Return’ (*ma’ād*), which means ‘the place of Returning’” is defined in two ways, in the exoteric sense of the word and in terms of *sayr-e takāmol*. The exoteric understandings are presented in chapters four through five of the text which are titled, “The Purely Bodily Return,” “The Purely Spiritual Return,” and “The Harmonization of a Bodily and Spiritual Return,” respectively. The understanding of *ma’ād* as it pertains to *sayr-e takāmol* and “is that of the actual process of perfection: that is to say, (the spirit’s) passing through various stages in order to reach its final goal, which is the stage of Perfection, the ultimate spiritual station of reunion with God, the Truly Real. This is attested to in the verse: *They said: ‘We are from God, and surely to him we are returning.’* (2:156)”⁶⁸

All human beings are products of a “(creational) arc of descent” and from there embark on the process of “spiritual ascent” to complete the process of spiritual perfection by means of Return to the Source.⁶⁹ Ostad Elahi makes it abundantly clear that “***the course of the process of perfection and its ultimate Goal are the same for every creature***” and “***all of the creatures are on the same equal footing with respect to their nature, their creation, and their direct relationship with the Creator, not at different***

⁶⁷ Morris, *Knowing*, 1.

⁶⁸ Elahi, *Knowing*, 83-84.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

levels.”⁷⁰ This is to illustrate that the starting point on the arc of ascent, which is the endpoint of the arc of descent, is the same for everyone, in other words the arc of (creational) descent must end at the lowest point before the arc of ascent commences. From the initial point of ascent, there is a process of ascension that occurs “from minerals to plants, then to animals and higher states.” Up to this point in the process of perfection, things progress automatically.⁷¹ This is due to the fact that these lower forms cannot be held accountable for their actions, as they are not morally discerning.⁷² Relating to this there are three basic levels of beings: beings “without sensation,” beings with a “spirit without (moral) discernment,” and beings with a “(morally) discerning spirit.” From the point of existence of a morally discerning spirit, there will be accountability for all things. The relation of the spirit to these three levels of being is as follows: “...the human-animal is a composite of mineral, plant, animal, and human-animal material elements- but with the addition of an angelic, subtle, fully human (*insānī*) spirit that according to the saying of Imam Ali, is ‘the angelic, divine soul.’”⁷³

According to Ostad Elahi, one-thousand-and-one spiritual stages have been set forth for the perfection of the spirit. A thousand of those spiritual stages must be completed in human form. It is possible for a spirit to accomplish this in one human form, but if the spirit is unable, it goes to the intermediate realm of the *barzakh*⁷⁴ and after a

⁷⁰ Ibid., 86.

⁷¹ This concept is echoed in the work of the philosopher, Mulla Sadra, and is referred to in the following chapter.

⁷² Ibid., 86.

⁷³ Ibid., 97.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 90: “The *barzakh* is a world situated between this material world and the realm of eternity, a world which is devoid of (this world’s) spatial dimensions and temporality. In other words, the intermediate world is so unlimited with respect to its spatial capacity that, for example, all of the beings in creation, from the

certain period of time returns in another human form to continue the process and movement through the spiritual stages. There is a clear time limit for completing the spiritual stages. That limit is set at fifty thousand years.⁷⁵ On the basis that each human form's lifespan will range an average of fifty years, each spirit will have a minimum of one thousand human forms or opportunities. At the end of each spirit's fifty thousand year allotment, it will experience *Qiyāmat* and be held accountable for its right and wrong doings and receive its eternal rewards and punishments.⁷⁶ "The process of the spirit's leaving its initial human form and subsequently entering other successive human forms has been called, in the technical language of this group [the proponents of *sayr-e takāmol-e ettehādī*], the movement from 'garment to garment' [*jāmeḥ be jāmeḥ*] or 'turn to turn' [*dūn be dūn*] or manifestation to manifestation [*mazhar be mazhar*]."⁷⁷

For the sake of clarity, it should be emphasized that the process of perfection consists of evolutionary, upwards movement and finite successive lives, ending with the *Ma'ād*. There is no downward movement in the *sayr-e takāmol*. Only in very rare cases of punishment, is a spirit sent into the body of an animal with the "power of reflection."⁷⁸ This is technically not considered a part of *sayr-e takāmol* as the clock stops on the allotted time⁷⁹, and the spirit is fully aware of why it is punished in such a manner.⁸⁰ This is a punishment that is inflicted in cases of "degradation in...spiritual rank."⁸¹

first to the last, could be brought together in that realm without ever restricting its capacity and relative extent in any way."

⁷⁵ Morris, *Knowing*, 139: Textual basis for this figure is given as Sūra 70:4 and the prophetic tradition addressing it.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 98-99.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 100.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 100.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 99.

On the topic of awareness, the spirit is not aware of its previous garments for if spirits could remember things from former lives, it “could lead to a breakdown of the social order,” amongst other consequences.⁸² Ostad Elahi emphasizes, however, “***that it is not the material body in itself that causes the veil of forgetfulness keeping us from an awareness of our earlier experiences. Rather, it is the passions of the domineering self that bring that veil of obscurity into existence.***”⁸³ In other words, during *sayr-e takāmol*, aside from certain exceptions, the spirit is unaware of its accumulated deeds and experiences while in a garment. In the realm of the *barzakh*, however, the spirit has full access to everything from the past and sometimes even some pre-destined things from the future.⁸⁴

Again, the centrality of the Return in this process must be emphasized and re-emphasized. The notion of *Ma’ād* and reward and punishment is explained as such, “***...there are two kinds of reward and punishment for every person’s good and bad actions: one of them is the consequences of that action here in this world, and the other is the reward or punishment of that action in the (spiritual) world***⁸⁵...In other words, ***every action will have an immediate (this-worldly) effect and an ultimate (spiritual) result.***”⁸⁶ As mentioned above with regard to *Qiyāmat* arriving at the end of each person’s allotted time, “***the ‘eternal’ punishments that persons may receive in the***

⁸⁰ Ibid.,103-104.

⁸¹ Ibid.,99.

⁸² Ibid.,102.

⁸³ Ibid.,104-105.

⁸⁴ Ibid.,101-102.

⁸⁵ Ibid.,104.

⁸⁶ Ibid.,105.

afterlife are at the time after each person's allotted period of 'Proof' in this world has been completed."⁸⁷

In continuation of the discussion of eternal reward and punishment, Ostad Elahi repeats at multiple points throughout the chapter that the ultimate goal is Union with the Source, that Union is the highest spiritual station. "It is self-evident that once these beings have attained their perfection, then their body will disappear and their spirit- after carrying out certain preparatory procedures and having passed through the process of accounting for all its actions- will be dispatched to its eternal abode, where it will everlastingly experience the ultimate outcome of its good and bad deeds."⁸⁸ All other stations, all levels of heaven and of hell as eternal reward or punishment, are relative in their eternality. There is only one *absolutely* Eternal thing in existence and that is God's Essence.⁸⁹ The following verses of the Qur'an are used by Ostad Elahi to demonstrate this: *There is no god* (no object of worship) *but He: everything is perishing except for His Face* (His Essence)...(28:88) and *Everything upon it* (the earth) *is passing away: there only remains the Face* (the Essence) *of your Lord, the Master of Majesty* (Greatness) *and Beneficence* (Generosity)! (55:26-27)

In a particularly powerful articulation, Ostad Elahi indicates that true satisfaction only comes from Union with the Divine. If a particular spirit falls short of their requirements, they are eternally aware of that shortcoming, fully aware that they are "forever deprived of the grace of the (spiritual) rank of Perfection- that is of its reunion

⁸⁷ Ibid.,105.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 87.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 88.

with God, the Truly Real.” For any reader who has grown up with conceptions of heaven as the ultimate reward, this particular expression of the aims of *sayr-e takāmol* could be particularly jolting. Even while enjoying the rewards of heaven, the spirit suffers in its eternal separation and longing.⁹⁰

Regarding the spiritual senses and experience of reward and punishment in the hereafter, Ostad Elahi writes:

...the quantities and the distinctive qualities of the actual pleasures and pains of the eternal realm of the Return are inconceivable. For each of the levels of the blessings of paradise and the sufferings of hell, of their respective ‘gardens’ and ‘fires,’ are always described through likeness and symbols designed to be understandable to human beings, to help them understand and become aware in general terms of the reality of the existence of the rewards and punishments that exist in that realm. Otherwise, the degree of intensity of the effect of each of those blessings and punishments in that realm are such that they could not even be compared with what can be imagined here. To put it simply, until you’ve actually tasted them, you just can’t know! We can only recognize the specific flavor of each food by actually tasting it, not by putting together a verbal description of it. For example, the word ‘sweet’ covers all sorts of sweet things, such as sugar, honey, dates, raisins, and so on, yet the ability to recognize the distinctive quality of sweetness of each of them comes through tasting, not by talking about them.⁹¹

This quote serves as a perfect end to this chapter as it represents Ostad Elahi’s emphasis on experiential learning and knowledge as a result of experience. Again, this chapter is intended as a summary presentation of Ostad Elahi’s articulation of *sayr-e takāmol*, the heart of *Knowing the Spirit*. It must also be noted that during Ostad Elahi’s explanation of *sayr-e takāmol* in chapter seven of the text, it is unequivocally stated that the notions therein do not, according to any definition, amount to *tanāsokh*.⁹² The following chapter of this study turns its attention to those definitions.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 99.

