

‘ALLĀMA SAYYID MUḤAMMAD ḤUSAYN
ṬABĀṬABĀ’Ī: PHILOSOPHER, EXEGETE,
AND GNOSTIC

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The transmission of scholarly eminence within a given family has been a frequent occurrence in the history of Islamic Iran, particularly after the adoption of Shi‘ism during the tenth/sixteenth century. Few, however, are the lineages that could compete for continuity of erudition with the ancestry of ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī, the author of *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*. From the Aq Qoyunlu through the Safavid, Qajar and Pahlavi periods into the era of the Islamic Republic, members of this family have been consistently prominent as scholars of religion, qādis, and *shaykhs al-Islām*, especially in Tabriz. The progenitor of this illustrious line was a certain Sayyid ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Hamadānī who, born and bred in Samarqand, succeeded to the position of his father, Sayyid Najm al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ghaffār Ṭabāṭabā’ī, as *shaykh al-Islām* of Tabriz not long before the Safavids displaced the Aq Qoyunlus in 907/1501. Successfully negotiating the delicate transition between dynasties, Sayyid ‘Abd al-Wahhāb gained the trust of Shah Ismā‘īl sufficiently to be entrusted with a diplomatic mission to Istanbul, where, however, he was detained until his death in 930/1524.¹

From Sayyid ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī was separated by twelve generations.² His ancestor in the seventh generation, Mīrzā Muḥammad ‘Alī Qāḍī, had been *qāḍī al-quḍāt* of Azerbaijan, and the

¹ For a detailed account of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and his responses to the turbulence of the age, see Hamid Algar, ‘Naqshbandis and Safavids: A Contribution to the Religious History of Iran and Its Neighbors’ in Michel Mazzaoui (ed.), *The Safavids and Their Neighbors* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003), 9–13.

² For the complete genealogy, see Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥusaynī al-Tihirānī, *al-Shams al-Sāṭi‘a* (Beirut, 1417/1997), 31–2. (This is the Arabic translation, made by ‘Abbās Nūr al-Dīn and ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Mubārak, of a Persian original, *Mibr-i Tābān* [Tehran, 1401 SH/1982], unavailable to the present writer).

designation ‘Qāḏī’ clung as a proper name to later members of the lineage, whether or not they exercised the profession of judge.³ Among the ancestors relatively close in time to the ‘Allāma particular mention may be made of his great-great-grandfather, Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī Qāḏī Ṭabāṭabā’ī, pupil of the great Uṣūlī jurist, Āqā Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbahānī, and of Bihbahānī’s gnostically inclined student, Mīrzā Mahdī Baḥr al-‘Ulūm (d. 1212/1797). Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī’s son, Mīrzā ‘Alī Aṣghar, was a man of somewhat different temperament and accomplishment: as *shaykh al-islām* of Tabriz during the reign of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh he was involved in many of the disturbances that pitted the townsfolk against the corruption of the Qajar dynasty and its local agents.⁴

Destined to overshadow all of his ancestors in scholarly accomplishment, ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī was born in the village of Shādābād (or Shādagān) near Tabriz on 29 Dhū l-Ḥijja 1321/16 March 1904. He lost his father, Sayyid Muḥammad Ṭabāṭabā’ī, at the age of five, and his mother died four years later while giving birth to his brother, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥasan. This experience of being orphaned doubtless contributed to the closeness that bound the brothers together throughout their lives, a closeness which came to manifest itself in virtually identical interests and inclinations. The guardianship of the two boys fell to a paternal uncle, Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Alī Qāḏī, and it was under his guidance that Ṭabāṭabā’ī began his primary education. In accordance with well-established convention, he first memorized the Qur’ān, studied Persian texts such as the *Būstān* and *Gulistān* of Sa’dī, and learned calligraphy before moving on to the specialized study of the ‘Arabic sciences’—Arabic grammar, syntax, and rhetoric, the essential prerequisites for the serious study of Islam—some ten years later.

This was a relatively late initiation into the world of scholarship, not at all presaging the eminence that the ‘Allāma was ultimately to attain. He recounts, indeed, that he was initially averse to study and discouraged by his inability to understand fully what he was reading, a condition that continued for about four years. A turning point was reached when he failed a test on Suyūṭī’s well-known treatise on grammar, a staple of the traditional elementary curriculum, and his exasperated teacher told him: ‘Stop wasting my time and your own.’ Shamefaced, he left Tabriz for a while to engage in a devotional practice

³ ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī himself was initially known as Qāḏī after his arrival in Qum in 1946, but he discouraged this practice, preferring to use Ṭabāṭabā’ī as surname. See al-Tihrānī, *al-Shams al-sā’ī’a*, 13, n. 1.

⁴ See Nādi Mīrzā, *Tārīkh va-juḡhrāfi-yi dār al-saltāna-yi Tabrīz* (Tehran, 1323/1905), 118, 244.

(*amal*) that resulted in the divine bestowal on him of an ability to master whatever difficulty he encountered; this remained with him to the end of his life. In keeping with his general reticence on personal matters, he never identified the practice in question.⁵ What is certain is that he now acquired a passionate love of learning. He later recalled:

I ceased entirely to associate with anyone not devoted to learning, and began to content myself with a minimum of food, sleep, and material necessities, devoting everything to my studies. It would often happen, especially during the spring and the summer, that I would remain awake studying until dawn, and I always prepared the next day's class on the previous night. If I encountered a problem, I would solve whatever difficulty I encountered, however much effort it cost me. When I came to class, everything the teacher had to say was already clear to me; I never had occasion to ask for an explanation or for an error to be corrected.⁶

It was presumably during these early years that Ṭabāṭabā'ī also acquired a surprising variety of athletic skills that in later life were belied by his frail and ascetic appearance: horsemanship, swimming, mountaineering, hunting, and marksmanship. He must have maintained these skills at least long enough to pass them on to his son, 'Abd al-Bāqī.⁷

After completing the *suṭūh* level of the religious studies curriculum in 1343/1925, 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī went together with his brother to Najaf in order to benefit from the ample opportunities offered by that centre of Shi'i learning, traditionally designated as Dār al-'ilm ('The Abode of Knowledge'). Jurisprudence, then as later, was the principal focus of instruction in Najaf. Ṭabāṭabā'ī accordingly spent many years studying that discipline at the *khārij* level with authorities such as Mīrzā Ḥusayn Nā'inī (d. 1355/1936), Āyatullāh Abū l-Ḥasan Iṣfahānī (d. 1365/1946), Āyatullāh Ḥājj Mīrzā 'Alī Īravānī, and Āyatullāh Mīrzā 'Alī Aṣghar. Among his teachers in *fiqh* it was however Muḥammad Ḥusayn Gharavī Iṣfahānī Kumpānī (d. 1361/1942) to whom he became particularly

⁵ It may, however, have been a lengthy prostration, in the course of which Ṭabāṭabā'ī beseeched God either to bestow on him the ability to master whatever difficulties he encountered, or to take his life. Conversation of Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn Ḥāi'rī Shīrāzī with the 'Allāma, cited in l-Tīhrānī, *al-Shams al-Sāṭī'a*, 34, n. 1.