⁹¹ Ibid., 105.

⁹² Ibid., 98.

Chapter Four: Defining Tanāsokh

In this final chapter, the word *tanāsokh*, generally defined as the transmigration of souls, will be explored in terms of its definition and application by different sources in different contexts. A brief account of Ostad Elahi’s own summation and dismissal of the beliefs of the *tanāsokhīyūn* (proponents of *tanāsokh*), as found in chapter eight of *Ma’refat ol-Ruh (Knowing the Spirit)* will be presented in the following way: Ostad Elahi’s articulation of *sayr-e takāmol* and dismissal of *tanāsokh* will be presented in a dialogue with Ayatollah Ja’far Sobhani’s *Doctrines of Shi’i Islam*. Ayatollah Sobhani [b. 1930 CE], as a “senior member of the Council of Mujtahids in the seminary of Qom [center of Shi’i religious learning]” and as “one of the most prolific religious authorities in Iran today,”⁹³ is used here to illustrate a Twelver Shi’i doctrinal position. The study will then turn to a critique of three particular academic sources that aim to define the specific beliefs of the Ahl-e Haqq with regard to their belief in successive lives. The final source to be examined in this chapter is an entry in the Persian language, Iranian produced, encyclopedia, *Dāyerat ol-Ma’āref-e Bozorg-e Eslāmī (The Great Islamic Encyclopaedia)*, a source that represents the union of both academic and traditional religious scholarship. This source will be examined for its application of *tanāsokh* to the

⁹³ Ayatollah Ja’far Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shi’i Islam: A Compendium of Imami Beliefs and Practices*, trans. and ed. Reza Shah-Kazemi (Qom: Imam Sadeq Institute, 2003) inside back cover.

work Ostad Elahi and Sadr al-Dīn Muhammad al-Shīrāzī (d. 1641 CE), “better known Mulla Sadra, [who] was one of the most profoundly original and influential thinkers in the history of Islamic philosophy.”⁹⁴

In Ostad Elahi’s *Ma’refat ol-Rūh (Knowing the Spirit)*, as in the work of Mulla Sadra we will be discussing below, there is an outright rejection of the notion of *tanāsokh*. In this work by Ostad Elahi, nothing else is given such critical treatment or rejected so emphatically. For example, in the Persian text, only chapter eight, dealing with *tanāsokh* is explicitly labeled a “refutation” (*raddīye*), beneath the chapter title, “‘*Aqīdeyeh Tanāsokhīyūn*” (“The Belief of the Proponents of Transmigration”).⁹⁵ In what follows, Ostad Elahi’s presentation of the beliefs of the *tanāsokhīyūn*⁹⁶ in this chapter will be juxtaposed with Ostad Elahi’s presentation of the doctrine of *sayr-e takāmol*, which he endorses, as well as the official Twelve Imāmī Shi’ī doctrinal position on eschatological transformation as represented in Ayatollah Sobhani’s *Doctrines of Shi’i Islam*. The excerpts from *Doctrines of Shi’i Islam* will be italicized to facilitate easier reading by way of visual distinction.

Ostad Elahi cites many reasons for the falsity of *tanāsokh*, the greatest of which is that it is in conflict with one of the central beliefs of the Islamic faith, the return of every soul to God, a process referred to as the *ma’ād*. “The consensus of the people of the different religious communities has upheld the falsity of this opinion [i.e., *tanāsokh*], especially since an essential principle in the religion of Islam and the other religions is

⁹⁴ James Winston Morris, *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 3.

⁹⁵ Ostad Elahi, *Ma’refat ol-Ruh*, 5th ed (Tehran: Jaihoon, 2005), 137.

⁹⁶ This entire list is found on Elahi, *Knowing*, 107-109.

the belief in the (spirit's) Return (to its divine Source)-whether that Return is conceived of as physical, spiritual, of other."⁹⁷ This notion is echoed at the very beginning of Ayatollah Sobhani's chapter on eschatology, titled "The Hereafter (Ma'ād)."

*All divinely revealed religions are in unison over the principle of faith in the reality of the Hereafter. The Prophets all affirmed, alongside their invitation to accept Tawhīd, the reality of life after death, and the return to God in the Hereafter, these principles being of capital importance in their mission. Indeed, the belief in the Resurrection is one of the pillars of faith of Islam.*⁹⁸

Ma'ād is among the tenets of Islam that all Muslims are expected to believe in. Disbelief in the resurrection and hereafter, according to religious authorities, would generally place one outside of the bounds of the Islamic tradition. Presenting the beliefs of the *tanāsokhīyūn* Ostad Elahi writes:

First, at the moment of death and the decay and disappearance of the body, the spirit of every being that exists in each body in this material world must be transferred to another elemental body, different and separate from that first body, in the same material dimension of this world.

Second, the transfer of that initial spirit to a material body must take place without any delay or interruption.

Third, it is necessary that the connection be instantaneous, without any pause or interval of delay or advance, between the time of death of the body of the first being and the time of establishing the existence of the second being with whose body that initial spirit will then become connected.⁹⁹

Ostad Elahi specifies that, by contrast, in his doctrine of *sayr-e takāmol*, the spirit goes to the intermediate world (*barzakh*)¹⁰⁰ for a certain time before returning in its subsequent garment. It should be noted here, as it was not noted in the previous chapter of this study, that the *barzakh* could serve as something of a remedial class before being sent back to school in the next garment. This is to say that accounts are settled, necessary

⁹⁷ Ostad Elahi, *Knowing the Spirit*, trans. James Winston Morris (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 109.

⁹⁸ Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam*, 120.

⁹⁹ Elahi, *Knowing*, 107.

¹⁰⁰ This subject of the *barzakh* is vast and has been addressed by many theologians and philosophers. It deserves a great deal of attention, particularly in light of Ostad Elahi's doctrine of *sayr-e takāmol*.

adjustments are made, and lessons are learned in the *barzakh*, which is why there is no determined time for the spirit's stay in the intermediate world; that time is dependent upon the specifics of that particular spirit's account. The *barzakh* as the intermediate realm plays an important role in *sayr-e takāmol*; it is not simply a rest stop on the way to the next garment.¹⁰¹

Ayatollah Sobhani describes the *tanāsokhīyūn*:

*Certain groups with different religions, and others outside the pale of all religion, deny the notion of Resurrection such as it is found in heavenly-inspired religions, but have accepted the principle of reward and punishment of actions doing so in connection with the idea of reincarnation (tanāsukh). They claim that the spirit attaches itself to a foetus, through the unfolding of whose life the spirit returns to this earth, going through the stages of childhood, maturity and old age; but, for one who had been virtuous in his previous life, a sweet life results, while for those who were wicked in their previous lives, a wretched life lies in store. It must be understood that if all human souls traverse that path of reincarnation for ever, there can be no place for the principle of Resurrection; while by both intellectual and traditionally transmitted evidence, belief in the Resurrection is an obligation.*¹⁰²

Ostad Elahi writes of the belief in *tanāsokh*:

...the proponents of this belief maintain that there is absolutely no beginning or end to these movements of the spirit, no starting point or limit, no origin or goal, no purpose or aim. They say that every being must continue throughout eternity in this state of constant transferal from one body to another.

...in the opinion of this group, there is no sense in talking about a Return or any rewards and punishment at a (Day of) Rising. They believe that any justice and equity will take place *only in this world*, by means of those ongoing transfers (from one body to another). In other words, if a spirit commits a good or bad action in one body, then it will reap the fruits of that action in one or more subsequent bodies.¹⁰³

There is little to no difference in the descriptions and critiques of the *tanāsokhīyūn*'s beliefs given by Ayatollah Sobhani and Ostad Elahi. The proponents of *sayr-e takāmol*, however, believe in the Origin of all existence, the arc of creational descent from it, and the arc of spiritual ascent to Return back to the Origin. The amount

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 90-92, 100.

¹⁰² Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam*, 127.

¹⁰³ Elahi, *Knowing*, 107-108.

of time allowed for this process is finite: fifty thousand years to cover the one-thousand-and-one spiritual stages. These stages can be completed in one lifetime or in subsequent lives (roughly one thousand ‘garments’ can be ‘worn’ in the fifty thousand year allotment of time). Upon completion of the spiritual stages or time-out on fifty thousand years, each spirit’s good and bad deeds are weighed. Those who have completed their assignment of spiritual stages are granted Union with their Source (the highest spiritual station) and eternal punishment and reward is assigned accordingly, to those who did not complete the assignment. The differences between the beliefs of the *tanāsokhīyūn* and *sayr-e takāmol*, as explained in the previous chapter, are anything but subtle.

...the proponents of transmigration are divided into several schools, including the following groups:

- (a) The school of ‘replacement’: this group maintains that the transferal of a human spirit after the death and decay of the body is (only) to another *human* body. They call this the process of ‘replacement’ (*naskh*).
- (b) The school of ‘metamorphosis’ (into animals): this group claims that the transferal of the human spirit after death is to the body of various animals- including higher animals, insect, and others- in accordance with the moral qualities of the good and bad actions of each spirit when it was in a human body, Thus, for example, (the spirits of) greedy individuals may be transferred to ants or pigs, or those of thieves may become mice, crows, and the like. They call this the process of ‘metamorphoses’ or ‘zöomorphoses’ (*maskh*).
- (c) The school of ‘dissolution’: they are like the preceding group, except that they extend the process of transferal (of human spirits) to the realm of plants, including trees, herbs, and others. This they call the process of ‘dissolution’ (*faskh*).
- (d) The school of ‘implantation:’ this sect shares the opinions of the two preceding groups, with the exception that they extend the transferal of human spirits after death to include as well the whole mineral realm, including rocks, soil, and so on. This is what they call the process of ‘solidification’ (*raskh*)...
- (e) Still another group are called the ‘proponents of ascension’: some people consider them a fifth sect among the transmigrationists, while others would include them among those who would argue for the process of spiritual perfection. In any case, this group, unlike the preceding four groups, maintain that the soul’s transferal- or the process of the spirit’s perfection- takes place in an *ascending* direction, not through any descent (into lower realms of existence). Thus they say: ‘The vegetal soul is gradually transferred from lower to higher levels of existence until it reaches a body among the lowest animal levels. Then it is gradually transferred in the same way from the lower to the nobler levels of animals until it enters the body of a human being. Likewise the human spirit is transferred after death into heavenly bodies.’¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Elahi, *Knowing*, 108-109.

Ostad Elahi’s full list of the proponents of *tanāsokh* has been included to demonstrate the overlap between Ostad Elahi’s categorizations and existing categorizations that are found in in the majority of studies, as demonstrated by recent encyclopedia entries, such as the *Encyclopedia of Islam II (EI II)* and *Dāyerat ol-Ma’āref-e Bozorg-e Eslāmī*, which will be addressed below. The *EI II* article on “Tanāsukh”¹⁰⁵ attributes the widespread use of the categories listed above to the Muslim scientist Abu Rayhān al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048 CE) whose original presentation is found in his work, *Kitāb fī tahqīq mā lil-Hind min maqūla* (“*Book Ascertaining the Doctrines of the Hindus*”), which is the compendium of his research on and travels in India.¹⁰⁶

The category of *maskh* (metamorphosis or zōomorphosis), as defined in the above excerpt, is one that comes up frequently in discussions of *tanāsokh* in Islam. It is addressed by Ayatollah Sobhani and is also seen in Mulla Sadra’s work, *Wisdom of the Throne*, which we will examine below. The subject comes up because of a particular verse in the Qur’an, which seems to refer to human reincarnation in animal form:

Say, ‘Shall I tell you who deserves a worse punishment from God than [the one you wish upon] us? Those God distanced from Himself, was angry with, and condemned as apes and pigs, and those who worship idols: they are worse in rank and have strayed further from the right path.
(Sūrah 5:60)

On this matter, as summarized in the previous chapter, Ostad Elahi explains that the process of perfection consists of evolutionary, upwards movement and finite successive lives, ending with the Return (*ma’ād*). There is no downward movement in the

¹⁰⁵ D. Gimaret, "Tanāsukh," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, (Brill Online, 2015, [Reference](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/tanasukh-SIM_7388), George Mason University) 28 July 2015. <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/tanasukh-SIM_7388>

¹⁰⁶ Michio Yano, "al-Bīrūnī," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*. Ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson, (Brill Online, 2015, [Reference](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/al-biruni-COM_25350), George Mason University) 28 July 2015. <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/al-biruni-COM_25350>

sayr-e takāmol (the journey of perfection). Only in very rare cases of punishment, is a spirit sent into the body of an animal with the “power of reflection.”¹⁰⁷ This is technically not considered a part of *sayr-e takāmol* as the clock stops on the allotted time¹⁰⁸, and the spirit is fully aware of why it is punished in such a manner.¹⁰⁹ On this same subject,

Ayatollah Sobhani writes:

*...the soul of a person who was a sinner does not descend from the state of humanity to that of animality. For, were such the case, the person so transformed would not be able to grasp their suffering and punishment as such, whereas the whole point of this kind of transformation, as the Qur'an says, is that it be an exemplary punishment for sinners.*¹¹⁰

Further down, ‘Allāma Tabātabā’ī [d. 1981] is quoted explaining the apparent reference in the Qur’anic verse above regarding the transformation of human beings into the form of apes or pigs as punishment:

‘People who have been transformed are those who, while retaining their human spirit, are transformed as regards their form; transformation does not mean that the human soul is transformed also, becoming the soul of [for example] a monkey.’

Again, elements of these two Shi`ite clerical perspectives seem in line with Ostad Elahi’s explanation of those particular cases of punishment. For example, all three refer to the critical point that the spirit who is condemned to such punishment needs to be aware of why it is being punished. This and the other correlations between the two texts, *Knowing the Spirit* and *Doctrines of Shi’i Islam*, should not come as a surprise. This, however, does not mean that there are no differences in perspective and these differences are to be expected as Ostad Elahi has presented a number of different views in his text.

¹⁰⁷ Ostad Elahi, *Knowing*, 100.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

¹¹⁰ Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shi’i Islam*, 128-129.

On the matter of resurrection and the details pertaining thereto, for example, regarding what is resurrected, when, etc., Ayatollah Sobhani writes:

Some writers have presumed that the idea of the ‘return’ (*raj’a*) has been derived from that of reincarnation. Does belief in the ‘return’ require belief in reincarnation? As we shall be seeing below, the doctrine of the ‘return’, according to most of the Shi’i scholars, consists in this: A number of believers and disbelievers will return to this world in the Last Days; and their manner of ‘returning’ is akin to the way in which the dead were brought to life by Jesus; or like the reviving of Uzayr after 100 years. Thus, belief in the ‘return’ has nothing to do with reincarnation.¹¹¹

This is a good point to highlight the critical difference that exists between Ostad Elahi’s *sayr-e takāmol* and the standard doctrinal belief and emphasis on the bodily resurrection in the Islamic tradition. Ostad Elahi addresses this difference in his chapter on The Purely Bodily Return, writing:

This is the belief held by most of the theologians, jurists, and official leaders of the religions of the ‘people of the (revealed) Book,’ including the books of the Torah, Gospels, Qur’an, and others. Moreover, the majority of Muslims, in addition to the literal text of the verses of the Qur’an, have also taken into consideration the transmitted reports of the hadith (of the Prophet) and the traditions of the holy Imams.