⁶ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, autobiographical essay prefaced to his *Barrasīhā-yi Islāmī*, ed. Sayyid Hādī Khusraushāhī, (Qum, 1396/1976), 10–11.

⁷ 'Abd al-Bāqī recalls that his father regarded hunting as *ḥarām* except in cases of dire necessity. See Nāṣir Bāqirī Bīd-i-Hindī, 'Mufasssīr va ḥakīm-i ilāhī, Ḥazrat-i Āyatullāh Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī,' *Nūr-i 'Ilm*, 3:9 (Āzar 1368/December 1989), 77.

attached during a decade of study; he would later always refer to him as ‘our master’ (*shaykh-i mā*). This closeness was due in part, perhaps, to the interest in philosophy that the pupil increasingly had in common with his teacher.⁸ *Fiqh* never became Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s main focus of concern, but he was thoroughly competent in the discipline. He attained the rank of *ijtihād* while in Najaf but, disinclined by temperament to extensive social involvement, he never sought to become a *marja’ al-taqlid*.

It was instead philosophy that, together with *tafsīr*, came to preoccupy Ṭabāṭabā’ī for most of his career. He was initiated into this discipline while in Najaf by Āqā Sayyid Ḥusayn Bādkūba’ī (d. 1358/1939). Originally from Baku (or more precisely a village near Baku) as his last name indicates, this scholar had studied philosophy in Tehran with Āqā Mīrzā Hāshim Ishkivārī, under whose guidance he read the *Asfār* of Mullā Ṣadrā, before migrating to Najaf.⁹ Ṭabāṭabā’ī spent six years studying with Bādkūba’ī, concentrating on such primary texts of philosophy as the *Akhlāq* of Miskawayh, the *Shifā’* of Ibn Sīnā, the *Qawā’id* of Ibn Turka, the *Asfār* (on which his teacher also compiled a commentary), the *Mashā’ir* of Mullā Ṣadrā, and the *Manzūma* of Shaykh Hādī Sabzavārī. Then, on Bādkūba’ī’s instructions, he studied traditional mathematics with Sayyid Abū l-Qāsim Khwānsārī, in order to strengthen his powers of reasoning and deduction.¹⁰ It was presumably during his years in Najaf that he also mastered subjects as diverse as traditional astronomy (*‘ilm-i falak*) and occult sciences such as *raml*, *jafr*, and numerology.

More influential on ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’ī than any of his other teachers in Najaf was a cousin, Ḥājj Mīrzā ‘Alī Qāḍī Ṭabāṭabā’ī (1286–1365/1869–1947; hereafter, Qāḍī); it was he who more than anyone else helped to mould his spiritual personality. In later years he declared himself indebted to Qāḍī for everything he ever attained, and he would always refer to him, and to him alone, as *ustād* (‘the master’), deeming it presumptuous to speak of him by name. Qāḍī was a scholar of typically wide-ranging achievement. He had been trained in *fiqh* and *uṣūl* by his father, Sayyid Ḥusayn Qāḍī, a foremost pupil of the celebrated Mīrzā Ḥasan Shīrāzī, and having qualified as a *mujtahid* he could have

⁸ Although celebrated primarily for his writings on *fiqh*, Āyatullāh Kumpānī also composed a versified treatise on philosophy, *Tuḥfat al-ḥakīm*, which has been described as ‘a prodigious work’ (Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥirz ad-Dīn, *Mā’ārif al-Rijāl*, Qum, 1405/1985, ii. 264).

⁹ Manūchihr Ṣadūqī Suhā, *Tārīkh-i ḥukamā’ va ‘urafā-yi muta’akkbhīrīn-i ṣadr al-muta’allihīn* (Tehran, 1359 SH/1980), 71–72.

¹⁰ See al-Tīhrānī, *al-Shams al-sā’i’a*, 21.

successfully vied with other scholars in attracting students of *fiqh*, the main focus of the Najaf curriculum. His defining characteristic, however, was an immersion in the world of 'practical gnosis' (*'irfān-i 'amalī*), a strict regimen of ascetic self-purification leading to the direct perception of the suprasensory realm. Undeniably reminiscent of Sufism in a number of ways, this discipline involves affiliation to a teacher who is himself the heir to an initiatic chain. Qāḍī's initiating guide on the Path had been Sayyid Aḥmad Karbalā'ī Tihirānī 'Bakkā' (d. 1332/1914), whose chain led back first to Ākhūnd Ḥusayn-qulī Hamadānī (d. 1311/1893) and then to Sayyid 'Alī Shūshtarī; the links farther removed in time are somewhat obscure.¹¹ The known aspects of Qāḍī's adherence to 'practical gnosis' were night vigils at blessed locations such as the mosque in Kufa and the Masjid al-Sahla and constant *dhikr* when not teaching; in addition, he would entirely disappear from view during the last ten days of Ramaḍān every year.¹²

Ṭabāṭabā'ī sought out Qāḍī soon after his arrival in Najaf; he was, after all, his cousin, and as an experienced scholar thirty-five years his senior was in a position to dispense advice on what classes to attend. Qāḍī came to his house, and not only suggested a course of study to follow but also counselled him to devote himself above all to moral and spiritual development while in Najaf. He remained a regular visitor to the 'Allāma's home, advising the family on a variety of matters. A number of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's children had died in early infancy, and when his wife became pregnant once more, Qāḍī suggested that the expected son be named 'Abd al-Bāqī in the hope that the divine attribute of permanence (al-Bāqī, 'the Eternal') contained in this name might be reflected in the child.

The 'Allāma's more intimate involvement with Qāḍī began a full five years into his sojourn in Najaf. Qāḍī passed by 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī when he was standing one day at the entrance to a madrasa, and for some

¹¹ Ibid, 27–29. See also Ja'far Subḥānī, 'Maqām-i 'ilmī va farhangī-yi 'Allāma-yi Ṭabāṭabā'ī', *Kayhan-i Farhangī*, 6:8 (Ābān 1368/November 1989), 7. Shūshtarī may have been a pupil of Ṣadr al-Dīn Kāshif Dizfūlī, the heir to a line of Dhahabī transmission; see Sayyid 'Abbās Qā'im-maqāmī, 'Āthār va afkār-i Ṣadr al-Dīn Kāshif Dizfūlī', *Kayhān-i Andīsha* 38 (Mihr–Ābān 1370/October–November 1991), 82, 85. In addition to Sayyid Aḥmad Karbalā'ī Tihirānī, Hamadānī trained at least two other pupils of note: Mīrzā Javād Āqā Malik Tabrīzī, an early teacher of Imām Khomeini in *'irfān*, and Shaykh Muḥammad Bahārī of Hamadan. Other noteworthy propagators of this spiritual lineage are Āyatullāh Muḥammad Taqī Bahjat and Āyatullāh Ḥasan-zāda Āmulī, both trained, like the 'Allāma, by Mīrzā 'Alī Qāḍī. (Personal communication from Hujjat al-Islām Sayyid 'Abbās Qā'im-maqāmī).

¹² Al-Tihirānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭi'a*, 25, 29.

reason regarded the occasion as appropriate to enjoin on him the regular performance of the supererogatory night prayer. For whatever reason, this injunction had a transformative effect on Ṭabāṭabā'ī, and he spent as much time as he could during his remaining years in Najaf with Qāḍī.¹³

Qāḍī's influence on him was profound. He used to say that before studying with him he thought that he had understood the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* of Ibn 'Arabī, but on re-reading it with him he realized he had understood nothing of it at all. Qāḍī also instructed him in another key work of Ibn 'Arabī, the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiya*. The path of 'practical gnosis' involves, however, far more than immersion in mystical texts. It may therefore be presumed, despite Ṭabāṭabā'ī's chaste reticence on such matters, that under Qāḍī's guidance he began to engage in practices such as *dhikr*, *murāqaba*, night vigils, and various supererogatory acts of devotion, more regularly and intensively than before. In full conformity with the traditions of his discipline, Qāḍī used to warn Ṭabāṭabā'ī and his other pupils to ignore the manifestations of the suprasensory realm, the forms reflecting the divine beauty, that they might see while engaged in *dhikr*. Ṭabāṭabā'ī had at least one occasion to act on this advice. He relates that while absorbed one night in *dhikr* at the mosque in Kufa, a houri appeared before him and proffered him both her own person and a goblet of the wine of paradise. He gently rebuffed her advances, and she departed—slightly offended, as Ṭabāṭabā'ī recalled.¹⁴

In 1354/1935, Ṭabāṭabā'ī returned from Najaf to Tabriz, again accompanied by his brother. Newly promulgated regulations had made it impossible for them to receive the minimal funds from the family's land holdings in the village of Shāhābād that, together with extensive and repeated borrowing, had made it possible for Ṭabāṭabā'ī to lead a frugal existence in Najaf. Matters reached the point that he could no longer afford to buy groceries, and there was no one left from whom to borrow. He went to the shrine of Imām 'Alī and unburdened himself of his predicament. Soon after he returned home, a person appeared to him in the courtyard. Introducing himself as Shah Ḥusayn Valī, the figure gave Ṭabāṭabā'ī greetings from the Imām (presumably Imām 'Alī) together with the message that God had never deserted Ṭabāṭabā'ī during the eighteen years he had spent in the study of religion. After the figure disappeared, Ṭabāṭabā'ī remembered that Shah Ḥusayn Valī was a dervish who had lived some two hundred years earlier in Tabriz and was buried there in the cemetery of Sayyid Ḥamzā. Just before dawn next morning, someone knocked at the door of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's home, delivered a packet containing three hundred Iraqi dinars, and hastened

¹³ Ibid, 24.

¹⁴ Ibid, 29–30.

away before he could be identified. This sum happened to be exactly enough for Ṭabāṭabā'ī to pay off his debts in Najaf but not for anything more, so he took it as a sign that he should return to Iran. It later transpired that the money came from an Arab shaykh who had vowed to donate it to a man of learning if his son should recover from a serious illness.¹⁵

The return to Tabriz occasioned something of a hiatus in his scholarly activity for roughly a decade, during which he devoted himself to farming the family lands. Despite the degree of erudition he had already attained, he was almost entirely unknown in the city. It was therefore only with difficulty that a visitor to Tabriz, a certain Shaykh 'Alī Aḥmadī Miyānjī, was able to locate his teaching circle; this consisted of only two students to whom he was lecturing on *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*.¹⁶ Thus isolated from scholarly contact and preoccupied with material affairs, Ṭabāṭabā'ī characterized this period in his life as one of 'spiritual loss'. He was able nonetheless to complete during this involuntary residence in Tabriz no fewer than nine treatises (including the series *al-Insān: qabl al-dunyā, fī l-dunyā, wa-bā'd al-dunyā*), a history of his ancestors, and a relatively brief commentary on the first seven *sūras* of the Qur'ān.¹⁷

During World War II, the Soviet Union invaded northern Iran and established a separatist regime of Marxist orientation in Azerbaijan. This impelled Ṭabāṭabā'ī to leave once more, this time for Qum, where he arrived in March, 1946. His choice of refuge had been confirmed when he sought an omen in the Qur'ān and alighted on the verse, 'There, protection comes from God, the True One; He is the best to give reward and the best to give success' (*al-Kahf*, 44).¹⁸ The family lands in Shādābād, the sole source of income for the 'Allāma and his brother, had apparently been usurped, in whole or in part, so there was no longer any reason for him to stay in Tabriz, a location he evidently found irksome or at best unrewarding.¹⁹ The migration to Qum was, however, far from

¹⁵ Bīd-i-Hindī, 'Mufasssīr va ḥakīm-i ilāhī', 55–56.

¹⁶ Ibid, 48.

¹⁷ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Barrasīhā-yi islāmī*, 11; al-Tīhrānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭī'a*, 58.

¹⁸ Bīd-i-Hindī, 'Mufasssīr va ḥakīm-i ilāhī', 48.

¹⁹ Precisely what became of the family lands is unclear. Al-Tīhrānī cites Ṭabāṭabā'ī to the effect that the lands had been usurped (presumably by the separatist regime), but then remarks, while describing Ṭabāṭabā'ī's economic plight in Qum, that the income they provided was insufficient for even the necessities of life (*al-Shams al-Sāṭī'a*, 96–97). Ṭabāṭabā'ī's brother, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥasan Ilāhī, chose to remain in Tabriz, where he spent the few years that were left of his life teaching philosophy. He also wrote a book on the spiritual benefits to be had from music, but destroyed it, fearing it might be subject to misinterpretation (al-Tīhrānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭī'a*, p. 37).

being motivated by a quest for more comfortable circumstances. The monies gathered and distributed there under the heading of *sahm-i imām* were devoted almost entirely to the students and teachers of *fiqh*, a category to which Ṭabāṭabā'ī did not belong, and all his years in Qum were destined to be spent in ascetic conditions of near-indigence.²⁰ The turbulence in Azerbaijan provided at most the proximate cause for his departure; what was truly at issue, as he himself made plain, was a profound desire to help provide for the spiritual and intellectual needs of the students.