The proponents of this view say that since the Return of the bodies (of the dead at the Last Day) is something that the religious experts among the people of the Book have accepted and come to agree upon by consensus, as is required by the literal texts of (God’s) Word on the divine Scriptures and the widely transmitted reports (of the teachings of the Prophet and Imams), they consider the belief on the bodily Return to be one of the essential elements of religion; so they consider whoever denies that to be an opponent (of the true religion). In particular, (this group maintains that) the verses of the Qur’an concerning the Return are so unambiguously clear that they don’t allow any room for interpretation. Since that is the case, the reasoning of an (opposing) group of philosophers- based on things like ‘the impossibility of bringing back what was annihilated,’ the objection concerning, ‘the beast of prey and the person who is eaten,’ and the claim that the impossibility of this (material bodily Return) is ‘self evident,’ and the like- are all groundless and absolutely without foundation.¹¹²

Ayatollah Sobhani addresses the necessity of the bodily resurrection in Article 105 of the *Doctrines of Shi’i Islam*.¹¹³ It is important, at this point, given this major point of distinction, to clarify that the centrality of *ma’ād* in Ostad Elahi’s *sayr-e takāmol* does

¹¹¹ Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shi’i Islam*, 129.

¹¹² Ostad Elahi, *Knowing*, 69.

¹¹³ Sobhani, *Doctrines of Shi’i Islam*, 122-124.

not reconcile it with the normative doctrinal position on the resurrection in the Shi'i tradition. Ostad Elahi, as demonstrated in the quote above, was well aware of this and made no such effort to reconcile it with the traditional Islamic doctrinal position. The key point for the purpose of this study and for the argument that Ostad Elahi's *sayr-e takāmol* should be seriously engaged in the field of Islamic Studies is its very unique contribution as a conception of finite successive human lives, with the purpose of perfection of the spirit, within the framework of the doctrine of *ma'ād*. This study does not assert, nor does the text of *Ma' refat ol-Rūh* assert, that the centrality of the doctrine of *ma'ād* in *sayr-e takāmol* makes it fully consistent with all aspects of traditional Islamic eschatological doctrine—particularly the latter's emphasis on the unique connection between the soul and a single body, and its material resurrection in this same body. It must be noted that the traditional Islamic notion of a purely bodily resurrection, that is the resurrection of the material body, implies that it is only ever resurrected in its one body. This also places the notion of successive human lives irreconcilably outside of the Twelver Shi'i doctrinal formulation, as well as that of all other Islamic doctrinal perspectives which uphold the validity of the material resurrection of the body. .

Not only is there no an attempt to reconcile *sayr-e takāmol* with the traditional Shi'i doctrinal position, Ostad Elahi points to the futility of engaging in debates on these matters in his comments on the prolonged debates between theologians and philosophers and the complexity of the topic of the Return:

Each one of the arguments brought forth by those who support the impossibility of bringing back what is non-existent [position of some Muslim philosophers] and those who would allow that [majority of Muslim theologians] merits further discussion and consideration in itself, since this topic (of the Return) is so difficult and profound that it cannot be so easily resolved. The only thing that could really bring about decisive certainty and remove any doubts, confusions, and

uncertainty would be the immediately self-evident presence and actual reality of the Gathering, Reawakening, and Returning of all the creatures in the realm of the Return- in such a way that that reality would become subject to the unequivocal support of all the religious groups of the people of the Book.

As Ostad Elahi indicates in the quote above, there is no point in arguing for or against any of the different positions that exist regarding *ma'ād*. This accounts for the style and presentation of *Knowing the Spirit*, on which James Morris writes:

In this respect, it is particularly important to stress that *all* the formally eschatological sections of Ostad Elahi's book (chapters 3-8), regarding the 'Return' and the destiny and perfection of the human spirit, are equally phrased in the form of an ostensibly third-person, external account of the proponents of various radically different understandings of this metaphysical process. This is not just a traditional literary form or a transparent device for masking the author's own opinions. On the contrary, it is- to adapt his own central image from chapter 5- a very carefully constructed mirror to 'capture the conscience' of each individual reader, to oblige each of us to reflect far more deeply and conscientiously about the actual grounds and deeper implications of our own spiritual understandings, beliefs, and experiences concerning this immensely important subject.¹¹⁴

In his introduction, Ostad Elahi expresses the "intention (to set forth) the subject of the 'Gathering' [*hashr*] and 'Reawakening' (of the spirits) in the physical and the spiritual Returning and the right combination of those two, in order to eliminate certain illusions and misunderstandings that are prevalent among both ordinary people [*'ām*] and the (learned) elite [*khāss*] in regard to this subject."¹¹⁵ Despite this intention to clear up existing misconceptions, there is no condemnation or dismissal of the positions of "The Purely Bodily Return," "The Purely Spiritual Return," and "The Harmonization of a Bodily and Spiritual Return," as presented in *Knowing the Spirit* chapters four, five, and six, respectively. For the purpose of this study, the important point is not the differences themselves, but rather how Ostad Elahi approaches these differences within the text. An understanding of *ma'ād* as a purely bodily resurrection, for example, as incorrect of an

¹¹⁴ Morris, *Knowing*, 15.

¹¹⁵ Ostad Elahi, *Knowing*, 41.

understanding as it would be in relation to *sayr-e takāmol*, falls within the boundaries of normative Islam and therefore does not receive condemnation. This tolerance applies, likewise, to all of the other perspectives that are presented. This changes, however, when it comes to the people who uphold any one of the transmigrational ideas listed above.

There is no sense of a sudden shift to abhorrence in tone, but the point that *sayr-e takāmol* is distinct from and unrelated to *tanāsokh*, is irrefutably addressed. Because of the implications of the word *tanāsokh* and the insistence on continued use of that and related words, its falsity must be demonstrated in order to make a clear distinction between *sayr-e takāmol* and *tanāsokh*. Furthermore, the need for correction is one that, according to Ostad Elahi in the other textual sources, is necessary amongst the Ahl-e Haqq themselves. This was alluded to in Chapter Two of this study and is repeated here as seen in *goftār* (saying) 890 from *Āsār ol-Haqq* in which Ostad Elahi says that the key to the path of perfection is *dūnādūn* (turn to turn). Aflātūn (Plato) attempted to reveal the secrets of this key but due to his errors, it was turned into *tanāsokh*. Later in the ‘way of truth’ (*maslak-e haqīqat*), Sultan Ishāq (Sahāk) enlightened the people on the matter of *dūnādūn* and after him, this jewel fell into the hands of a group of ignorant [people]...¹¹⁶ While it is not explicit in Ostad Elahi’s recorded saying, the “*jāhell* and *nādūn*” (both words can be translated as ignorant) are taken to be certain members of the Ahl-e Haqq. It is difficult to contextualize the saying, because it is presented without context, as the

¹¹⁶ Ostad Elahi, *Āsār ol-Haqq*, 2nd ed (Tehran: Jeihoon, 1994), 264.

sayings in Volume II of *Āsār ol-Haqq* are arranged chronologically, as opposed to the thematic arrangement of Volume I.

The study now turns to an examination of three contemporary sources that attempt to address the Ahl-e Haqq eschatological beliefs. The reader is reminded, once again, that this study does not claim to know how the other Ahl-e Haqq *khāndāns* view themselves or how they explain their eschatological beliefs or lack thereof. It has been maintained, throughout the course of this work, that the focus is solely on the Ahl-e Haqq beliefs and traditions as articulated by Ostad Elahi in relation to the eschatological conception of *sayr-e takāmol*. This is not a study on the Ahl-e Haqq. Therefore, unless otherwise specified, anytime Ahl-e Haqq beliefs or certain key terms are addressed, the reader should be well aware of who and what is being presented here. The expectation of clarity and specificity is one that is extended to all scholarship, across disciplines. This expectation is compounded when the subject matter is debated in any way. Therefore the critiques below, particularly of Khaksar and Mir-Hosseini, are not because they present a different formulation or articulation of the Ahl-e Haqq beliefs, but because they do not address the fact that there are different perspectives on the matter or, if they are referring to a very specific group, who that is and how they, as researchers, came by the information. As works by anthropologists who rely primarily on their field materials as resources, Mansur Khaksar's article, "Reincarnation as Perceived by the 'People of the Truth [*Ahl-e Haqq*],'" (2009) and Ziba Mir-Hosseini's "Inner Truth and Outer History: The Two Worlds of the Ahl-i Haqq of Kurdistan" (1994) will be examined side by side. This will be followed by an examination of Ahl-e Haqq eschatology as found in M. Reza

Hamzeh'ee's book, *The Yaresan: A Sociological, Historical and Religio-Historical Study of a Kurdish Community* (1990) which is distinct from the anthropological studies of Khaksar and Mir-Hosseini, as it based on textual sources.