Qum was to be Ṭabāṭabā'ī's home for the rest of his life and the scene of the most fruitful portion of his career, as teacher and author. The city had intermittently enjoyed prominence as a centre of learning since the earliest days of Shi'ism in Iran, but it was often overshadowed by the shrine cities of Iraq and, in the Safavid and Qajar periods, by Isfahan. Despite the anti-religious policies of the Pahlavi dynasty, Qum had begun to flourish anew under the stewardship of Shaykh 'Abd al-Karīm Ḥā'irī, which lasted from 1922 to 1936, a period that included the entire decade Ṭabāṭabā'ī spent in Najaf. A relatively large number of students had begun to cluster around the scholars of the city, and the situation remained stable during the eight years after the death of Ḥā'irī in which the teaching institution (*ḥauza-yi 'ilmiyya*) was administered by a triumvirate of its most senior scholars. Unified leadership was restored in 1944 with the arrival of Āyatullāh Ḥusayn Burūjirdī, who succeeded in building further on the foundations laid by Ḥā'irī. Despite these institutional accomplishments, Ṭabāṭabā'ī viewed some aspects of the situation critically:

When I came to Qum, I weighed the teaching programme of the religious institution against the needs of Islamic society. I found it to be deficient in a number of respects and considered it my duty to remedy the situation. The most important deficiencies in the syllabus concerned the exegesis of the Qur'ān and the rational sciences (*'ulūm-i 'aqlī*). I therefore began teaching *tafsīr* and philosophy. In the atmosphere prevailing at the time, *tafsīr* was not regarded as a science requiring precision of thought and investigation, and to engage in it was thought unworthy of persons capable of scholarship in the fields of *fiqh* and *uṣūl*.

²⁰ Al-Tihirānī remarks with some bitterness that ample funds were available in Qum even for the most incompetent and pretentious among them, and that scholars working on disciplines other than *fiqh* had to accept poverty as the price of their choice. As an example additional to that of Ṭabāṭabā'ī, he cites a close acquaintance of the 'Allāma, Āqā Buzurg Tihirānī (d.1389/1970), compiler of the great Shi'ī bibliographical encyclopaedia, *al-Dharī'a ilā taṣānif al-shī'a (al-Shams al-sāṭi'a*, 97–8).

Indeed, to teach *tafsīr* was seen as a sign of deficient erudition. I did not regard any of these considerations as an excuse acceptable to God, and I continued teaching *tafsīr*...²¹

If *tafsīr* was regarded as intellectually unchallenging, philosophy was viewed by some elements in Qum as positively subversive, and they accordingly attempted to have Burūjirdī curtail Ṭabāṭabā'ī's classes on the subject. Bowing to their pressure, Burūjirdī cancelled the stipends of the roughly one hundred students that were attending the objectionable lectures. This placed Ṭabāṭabā'ī in a dilemma. Were he to persist in the teaching of philosophy and the students in attending, they would be deprived of the funds they needed to continue their studies. But were he to cancel his classes, the students would be deprived of what he regarded as an important part of their education. After prolonged reflection, he sought an augury in the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfīz and happened to alight on the following line of verse: 'This reprobate will not abandon beloved or goblet; such is not my habit, as the morals police knows full well.' The message was clear, and Ṭabāṭabā'ī made known his intention of continuing to teach philosophy. Burūjirdī thereupon wrote him a letter, recalling that he had himself studied philosophy while a student in Isfahan with the celebrated Mīrzā Jahāngīr Khān, but done so secretly, and advising him to do likewise; the open teaching of philosophy in the *ḥauza* was impermissible.²²

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's response, skilfully worded and apparently submissive, expressed his belief that the teaching of philosophy was a matter of religious duty, not the result of a personal predilection. He was profoundly convinced that Muslim (or, more precisely, Iranian Shi'ī) society faced an intellectual crisis that could be confronted only by means of philosophy:

I came from Tabriz to Qum only in order to correct the beliefs of the students on the basis of the truth and to confront the false beliefs of the materialists and others. When the Āyatullāh [Burūjirdī] was studying with a small group of students with Jahāngīr Khān, the students and the people in general were believers, praise be to God. Their beliefs were pure, and they did not need public sessions for the teaching of the *Asfār*. But today every student who comes to Qum comes with a suitcase full of doubts and problems. We must come to the aid of these students and prepare them to confront the materialists on a sound basis by teaching them authentic Islamic philosophy. I will not therefore [voluntarily] abandon the teaching of the *Asfār*. At the same time, however, since I consider

²¹ Cited in Bīd-i-Hindī, 'Mufasssīr va ḥakīm-i ilāhī,' 49.

²² Al-Tihirānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭī'a*, 101–104.

Āyatullāh Burūjirdī to be the repository of *sharʿī* authority, the matter will take on a different aspect if he commands me to abandon the teaching of the *Asfār*.²³

Ṭabāṭabāʾī thus placed on Burūjirdī the moral responsibility of preventing him from meeting his responsibilities, as he perceived them. Not surprisingly, no explicit command was forthcoming, and the instruction in philosophy continued.²⁴ The exchange does not seem to have harmed relations between the two scholars. Evidence for this is that when Burūjirdī was approached for an explanation of the Islamic prohibition of alcohol to be read at an international conference on alcoholism, it was to Ṭabāṭabāʾī that he assigned the task of preparing a statement.²⁵ Burūjirdī is additionally said to have read appreciatively each volume of *al-Mīzān* as it appeared.

Ṭabāṭabāʾī had attracted a devoted group of students soon after his arrival in Qum. As one of them, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ḥusaynī Tihirānī, relates, he and his friends had long been eager to study philosophy. They had extracted from Mīrzā Mahdī Āshtiyānī a promise to teach them the *Manzūma* of Mullā Hādī Sabzavārī, but Āshtiyānī abruptly left Qum for Tehran before he could fulfill the promise. Greatly impressed by the person as well as the erudition of Ṭabāṭabāʾī, the group now approached him with the request for a class and he readily agreed. The class met openly in the Ḥujjatiya madrasa, but certain sensitive topics were discussed while Ṭabāṭabāʾī was walking home in the company of his closest students—an implicit grant of validity, perhaps, to some of the objections raised by Burūjirdī.²⁶

The principal philosophical texts Ṭabāṭabāʾī taught were the *Shifāʾ* of Ibn Sīnā and the *Asfār* of Mullā Ṣadrā. By and large, he can be regarded as an adherent of the school of the latter sage. Although he deemed Ibn Sīnā superior to Ṣadrā with respect to rational deduction, he credited Ṣadrā with having enriched philosophy with some five hundred topics that had not occurred to Ibn Sīnā or his Greek predecessors and thus deserving the title, ‘renewer of Islamic philosophy’. Ṭabāṭabāʾī was, however, far from being an uncritical propagator of Ṣadrā’s views, unlike, for example, Mullā Hādī Sabzavārī. He never taught the section of the *Asfār* on the hereafter (*maʿād*)—or its reflection in Sabzavārī’s *Manzūma*—because he found Ṣadrā’s concept of *maʿād* as being a matter

²³ Ibid, 104–5; Bīd-i-Hindī, ‘Mufasssīr va ḥakīm-i ilāhī’, 48.

²⁴ Ibid, 49.

²⁵ For the text of his communication, see Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *Barrasīhā-yi Islāmī*, 67–72.

²⁶ Al-Tihirānī, *al-Shams al-sāʿīʿa*, 12–14.

of forms, devoid of all substance, contrary to the outer meanings of the relevant Qur'ānic verses. Although he never expounded in detail his own views on this topic, he appears to have regarded *mā'ād* as the final point in man's progress to perfection, as 'a transfer from one realm to another'.²⁷ In addition, he elaborated a number of new philosophical principles himself. One of these was the distinction between 'realities' (*ḥaqā'iq*) and 'constructs' (*ītibārāt*), the former embracing all matters pertaining to being and external existents, 'realities' in the sense that they can be proven by rational evidence, and the latter including such subjects as jurisprudence and its principles, for they depend on social convention rather than rational evidence. He elaborated this distinction in an unpublished Arabic treatise, *al-Ḥaqā'iq wa-l-ītibārāt*, as well as in one of his major systematical works on philosophy, *Nihāyat al-ḥikma*. He also made an original contribution to the question of potentiality and actuality, devoting a separate treatise to the subject, and developed further Mullā Ṣadrā's concept of substantial motion (*ḥarakat-i jawharī*) by treating time as the fourth dimension of bodies.²⁸

Ṭabāṭabā'ī also distinguished himself from Mullā Ṣadrā by strictly separating the methods and principles of philosophy from those of 'theoretical gnosis' (*irfan-i nazarī*) and he praised Mullā Muḥammad Muḥsin Fayz-i Kāshānī (d. 1090/1679), a pupil of Ṣadrā, for having done the same.²⁹ Ṣadrā's 'transcendent philosophy' (*al-ḥikmat al-muta'ālīya*) is based on the insight that reason, gnostic illumination, and revelation, all furnish paths to the perception of truth. It might therefore be argued that the commingling in a single discussion of arguments and evidence derived from all three is legitimate, if not inevitable. From a different point of view, however, precisely the autonomous adequacy of each path suggests that the evidence it provides should be allowed to stand on its own.³⁰ Ṭabāṭabā'ī's belief in the necessity of keeping the two

²⁷ Ja'far Subḥānī, 'Maqām-i 'ilmī va farhangī-yi 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī', 6.

²⁸ Ja'far Subḥānī, 'Shakhṣiyatī ki ba tanhā'ī millatī būd', *Yādbūd: Yādvāra-yi 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī dar Kāzarūn*, ed. Manūchīhr Muẓaffariān (Shiraz, 1369 SH/1990), 107–8. For an apparently complete listing of the 'Allāma's works, on philosophy and all other topics, see Qanbar 'Alī Kirmānī, *Kitāb-shināsī-yi 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī* (Tehran, 1373 SH/1994).

²⁹ Al-Tīhrānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭi'a*, 40; Aḥmad Aḥmadī, 'Akhlāq-i 'Allāma va yek bahth-i falsafī', *Yādnāma-yi 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī* (no editor indicated), Tehran, 1362 SH/1983, 173–4.

³⁰ This is not to say, however, that the intellect is omniscient, in the view of either Ṭabāṭabā'ī or other exponents of traditional Islamic philosophy. There are matters which lie entirely beyond its scope, above all resurrection and the hereafter (*mā'ād*); here, the task of the intellect is to confess its limitations and to submit entirely to revelation.

complementary disciplines of philosophy and theoretical gnosis separate from each other showed itself, *inter alia*, in the lectures he delivered in Qum on a correspondence on *tawḥīd* that had taken place in Najaf. The parties to the exchange were Āyatullāh Kumpānī, one of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's teachers in *fiqh*, and Sayyid Aḥmad Karbalā'ī, Qāḍī's master in *'irfān*; Kumpānī had approached the matter from the viewpoint of philosophy, and Karbalā'ī from that of *'irfān*. Ṭabāṭabā'ī also wrote a series of notes on this correspondence, explaining the arguments advanced by the two scholars, each set of arguments valid in its own right. This commentary was completed after his death by one of his foremost students, Āyatullāh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ḥusaynī Tihirānī.³¹

The primacy Ṭabāṭabā'ī gave to philosophy in his teaching and writing meant, too, that he had little time to devote to 'theoretical gnosis', despite his mastery of the subject and his lifelong immersion in the closely related discipline of 'practical gnosis'. He never authored a separate book or treatise on the subject nor taught any class on it; a promise to teach Qaysarī's celebrated commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ* of Ibn 'Arabī remained unfulfilled. However, he did encourage the study of the *Iqbāl al-A'māl* of Ibn Ṭā'ūs, the *Jāmi' al-Sa'ādāt* of Aḥmad Narāqī, and, most emphatically, the *Risāla-yi Sayr-o-sulūk*, a treatise on spiritual wayfaring attributed to his ancestor, Sayyid Mahdī Baḥr al-'Ulūm Ṭabāṭabā'ī, and in 1368–69/1949–50 taught classes on ethics, a subject that may be regarded as overlapping with gnosis.³²

We have seen that part of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's motivation for the teaching of philosophy was his desire to help students who were arriving in Qum 'with a suitcase full of problems'. Many of those problems arose from acquaintance with contemporary Western thought, particularly its materialist dimensions. Ṭabāṭabā'ī therefore accepted an invitation by 'Izz al-Dīn Zanjānī to devote an hour every week to the logical analysis and refutation of materialist thought.³³ According to a different account,

³¹ Al-Tihirānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭi'a*, 18–19.

³² In the introduction to his edition of *Risāla-yi Sayr-o-sulūk* (Tehran, 1360 SH 1981, 11–12), Āyatullāh Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Tihirānī cites Ṭabāṭabā'ī as adhering to the view of Qāḍī that the work was indeed authored by Baḥr al-'Ulūm Ṭabāṭabā'ī, with the exception of three chapters inserted in some manuscripts by ignorant copyists. The *taqṛīrāt* of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's lectures on *akhlāq* were published by Āyatullāh Ḥusaynī Tihirānī under the title 'Lubb al-albāb dar sayr-o-sulūk-i ūlī l-albāb' in *Yādnāma-yi ūstād-i shahīd Murtaḍā Muṭabharī*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm Surūsh (Tehran, 1360 SH/1981), 193–255.