The abstract of the article titled, "Reincarnation as Perceived by the 'People of the Truth,'" by Mansur Khaksar reads:

Being primarily typical of Hinduism, the belief in the reincarnation of souls has penetrated-through probably various 'heresies'- into the Muslim heterodox milieu and became an organic element of many local doctrines, particularly those of extreme Shi'ites.

This paper focuses on the modern perception of the idea of *tanāsux* [*tanāsokh*] among the Ahl-i Haqq, the 'People of the Truth'. It is mainly based upon the field materials collected from the Ahl-i Haqq in the Iranian provinces of Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and Eastern Azarbaijan.¹¹⁷

It is not necessary to recount here, all that has been problematized in Chapter One of this study with regard to the use of particular classifications and approaches; suffice it to say that they are all present in this abstract. Khaksar's reliance on field notes and anthropological methods, does not excuse him of the generalizations made in his article and the lack of clarification between the different perspectives that may appear among the Ahl-e Haqq. Such a clarification would require no more than a sentence or two of explanation, but the author neglects to do this. The greater concern is that it is unclear when and to what extent Khaksar is relying on field notes that are his own, as opposed to those of Dr. Victoria Arakelova (perhaps an academic advisor whom he thanks for sharing her notes).

In her article, "Inner Truth and Outer History: The Two Worlds of the Ahl-i Haqq of Kurdistan," Ziba Mir-Hosseini writes:

¹¹⁷ Mansur Khaksar, "Reincarnation as Perceived by the 'People of the Truth,'" *Iran and the Caucasus* 13, (2009): 117.

The Ahl-i Haqq neither observe Muslim rites, such as daily prayers and fasting during the month of Ramadan, nor share Islamic theology and sacred space, such as a belief in the day of resurrection and sanctity of the mosque.¹¹⁸

Such a blanket generalization flies in the face of Ostad Elahi's explicit position in his work on the importance of abiding by Muslim religious law, as seen in Chapter Three of this study. Although we have already demonstrated Ostad Elahi's emphasis on the Islamic doctrine of the the Return (*ma'ād*) and its central importance to his doctrine of *sayr-e takāmöl*, Mir-Hosseini asserts that the Ahl-e Haqq, as a whole, do not believe in the day of resurrection. On their belief in successive lives, she writes:

The same [that the Guran and Sahneh versions have much in common at the level of inner truth] is even more true of the other cardinal Ahl-i Haqq dogma: the transmigration of soul (*dūnādūnī*). According to this, human life is nothing but a series of journeys during which the soul migrates from one world to the other. In each of these journeys, the soul takes on a different body, likened to putting on a new garment (*dūn*). Death is only interval in the world of *bātin* during which one is confronted with the sum total of one's deeds in the world of *zāhir*. Suffering and good fortune can only be understood in relation to one's deeds and thoughts in the course of one's previous incarnations. The whole purpose of all these comings and goings, whose number and duration are already fixed at 1,000 incarnations on the course of 50,000 years, is for the soul to gain perfection. Those who complete the journey become perfect souls, part of the *bātin*, and if they come back to the world of *zāhir*, it is always for a purpose, a mission.¹¹⁹

The biggest issue with Mir-Hosseini's presentation of this "cardinal Ahl-i Haqq dogma" is that, in addition to not accounting for Ostad Elahi's articulation [specifically the absence of terms which she would refer to as Islamic reforms] she goes a step further by expressing that , "According to this [*dūnādūnī*], human life is nothing but a series of journeys during which the soul migrates from one world to the other." This is not to say that she is being intentionally flippant, but this tone does not reflect the care that is expected, at least in the field of Religious Studies, when approaching a doctrinal belief.

¹¹⁸ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Inner Truth and Outer History: The Two Worlds of the Ahl-i Haqq of Kurdistan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 2 (1994): 267-268 .

¹¹⁹ Mir-Hosseini, "Inner Truth and Outer History," 281.

Problematically, Mir-Hosseini offers no citation indicating the source of this information. Mir-Hosseini, in this work and her handful of others on the Ahl-e Haqq, presents herself as being engaged in an attempt to address the nuance and variances amongst the different Ahl-e Haqq groups, but when it comes to the matter of explaining the Ahl-e Haqq belief in successive lives, this desire for nuance and distinction seems to fall by the wayside.

Perhaps it is a disciplinary difference that allows for such casual accounts of critical belief systems. Khaksar, according to the very title of his article, “Reincarnation as Perceived by the ‘People of the Truth,’” is responsible for a much more thorough account. Mir-Hosseini, by virtue of referring to Ostad Elahi as she does in her work,¹²⁰ has an obligation to address distinction between Ostad Elahi’s doctrine of *sayr-e takāmol* and what she refers to as the standard belief.

As indicated above, Khaksar’s article is problematic from the start; aside from the problematic title and abstract, the actual text is jumbled and due to the lack of citations for certain claims, not useful for academic purposes. The same criticism applies to Mir-Hosseini’s article; the complete lack of any sort of citation for very specific information that is presented in the selection above, draws the entire article under question and makes it useless in terms of a resource for others. In both of these cases, what is presented is not suitable for academic purposes as they do not specify to whom exactly these beliefs pertain or do not pertain (that would be valuable on its own); additionally, there are no citations to make use of for further research. The reader cannot verify or utilize this

¹²⁰ Mir-Hosseini, "Inner Truth and Outer History," 270.

information in any meaningful way aside from critique of the methods and conclusions, as done in this study. Given the nature of these texts, they cannot be considered a sufficient or fully reliable resource for Ahl-e Haqq conceptions of successive lives.

In a departure from Mir-Hosseini and Khaksar's reliance on field notes, M. Reza Hamzeh'ee's book (which predates the previous two sources), *The Yaresan: A Sociological, Historical and Religio-Historical Study of a Kurdish Community*, is referred to by Jean During, in his "Critical Survey on Ahl-e Haqq Studies in Europe and Iran," as "a well documented study on the Ahl-e Haqq which lays great emphasis on its relations to ancient cults and religions. Although this scholar is an Iranian of Ahl-e Haqq origin, he relies on written rather than oral sources."¹²¹ Hamzeh'ee's chapter on eschatology is titled "Doctrine of Metempsychosis," and it first addresses "Metempsychosis among the Yaresan [another name for the Ahl-e Haqq]." Hamzeh'ee writes:

Metempsychosis is one of the most important parts of the Yaresan religious tenets. The Yaresan doctrine of metempsychosis is based on cyclical regeneration with a limited number of re-births...In the course of metempsychosis each person is supposed to go through 1,001 reincarnations. This is however only a minimum number of re-incarnations for the pious soul. The re-incarnations will take place within a period of 50, 000 years, within which there will be about 1,000 re-birth and with the last incarnation will be 1,001. The last incarnation will be on the Day of Resurrection. This is the day of Judgment when the pious will be separated from the sinful.¹²²

Difficulty with collapsing terms, concepts, and numbers seems to be an issue here. "1,0001 reincarnations" used to refer to the one-thousand-and-one spiritual stages, according to the findings of this study as seen in all primary sources examined, is inaccurate and leads to further inaccurate statements. The problem here is not the use of

¹²¹ Jean During, "A Critical Study on Ahl-e Haqq Studies in Europe and Iran," in *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives*, ed. Tord Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga and Catharina Raudvere (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), 110.