³³ 'Izz al-Dīn Zanjānī 'Āyatullāh Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Jāmi' i ḥikmat va sharī'at*, *Kayhān-i Farhangī*, 8 (Ābān 1368/October 1989), 2.

it was the publication in 1950 of *Nigabbānān-i sihr va afsūn* ('The Guardians of Magic and Mystification'), a book ridiculing all religions, that impelled Ṭabāṭabā'ī to take up the fight against materialism. The study circle began meeting the following year every Thursday and Friday evening, with the participation of many figures that went on to play important roles in the Islamic Revolution and the early years of the Islamic Republic.³⁴ As a basic text, the participants were asked to study Muḥammad 'Alī Furūghī's *Sayr-i Hikmat dar Urūpā*. What was primarily at issue was a rebuttal of the claim of Marxism to possess a scientific worldview and of its positing of materialism and idealism as the only two conceivable explanations of the world; the choice of a third European word, 'realism', to convey the Islamic perspective of ontology was no doubt deliberate.³⁵ Islamic philosophy is 'realist' in that it accepts the reality of an existence that lies beyond human perception, and the materialism of Marxism is in fact 'idealist' because of the primacy it accords to the human mind. These private sessions ultimately resulted in Murtaẓā Muṭahhari's multi-volume series, *Uṣūl-i falsafa va ravish-i ri'ālizm*.³⁶

If the cultivation and propagation of philosophy was one of the principal goals Ṭabāṭabā'ī had set himself in coming to Qum, the other was the revival of Qur'ānic exegesis. He began teaching the subject soon after his arrival in Qum, but it was not until 1374/1954 that he set to work on writing his own twenty-volume commentary, *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, a monumental task that he completed on 'the Night of Power' (*laylat al-qadr*), i.e. Ramaḍān 23, 1392/October 31, 1972. Superlatives have been justly lavished on this great work. It has been called 'an

³⁴ Among them were Ayatullāhs Murtaẓā Muṭahhari, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Bihishtī, Muḥammad Mufattiḥ, Ḥusayn 'Alī Muntazirī and 'Alī Quddūsī. Other participants were Ibrāhīm Amīnī, 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Sharabīānī, Murtaẓā Jazā'irī, Ja'far Subḥānī, and Mūsā Ṣadr, founder of the Amal organization in Lebanon. See Ja'far Subḥānī, 'Shakhṣiyatī ki ba tanhā'ī millatī būd', 110, and Ḥusayn 'Alī Muntazirī, 'Ḥakīm-i farzāna', in *Yādnāma-yi ustād-i shahīd Murtaẓā Muṭahhari*, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm Surūsh, p. 172.

³⁵ 'Alī Shari'atmadārī, 'Naqsh-i 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī dar barkhurd bā maktabhā-yi jadīd-i falsafī', *Yādbūd: Yādvāra-yi 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī dar Kāzarūn*, 144–5.

³⁶ Whether the refutations of Marxism and other forms of materialist thought essayed by Ṭabāṭabā'ī and others were decisive for the defeat of Marxism in Iran may legitimately be questioned. The eclipse of the left in Iran may well have been due in far greater degree to the shallowness of its social roots and the growing clarity and coherence of the Islamic alternative as a vehicle of revolution, not to mention the ultimate collapse of the Soviet bloc.

encyclopaedia of the Islamic sciences' and regarded by some as the fruit of divine inspiration, and is deserving of more detailed analysis than is possible in this sketch of its author's life.³⁷ Nonetheless, given its centrality to his legacy, some of the leading characteristics of *Tafsīr al-Mīzān* must at least be delineated.

Foremost among those characteristics is the method it espouses, 'interpreting the Qur'ān by the Qur'ān'. Like much else, Ṭabāṭabā'ī had learned this method, at least in a formal sense, from Qāḍī, who had himself written a commentary on the first six chapters of the Qur'ān.³⁸ Underlying this mode of interpretation is the insight that each part of the Qur'ān serves to delineate the meaning of the whole, for the Qur'ān represents a single instance of speech, derived from a single and unique source, whatever be the chronology of the revelation of its parts; the Qur'ān is therefore the primary source for its own understanding. Ṭabāṭabā'ī's careful examination of the wording of each verse, taken in conjunction with all other verses pertinent to its subject matter, regularly yields fresh and convincing results. The result is that the Qur'ān—if the expression be permissible—is enabled to speak for itself, without the concepts, concerns and terminology of the various traditional disciplines being imposed upon it.³⁹ Moreover, by contrast with the atomistic approach of most of his predecessors, who were content to comment on one verse at a time, Ṭabāṭabā'ī pays attention to the structure of each chapter of the Qur'ān; he groups the verses into cohesive segments and clarifies the relationships existing between those segments and the chapter as a whole. It should not, however, be thought that *Tafsīr al-Mīzān* is simply a protracted essay in textual explication, leaving unexamined the manifold implications of the Qur'ān for all spheres of learning and life. The strictly exegetical portion devoted to each group of verses (headed *bayān*, 'explanation') is followed not only by a summation of traditions relevant to them (headed *baḥṭh riwā'i*) but also by essays, sometimes quite lengthy, on various philosophical, historical or sociological topics. In accordance

³⁷ The former is the opinion of Āyatullāh Javādī Āmulī (see his 'Sayrī dar andishahā-yi dīnī va falsafī-yi 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī', *Kayhān-i Havā'i*, no. 958 (Ādhar 6, 1370/November 27, 1991), 12), and the latter was the belief of Āyatullāh Muṭahharī (cited in Āyatullāh Miṣbāḥ Yazdī, 'Ḥukūmat dar Qur'ān az nazar-i mufasssīr-i *al-Mīzān*', *Yādbūd: Yādvāra*, 204).

³⁸ Tīhrānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭi'a*, 26, 58.

³⁹ None other than Imām 'Alī is reported to have said: 'Enable the Qur'an to speak, for it will not speak (of itself)'. Cited in *Tafsīr al-Mīzān* (3rd edn., Tehran, 1397/1977), ii. 275.

with Ṭabāṭabā'ī's method of 'permitting the Qur'ān to speak for itself', these are, however, clearly separated from the strictly exegetical paragraphs.⁴⁰

Many earlier commentators on the Qur'ān had regarded traditions of the Ma'sūmīn—the Prophet and the Twelve Imāms—as the primary source for their understanding of the text; the classic works of al-Ṭabarsī and al-Qummī, which are little more than accumulations of *aḥādīth*, are perhaps the most important examples of this genre of *tafsīr*. Plainly enough, and for good reason, Ṭabāṭabā'ī chose a different path. Nonetheless, he was deeply learned in the *ḥadīth* and insistent that the sayings of the Prophet and the Imāms be correctly transmitted and understood. He therefore accepted an invitation to oversee the publication of a new edition of Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī's vast compendium of *ḥadīth*, the *Bihār al-anwār*. However, although he approved thoroughly of the way in which Majlisī had arranged the subject matter and included commentary when warranted, he had serious reservations about some of his explanations. Majlisī had occasionally fallen into error, Ṭabāṭabā'ī believed, because of his ignorance of philosophy, an important deficiency considering the philosophical content of numerous *aḥādīth*; some of his errors were significant enough to distort the plain meaning of certain traditions. He therefore took it upon himself to add corrective notes to the new edition of the *Bihār*. This did not sit well with those in Qum who regarded the authority of Majlisī as beyond question, and the publisher pressed Ṭabāṭabā'ī to eliminate or modify his criticisms. He refused, and his participation in the project did not extend beyond the sixth volume.⁴¹ Less well known than this somewhat abortive venture are the explanatory notes the 'Allāma contributed to an edition of another *ḥadīth* collection, Kulaynī's *al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfī*. Few in number, these notes deal with important credal matters such as *badā'* (the appearance