¹²² M. Reza Hamzeh'ee, *The Yaresan: A Sociological, Historical and Religio-Historical Study of a Kurdish Community* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1990) 128.

the word reincarnation as much as the misunderstanding about the thousand-and-one stages. The number one-thousand-and-one does not refer to different lives, but rather stages that can be completed in one earthly life. The language in this explanation is so confused, that it is best to just refer to the preceding chapter or to the summary above for a corrective reading. Hamzeh'ee cites *Haqq ol-Haqāyeq*, the publication of Hajj Ne'mat's *Haqq ol-Haqāyeq* with Ostad Elahi's commentary (originally published in 1967), for this information and although this study did not have access to the particular edition that Hamzeh'ee uses, the above formulations were not found in the edition that was accessed. Hamzeh'ee also cites *Āsār ol-Haqq* [see above] but, because of a difference in edition, the information could not be properly addressed. As methodological aside relating to the issue of different editions of *Āsār ol-Haqq*, it would be very helpful for researchers to use the *gofīār* number, in addition to the page number; this would allow access to the citation, regardless of the edition in possession of other researchers. The real question though, for a text that is described as "well documented," is why Hamzeh'ee did not use *Ma'refat ol-Rūh* for his chapter on eschatology? All of Ostad Elahi's other texts were listed in his bibliography except *Ma'refat*, despite its central importance for understanding Ostad Elahi's views on this topic.

Ostad Elahi's definition and dismissal of *tanāsokh* in *Ma'refat ol-Rūh*, coupled with the full explication of *sayr-e takāmol* also contained therein, should by itself lead to the cessation of application of the term *tanāsokh* to the whole body of the Ahl-e Haqq. Unless the term is specifically used by particular subjects of a study and specified as such, it should not be utilized in reference to their general eschatological system of belief.

For example, if a particular Ahl-e Haqq *seyyed* from a given *khāndān* is interviewed for ethnographic research and uses the word *tanāsokh* to describe his belief system, that would be a very appropriate time to use the term, provided that the source of the word is accounted for in the subsequent study. The issue is not that these words, particularly the English ones, do not apply to the notion of successive lives. The problem is that all of these words have very specific and immediate associations to Hindu or Buddhist expressions of reincarnation and therefore do not account for the complexity of an articulation of *sayr-e takāmol* like Ostad Elahi's. The term *tanāsokh* in the realm of Islam and Islamic Studies, in addition to the associations above, is associated with all kinds of so-called heresies; it carries so much negative association that it might as well be a curse word. All three scholars, by virtue of using the terms *tanāsokh*, transmigration, metempsychosis, and certainly reincarnation, encourage the exclusion of *Ma'refat ol-Rūh* and related works from serious consideration within the field of Islamic Studies.

Finally, we examine *Dāyerat ol-Ma'āref-e Bozorg-e Eslāmī (The Great Islamic Encyclopaedia)*, an encyclopedia of Islam written in Persian by Iranian scholars under the direction of Seyyed Mohammad-Kazem Mousavi-Bojnourdi. In their article on "*Tanāsokh*," Abbas Zahabi and Tahereh Tavakkoli seem to have gone to great lengths to produce an impressively thorough definition and account of *tanāsokh*. Abbas Zahabi is the author for the large portion of the article that is dedicated to the idea manifested in the "Muslim World," whereas Tavakkoli authors the section on the concept in pre-Islamic contexts.

In defining *tanāsokh*, Zahabi writes, “*Tanāsokh* is the transfer of the soul from one body to another because of the connection that exists between the body and the soul.”¹²³ This is a far-reaching definition, as it does not specify what kind of body, under what circumstances, etc.; in other words, the article starts off with a very broad and vague definition. He continues, “Within the different intellectual domains in the world of Islam, the subject of *tanāsokh* has been a topic of discussion- both in descriptions of the beliefs of other religions, as well as in disputes with individuals or groups of Muslims who had inclinations toward such beliefs.” This, and the fact that these groups are surveyed, is useful in illustrating the extent to which related ideas showed up in the Muslim intellectual and spiritual realm. The article goes on to trace the appearance of *tanāsokh* through Islamic history, connecting this idea, as is commonly done in scholarly work on the topic, with the derogatory concepts of “extremists” and “exaggeration” (*ghulat and ghuluw*)—a connection we have documented and problematized in Chapter 2. The article is tightly packed with information and without broader knowledge of the concept, the reader would likely be very impressed with its vast scope.

On the Ahl-e Haqq, the author writes, “The Ahl-e Haqq, and amongst their followers the Elāhīyūn, believe in a type of *tanāsokh* which they themselves call the turn to turn movements of spirits (*gardesh-e dūn be dūn-e arvāh*) or *dūnādūn*, and they relate that to the viewpoint of *sayr-e takāmol* and the transformation of a variety of beings into a variety of others [beings].”¹²⁴ In contrast to the critique of the scholars above, there is

¹²³ Abbas Zahabi, *Dāyerat ol-Ma’āref-e Bozorg-e Eslāmī*, vol 16, “Tanāsokh,” (Tehran: Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia, 1387), 180.

¹²⁴ Zahabi, *Dāyerat ol-Ma’āref*, 181.

certainly specificity here. A name has even been given to the Ahl-e Haqq who follow Ostad Elahi, “Elāhīyūn.” Zahabi’s summation of *sayr-e takāmol* does not suitably reflect that which is articulated by Ostad Elahi.

As for his sources, Zahabi cites *Āsār ol-Haqq* and *Spirituality is a Science*, by Dr. Bahram Elahi. Once again, it is interesting that in an article dealing specifically with a matter that is addressed in *Ma’refat ol-Rūh*, *Ma’refat* is not listed as a reference. Regardless, it is curious how Zahabi could have come away from either of the cited texts with the above formulation. Both texts are extremely clear in their presentation of what *sayr-e takāmol* is and is not, in complete accordance with the articulation in *Ma’refat ol-Rūh*. With the understanding that Zahabi is writing an article that surveys a great amount of information and therefore requires brevity, his summation of *sayr-e takāmol* leaves much to be desired. At the very least, a brief definition of *sayr-e takāmol* and the doctrine of *ma’ād* should be presented. There seems to be no sense in referring to *sayr-e takāmol* without any real indication of what it is. Zahabi’s description is extremely vague and because it is in an academic encyclopedia entry on the topic, should be more specific because it serves as a window for students and researchers. Encyclopedia articles, like survey texts, have a great responsibility to maximize accuracy in the most succinct way possible. This account is succinct, without properly representing Ostad Elahi’s articulation.

In his section dedicated to the “Viewpoint of the Philosophers,” Zahabi turns his attention to the highly influential 17th century Persian philosopher, Mulla Sadra who

formulated a number of highly original eschatological theories.¹²⁵ Zahabi goes through all of the places where one might presume Mulla Sadra to be a transmigratationist (according of course to Zahabi's very broad definition) on the basis of these eschatological theories, and demonstrates how Mulla Sadra refuted or condemned the *tanāsokhī* position thereby dissociating his eschatological views from transmigratationist ones. On the topic of transubstantial motion (*harakat al-jawhariyya*), Mulla Sadra's theory about the continual transformation of all beings in their essence, Zahabi teeters on the point that this could leave an opening for *tanāsokh* but clears it up himself by saying it would be an incorrect interpretation. This instinct to protect Mulla Sadra from the *tanāsokhīyūn* is a matter that will be addressed further below, when examining Mulla Sadra's conception of physical and psychic bodies. In his discussion of Mulla Sadra, Zahabi cites *The Four Journeys (al-Asfār al-Arba'a)*, Mulla Sadra's magnum opus, and his *Book on the Origin and the Return (Kitāb al-Mabda' wa 'l-ma'ād)*, neither of which have been translated in full from the original Arabic. Mulla Sadra's eschatological are, however, neatly summed up in another work, *al-Hikma al-'arshiyah*, translated as *Wisdom of the Throne* by James Morris.

Even a cursory look at Mulla Sadra's *Wisdom of the Throne*, demonstrates the numerous places where he writes rather controversial things. In his section on the "Principle (concerning the levels of the soul)," Mulla Sadra writes:

The human soul has many levels and stations, from the beginning of its generation to the end of its goal; and it has certain essential states and modes of being. At first, in its state of connection (with the body) it is a corporeal substance. Then it gradually becomes more and more intensified and

¹²⁵ Zahabi, *Dāyerat ol-Ma'āref*, 186.

develops through the different stages of its natural constitution until it subsists by itself and moves from this world to the other world, and so *Returns to its Lord* (89:27).¹²⁶

Further down, in the section on the “Principle (concerning the soul’s relation to the body) Mulla Sadra writes:

Unless it should become transformed in its being and intensified in its substantialization to such a degree that it becomes independent in its own essence and able to dispense with its connection to the physical body.¹²⁷

Mulla Sadra refers to the connection between the soul and the body a number of times in the text. A few times, as seen above, there is explicit reference to the fact that the soul comes into being connected to the body, but eventually comes into its own and detaches, allowing the soul to move freely to the imaginal realm (*barzakh*). This notion, by itself, allows for the movement of the soul in ways that traditional scholars would take issue with. Mulla Sadra goes on to clearly articulate the distinction between the soul and the body in order to illustrate the point that the “psychic” body, not the physical body, is the object of resurrection. The existence of concepts like the psychic body in Mulla Sadra’s work, as well as some of the other points below, indicate the need for further research in relation to the notion of *sayr-e takāmol*. The fact the scholars of Islam have been so eager to protect Mulla Sadra from falling prey to accusations of heresy also results in a need for re-visiting his work on new terms.

In *Ma’refat ol-Rūh* Ostad Elahi outright rejects *tanāsokh*. In fact, despite the fact that there is a full articulation of *sayr-e takāmol* that clearly indicates that the belief is not tantamount to *tanāsokh*, there is still this persistent misunderstanding and mischaracterization of Ahl-e Haqq eschatological beliefs that authors resist when

¹²⁶ Morris, *Wisdom*, 131.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

examining the eschatological beliefs of other leading thinkers, like Mulla Sadra, despite their similar susceptibility to such misinterpretation. In Mulla Sadra's work *al-Hikma al-'arshiyya* (*The Wisdom of the Throne*) as translated by James Morris, similar rejections are found, a few examples of which are given here. These examples are in no way intended to imply that this text has been studied at any great length. They are used in this study simply to illustrate a point, and hopefully plant a seed for future research.

In a section regarding the “*Principle, concerning the fundamental premises removing the veil from the manner of resurrection of the bodies,*”¹²⁸ beneath the subsection of the “Third Fundamental Premise (that the being remains one throughout the stages of its transformation, and that higher levels of being subsume the lower),”¹²⁹ Mulla Sadra writes:

In general, the more powerful and the more intense the being becomes, the more perfect it is in essence, the more completely comprehensive of all notions and quiddities, and the more (capable) in its activities and effects. Do you not see how the soul of the animal, because it is more powerful in being than the vegetal souls or the elemental forms (of mineral compounds), is able to perform the activities of plants, minerals, and the elements, and additional activities as well? Or that the soul of man performs all the activities of the animal soul, and moreover has reason? And the Intellect makes the Whole (or ‘all things’) by origination, while the Creator pours forth on the Whole what He wills.¹³⁰

There is something present here and in so many other places in the text that is deserving of further examination vis-à-vis *sayr-e takāmol*. Lest his original audience get the wrong idea, Mulla Sadra refers, in a few places, to the implausibility of *tanāsokh* and to the fact that the particular subject at hand is not *tanāsokh*. The following excerpt relates to the “*Principle (concerning the pre-existence of soul)*” on which Mulla Sadra writes:

¹²⁸ Morris, *Wisdom*, 153.

¹²⁹ Morris, *Wisdom*, 155.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

The ‘Adamic’ soul has a form of existence preceding the body, without this entailing the transmigration of the souls, and without necessitating the pre-eternity of the (individual) soul, which is the well known view of Plato. This (mode of pre-existence) does not require a multiplicity of individuals of a single species or their differentiation without reference to any matter or (material) preparedness; nor does it entail the soul’s being divided after having been one, in the manner of continuous quantities; nor does it presume the soul’s inactivity before (being connected with) bodies. Rather, (soul’s pre-existence) is as we have indicated and explained in our commentary on *Hikmat al-Ishraq* (Suhrawardi’s ‘Philosophy of Illumination’) in a way that cannot be surpassed, (so that here we shall offer only scriptural allusions).¹³¹

In another place Mulla Sadra writes, “One cannot say that such souls return in the bodies of animals, because of the impossibility of reincarnation.”¹³² The contents of *The Wisdom of the Throne* should be poured over and re-examined in light of Ostad Elahi’s articulation of *sayr-e takāmol*, and the same should be done with Mulla Sadra’s other works that deal with eschatology, referred to by Zahabi above. On *The Wisdom of the Throne*, it must be noted that James Morris, in truly exceptional form, takes such great care in clarification when it comes to definitions of *tanāsokh*. This serves as an example of the way in which a few appropriate lines can do so much to add depth and perspective to a particular subject. In a footnote to the excerpt above pertaining to the pre-existence of the soul, Morris writes:

The doctrine of metempsychosis (tanasukh) or the transmigration of souls, in its most literal interpretation as successive reincarnations in the bodies of animals and lower forms of life, was rejected by almost all Islamic schools of thought. In more refined forms, however—particularly with regard to phenomena on the plane of human souls and experiences—the theory had a continuing fascination for all groups, whether Sufis or more Platonic philosophers, concerned with the transtemporal dimensions of the soul and the ultimate unity of the Intellect: the conceptualization of those problems raises the philosophic dilemmas outlined in this opening paragraph.¹³³

The very fact that there are repeated rejections of and reference to *tanāsokh* by Mulla Sadra, indicate that he may have faced accusations of holding such beliefs. This

¹³¹ Ibid., 140.

¹³² Ibid., 151.

¹³³ Morris, *Wisdom*, 140.

should create a desire in the contemporary reader or researcher to search for those elements of his writings or teachings, which also depart from some of the more traditional Islamic understandings of eschatology. This is not to say that Mullla Sadra protests too much and must have actually been a proponent of transmigration, hiding behind his condemnation of it. This is simply to say that Mulla Sadra could very well, just like Ostad Elahi, be condemning a particular understanding that falls under the category of *tanāsokh*, while maintaining beliefs, like those articulated by Ostad Elahi, that fall outside of that category, but was not in a position to go beyond the condemnation. The argument is not that if scholars go back they will find explicit references to *sayr-e takāmol* in the works of Mulla Sadra; rather, the argument is that they will find there is room for new readings and new conclusions- at the very least, new questions- regarding the works of this great figure of Islamic philosophy. Among the subjects to examine alongside Ostad Elahi's work would be Mulla Sadra's conceptions of the *barzakh*, of imaginal or psychic bodies and forms, his conception of transubstantial motion (*harakat al-jawhariyya*), and many other things that resonate in some ways with Elahi's concept of *sayr-e takamol*.

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate the ways in which inappropriate applications of the word *tanāsokh*, like the use of the category of *ghulāt*, has great implications and consequences in the field of Islamic Studies. Very particular definitions of *tanāsokh* and very specific arguments against it are used in Ostad Elahi's text as well as in Ayatollah Sobhani's text. Their specificity does not lend itself to haphazard applications of the word *tanāsokh* and, by extension, of the use of the words

transmigration, metempsychosis, and reincarnation. These are words come with a history, and have many unacceptable associations within an Islamic doctrinal context. The implications of using the word *tanāsokh* and the beliefs associated with it are many, but most straightforwardly, they indicate a belief that lies beyond the pale of Islam. Allowing such associations and connotations to be issued through the use of these terms is crippling for academic study in two ways. The first, as mentioned above, is that the indiscriminate application of the word *tanāsokh* to anything remotely resembling it, leads to the exclusion of works that may actually belong in Islamic Studies proper. Second, as demonstrated in Zahabi’s approach to Mulla Sadra, use of the word *tanāsokh* can lead to unnecessary academic acrobatics in order to protect the acceptability of important works of Islamic thought—acrobatics that yield poor and inconsistent results. By engaging in elaborate maneuvers interpretations and apologetics to avoid the label of *tanāsokh*, dedicated researchers can miss critically important features of the work they are examining. The entry of *sayr-e takāmol*, as articulated in Ostad Elahi’s *Ma’refat ol-Rūh*, into the fold of the academic study of Islam can greatly facilitate the creation of new categories and distinctions when it comes to this subject, that do not depend on terms that have accumulated baggage beyond return. The use of these new categories and distinctions in re-examinations of the work of Mulla Sadra, and by extension into the past even Ibn ‘Arabi, the field of Islamic Studies could potentially open up to an entirely new world with regard to eschatology in Islam.