⁴⁰ Ṭabāṭabā'ī provides a brief explanation of his approach to exegesis in the introduction to the first volume of *Tafsīr al-Mīzān* (2–16). Among the many studies of his exegetical methods, particular mention may be made of 'Alī al-Ausī, *al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī wa Manhajuhu fī tafsīrihi 'al-Mīzān'* (Tehran, 1405/1985), translated into Persian as *Ravish-i 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī dar Tafsīr al-Mīzān* (Tehran, 1381 SH/2002) by Sayyid Ḥusayn Mīr-Jalīlī; and Jawad 'Alī Kassār, *al-Manhaj al-'Aqā'idī fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān: Ḥiwār ma'a al-Sayyid Kamāl al-Haydarī* [?Qum], 1424/2004).

⁴¹ See al-Tihirānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭi'a*, 51–53, and Sayyid Ibrahīm Sayyid 'Alavī, 'Ta'liqāt-i 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī bar *Bihār al-Anwār*', *Kayhān-i Andīsha*, 38 (Mīhr-Ābān, 1370/October–November, 1991), 12–30, and 39 (Ādhar–Day, 1370/December, 1991–January, 1992), 49–61.

of change in the divine will), the difference between the divine will (*irādat*) and the divine wish (*mashīat*), free will and predestination, and the means of attaining either felicity or wretchedness in the hereafter.⁴² It was also on the basis of a manuscript prepared by Ṭabāṭabā'ī that a new edition of another compendium of *ḥadīth*, al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī's *Wasā'il al-Shī'a ilā Tahṣīl masā'il al-Sharī'a*, was published in Beirut in 1971, together with an introduction by the ʿAllāma himself.⁴³

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's awareness of Western intellectual life included a critical interest in the writings of Orientalists on Islam and a prolonged acquaintance with one of the most celebrated among them, Henry Corbin (d. 1978). Corbin, director of the French Institute for Iranian Studies in Tehran, was in some ways an ideal interlocutor for Ṭabāṭabā'ī. His orientation, too, was primarily philosophical; he contested the then dominant view among Western scholars that philosophical activity in the Muslim world had come to an end with Ibn Rushd; he profoundly admired the work of Ṣadrā and his school; and, most importantly, he was convinced of the primacy of Shi'ism in the intellectual and spiritual life of Islam.⁴⁴

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's first meeting with Corbin took place in the fall of 1958. He had come to Tehran for various purposes of his own and while visiting Dr. Jazā'irī, a professor at Tehran University and sometime minister of justice, he was informed that Henry Corbin was in town and was interested in meeting him. Ṭabāṭabā'ī had already heard favourable mention of Corbin's work and he readily agreed to meet him. An encounter was accordingly arranged at Dr. Jazā'irī's home, which

⁴² Sayyid Ibrāhīm Sayyid ʿAlavī, 'Mitud-i naqd va taḥqīq-i ḥadīth az nazar-i ʿAllāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī', *Kayhān-i Andīsha*, 36 (Mihr-Ābān, 1368/October–November, 1989), 25–38.

⁴³ On the ʿAllāma's general contribution to the study of *ḥadīth*, see Shādī Nafīsī, *ʿAllāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī va Ḥadīth* (Tehran, 1384 SH/2005).

⁴⁴ For an estimate of Corbin's oeuvre, see Hamid Algar, "The Study of Islam: the Work of Henry Corbin," *Religious Studies Review*, 6.2 (April, 1980), 85–91. Concerning his complex, prolonged impact on intellectual life in Iran, see Daryush Shayegan, *La topographie spirituelle de l'islam iranien* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1990); *Dar Aḥvāl va andīshahā-yi Hānrī Kurban*, a collective volume published by l'Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, Tehran 1379 SH/2000; Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: the Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 85–6, 125 n. 20, 150; and Matthijs van den Bos, *Mystic Regimes: Sufism and the State in Iran from the Late Qajar Era to the Islamic Republic* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), 31–44.

passed off very cordially. Three other professors were also involved in facilitating this and subsequent meetings: Mahdī Bāzargān, professor of thermodynamics but better known for his literary and political activity; Muḥammad Mu'īn, a professor of literature now best remembered for his six-volume Persian dictionary, and Seyyid Hossein Nasr, already celebrated at the time for his numerous writings on philosophy and mysticism.⁴⁵ The second meeting took place the following year in a village near Damavand, where Ṭabāṭabā'ī was staying for a while before returning to Qum from his annual summer sojourn in Mashhad. Thereafter, according to Nasr, weekly sessions were held every fall until 1977.⁴⁶ Despite his frailty and growing infirmity, Ṭabāṭabā'ī would take the bus from Qum to Tehran to attend these sessions, presumably an indication of the significance he accorded to them.⁴⁷

Ṭabāṭabā'ī drew up a brief record of his first session with Corbin. The French scholar proclaimed, to the evident satisfaction of the 'Allāma, that the Orientalists had been mistaken in approaching Islam purely on the basis of Sunni sources, an error leading to the assumption that Islamic philosophy had effectively ended with Ibn Rushd.⁴⁸ If they had been aware of the reality of Shi'ism, he contended, they would have found there an uninterrupted tradition of wisdom and spirituality. Corbin went still further the following year. He described Shi'ism as 'the only religion that has always maintained the link of divine guidance between God and man', an achievement made possible by its belief in the continued reality of the Twelfth Imām: the link had been broken in Judaism and Christianity with the departures from this world of Moses and Jesus respectively, and in

⁴⁵ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Shī'a: Majmū'a-yi Mudhākārāt bā Prufisūr Hānrī Kurban*, eds. 'Āli Aḥmadī and Hādī Khusraushāhī (Qum, 1397/1977), 10. Nasr reports that he served as translator and interpreter for these sessions (introduction to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Shī'ite Islam* (Albany NY, 1975), 24). It is remarkable that despite lengthy residence in Iran and a passionate devotion to the study of what he called 'Iranian Islam' Corbin was evidently unable to express himself adequately in Persian.

⁴⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Muḥammad Ḥusayn', *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, iv. 161.