Conclusion

When engaging a text like *Knowing the Spirit* or *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam*, the reader should bear in mind that as two spiritually and religiously authoritative texts, the condemnations and prescriptions that are found therein are perfectly acceptable according to the guidelines set forth in this study. In the field of Religious Studies, however, scholars should take care not to put forth such judgments. Religious Studies scholars have a unique responsibility in that they are constantly engaging texts and materials that are sacred to others, perhaps even to themselves. It is not possible to remove oneself completely from one's research. If through stylistic or even logical methods, one is able to step out of the work itself, the very decision to write about something, the perspective from which one writes, is an assertion of one's self and beliefs. It is therefore of critical importance that the voices coming out of devotional communities, the voices of their authorities as well as critical voices be allowed to speak for themselves. The last thing that one would want to do as a scholar is to silence a voice or a point of view whose further study could advance the broader field in the academic realm in which one works. Silencing can be done in a number of ways. Certain perspectives may be intentionally ignored, while others may be dismissed summarily through hasty or biased judgments on the part of the scholar. Being sure all voices within a tradition are heard and

acknowledged is important in all disciplines, but there is a particular gravity to this role and responsibility for the Religious Studies scholar.

Bearing this great responsibility in mind, this study has demonstrated that the careless or unnuanced use of particular terminologies, categories, and approaches can lead to problematic results. The dismissive use of terms such as “extremists” *ghulāt*, or *tanāsokh* (transmigration of souls), and charges of syncretism when discussing minority communities in the Islamic world means that that these communities and beliefs, which have much to offer to the understanding of Islam in general, are thereby excluded from important discussions about the diversity of Islamic beliefs. Due to this exclusion, the scholarly attention afforded to these communities and beliefs are minimal at best. At worst, because of the general lack of scholarly attention and interest, the journal articles, chapters, and books dedicated to covering these communities and their beliefs often do grave injustice to the lived and textual realities of these groups. In this study, the example of Ostad Elahi, a charismatic master from the Ahl-e Haqq, and his various works, particularly *Ma’refat ol-Rūh*, was used to demonstrate the real consequences of insisting on continued academic use of these categories and terms that have very heavy implications.

The terms *ghulāt*, extremist Shi’ites, or even the apparently softer term, “hyper-Shi’a” are ultimately terms of exclusion—they suggest that the group so described falls outside the bounds of Islam. The word *ghulāt*, in addition to its automatic association with those beyond the pale of Islam, is offensive to the communities for which it is used. It is a derogatory word and should not be used in academia outside of its specific

historical context. The use of the word *ghulāt* to describe contemporary communities, especially as a category or analytical term, would be the equivalent of an Islamic Studies scholar referring to a non-Muslim religious community as “infidels” (*kuffār*). Such dogmatic and religiously charged language would never be used by scholars to describe communities outside of Islam and, likewise, analogous terms like “extremists” (*ghulāt*) should not be applied to esoteric Shi’i branches of Islam in scholarly literature.

The word *tanāsokh* (transmigration of souls) is one that often floats somewhere near the term *ghulāt*. As we have demonstrated, scholarly references to Ostad Elahi’s doctrine of *sayr-e takāmol* as a form of *tanāsokh* are not appropriate descriptions. Use of the terms *tanāsokh*, transmigration, metempsychosis, or reincarnation in this regard is a misleading representation of a belief that is explicitly described by its advocate, Ostad Elahi, as distinct from the ideas associated with those words in significant ways. It is too late to develop new definitions and interpretations of the words above because they are burdened by centuries of baggage and problematic associations, particularly in the Islamic context. Therefore, they must be used very carefully, if at all, to refer very specifically to those religious ideas that fit the literal and basic definitions of these terms, while new terms should be developed to discuss conceptions that are complex and explicitly situated by their adherents within the framework of Islam. In lieu of the use of the above terms this study suggest that when referring to Ahl-e Haqq eschatological belief, in general, the term “successive lives” should be used rather than “transmigration” or “reincarnation”; and of course when referring to Ostad Elahi and his works, the term “journey of perfection” or the Persian, *sayr-e takāmol*, should be used. Although *sayr-e*

takāmol is a concept that is applied to anything that goes through a process of perfection, when referring to eschatology and successive lives, it is quite clear that the term is used to describe the process of perfection of the spirit.

Charges of syncretism, and the resulting categorization of certain communities or beliefs as “syncretistic,” runs the risk of excluding and erasing the religious or intellectual contributions of such groups, regardless of the intention of the researcher. Extreme caution should be used when employing this approach, if at all, to safeguard against the marginalization of devotional groups; and particular care should be taken in the field of Islamic Studies. The Islamic tradition sees itself as the last revelation in the line of revelations that was afforded to every corner of the earth. Sūra 16:36 of the Qur’an states:

We sent a messenger to every community, saying ‘Worship God and shun false gods.’ Among them were some God guided; misguidance took hold of others. So travel through the earth and see what was the fate of those who denied the truth.

As academic scholars of Islam, it would thus be gracious to give deference to the above *āyah*, when approaching groups and beliefs that are considered beyond the pale, particularly those groups that are adamant about their Muslim identity. The mere existence of elements that are seemingly imported or “borrowed” because of their appearances in other traditions does not necessarily make them foreign to Islam, whether in its exoteric or esoteric dimensions. Referring once more to the words of Ostad Elahi: “It is obvious that only God truly knows the accuracy and inaccuracy of all this, so (as the proverb has it): ‘whatever strange things may reach your ears, at least consider them to be in the realm of what is possible.’” The inclusion of such works as Ostad Elahi’s *Ma’refat ol-Rūh* not only expands knowledge in the field, but also adds richness and texture to the

already vibrant study of Islam in its diverse manifestations. The exclusion of such a work, much to detriment of the field, results in potentially incomplete and inaccurate readings of texts from the past that alluded to, but did not openly speak to the matters addressed in *Ma'refat ol-Rūh*. Perhaps Ostad Elahi's unique articulation of *sayr-e takāmol* can shed light on the silences in some of those texts. It is with great hope that this study urges, in light of the contents of *Ma'refat ol-Rūh*, a scholarly re-examination of the extraordinary works of Mulla Sadra and other Muslim thinkers whose views, which depart in some ways from some aspects of more traditional Islamic teachings on the human journey in the hereafter, can add variety and nuance to our understanding of Islamic eschatological doctrines. The inclusion of *Ma'refat ol-Rūh* and the introduction of Ostad Elahi's body of work to the domain of Islamic Studies, has the potential to greatly expand current understandings of Islamic mysticism and eschatology.

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Biography

Golnesa Asheghali received a Bachelor of Arts in History with a minor in Islamic Studies in 2006 and received a second Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies in 2008, both from George Mason University (GMU). In her time at GMU, Golnesa served as the first program coordinator for the Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies. Through her merit based GRA position at the Center, Golnesa was afforded the opportunity to travel to Istanbul to attend a conference on Alevi-Bektashi History at Bogazici University. Golnesa also served as GMU's first Persian language instructor, teaching as a graduate lecturer for three semesters. In connection to her Persian language teaching experience, Golnesa was supported by the Center in a trip to UCLA to participate in a panel on Education in Diaspora and present a paper on "Language and Identity in the University Classroom" at the 2012 Iranian Alliances Across Borders (IAAB) conference. As a dedicated practitioner of Shotokan (traditional Japanese) karate under her Master, Sensei Ahmad Ali Mazhari, Golnesa, for a number of semesters, also taught a karate course for the Physical Education department at GMU. Golnesa's twenty plus years of active karate experience and her deep love for her master, led her to follow her Sensei in a cross country move to South Dakota where she now resides. Upon completing her Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies with a focus on Shi'ism, Golnesa will begin an intensive Master of Science program in Secondary Education at Black Hills State University to begin work as an educator in the Rapid City community she now calls home.