⁴⁷ Al-Tīhrānī, *al-Shams al-sāti'a*, 70. One wonders whether Corbin ever reciprocated this gesture of respect by going to visit Ṭabāṭabā'ī in Qum.

⁴⁸ For an example of the approach rightly criticized by Corbin, see T. J. de Boer, *The History of Philosophy in Islam*, first published in 1903 but often reprinted as an authoritative work as late as 1967.

Sunni Islam by failure to accord the Imāms of the Ahl al-Bayt their full due.⁴⁹

Later sessions were devoted to the systematic presentation of salient facts about Shi‘i doctrine and history. It may be that no written record exists for some of the meetings, for the published texts give no indication of the dates involved, nor are all of them in question-and-answer format.⁵⁰ One set of questions posed by Corbin does appear, however, in the record of his sessions with Ṭabāṭabā‘ī. They concern the importance of the traditions of the Imāms of the Ahl al-Bayt for deducing the esoteric meanings of the Qur‘ān; the origins of Shi‘i thought during the Imāmates of Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, i.e., before the bifurcation of the Shi‘i tradition into Ithnā‘asharī and Ismā‘īlī; the reasons for the (supposed) restriction to Iran of philosophical thought among Muslims in recent times; and the (alleged) origins of Sufism in Shi‘ism, as varyingly manifested by Farīd al-Din ‘Aṭṭār and ‘Alā‘ al-Dawla Simnānī.⁵¹ These topics represented almost the entire range of Corbin’s scholarly concerns with Shi‘ism. It is interesting that in the detailed answers Ṭabāṭabā‘ī gave him, he did not accord Ismā‘ilism any particular significance in the history of Shi‘i thought, despite Corbin’s obvious hope that he would do so.⁵² He also did not follow Corbin in claiming specifically Shi‘i origins for the entire discipline of Sufism, contenting himself with the observation that the teachings of the Imāms were indeed influential on many Sufis, and that all their initiatic chains bar one go back to Imām ‘Alī.⁵³

Ṭabāṭabā‘ī’s sessions with Corbin are said to have been devoted in part to the study and discussion of non-Islamic texts such as the

⁴⁹ Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, *Shī‘a: Majmū‘a-yi Mudhākarāt ba Profisur Hanri Kurban* (Qum, 1397/1977), 12–16. It is curious that Corbin should have thus asserted the superiority of Shi‘ism despite his self-description as ‘a Protestant Orientalist’ (ibid, 13). Hearing that Corbin had reportedly been moved to tears while reading the *Ṣaḥīfat al-Sajjādiyya*, Ṭabāṭabā‘ī ultimately came to believe that Corbin had embraced Islam, but that he was too shy to make his conversion public (according to the ‘Allāma’s son, ‘Abd al-Bāqī, cited in al-Tihirānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭi‘a*, 73, n. 1). If this be the case, Corbin was evidently unable to conquer his shyness by the time of his death, for he went to his grave a Christian (see obituary in *Le Monde*, October 11, 1978).

⁵⁰ See, for example, the section entitled ‘Chigūna Shī‘a ba vujūd mi‘yād’ (Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, *Shī‘a: Majmū‘a-yi Mudhākarāt*, 18–66; also printed separately as Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, *Zuhūr-i Shī‘a* (Tehran, n.d.)).

⁵¹ Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, *Shī‘a: Majmū‘a-yi Mudhākarāt*, pp. 67–70.

⁵² Ibid, 77.

⁵³ Ibid, 81–3.

Tao Te-Ching, the Upanishads and the Gospel of St. John, conceived of as an exercise in 'comparative gnosis'.⁵⁴ Any such exercise, it is important to note, can hardly have been inspired by an ecumenical motive. It seems rather to have been part of a broad agenda for the critical study of a wide variety of religious and philosophical traditions, and it was not, therefore, wholly dissimilar from the study of materialism. For Ṭabāṭabā'ī plainly regarded the gnosis of Islam as unambiguously superior to all other forms, and he expressed quite critical views of Hindu and Christian texts. Thus while conceding that the Upanishads, especially the Vedas, contain elements of 'profound monotheism', he claimed that the explicit mode of discourse they employ is bound to lead the unwary into incarnationism and idolatry. Hindu gnosis, moreover, encourages neglect of the phenomenal world, by contrast with Islam which encourages man to see in nature a vast display of divine indications, and additionally errs by depriving certain classes of men as well as all women of a spiritual life. As for Christian gnosis, as expounded at the beginning of the Gospel of St. John, it falls into the same trap as Hinduism at the level of practice, for the trinitarianism of Christianity is an 'idolatrous trinitarianism' (*tatblīth-i wathanī*).⁵⁵ Christian beliefs concerning Jesus have little to distinguish them from Hindu beliefs concerning Krishna. In a short piece entitled *Dāstān-i Masīḥ va Injīl* ('The Story of Jesus and the Gospels'), Ṭabāṭabā'ī also discusses the numerous contradictions existing among the books of the New Testament and their collective unreliability as a historical record. Drawing on the terminology of *ḥadīth* scholarship, he suggests that the whole scriptural basis of Christianity is essentially a *khabar-i vāḥid*, a tradition going back only to a single person, except that in the case of the Christian scriptures neither the name, life, nor characteristics of the person in question are known.⁵⁶

Corbin made little substantive mention of Ṭabāṭabā'ī in his own writings, and it was thanks to the initiative of another Western scholar, Professor Kenneth Morgan of Colgate University, that the 'Allāma became internationally known as an authority on Shī'ī Islam. Accompanied by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Morgan met with Ṭabāṭabā'ī in the summer of 1963 and proposed to Nasr that Ṭabāṭabā'ī be entrusted

⁵⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Introduction to *Shī'ite Islam* (Albany, NY, 1975), 24.

⁵⁵ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Barrasīhā-yi Islāmī*, 221–2. Ṭabāṭabā'ī recommends to his readers a book entitled *al-'Aqā'id al-wathaniyya fī l-millat al-naṣrāniyya* ('Idolatrous Dogmas of the Christian Religion', *ibid*, 22, n. 1). For his views of Christianity, see also al-Tīhrānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭī'a*, 181–189.

⁵⁶ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Barrasīhā-yi Islāmī*, 54–8.

with writing a series of works on Shi'ism for translation into English.⁵⁷ The first in the trilogy, *Shi'ite Islam*, appeared in 1975, with a lengthy introduction and appendices contributed by Nasr, who also undertook the translation. It was followed in 1979 by *A Shi'ite Anthology*, consisting of selections from fundamental Shi'i texts chosen by Ṭabāṭabā'ī, translated by William Chittick with an introduction by Nasr. Finally, in 1987, came *The Qur'an in Islam*, translated by Assadullah Yate, again with an introduction by Nasr.⁵⁸

Throughout the period following World War II, and especially after Imām Khomeini's emergence on the national scene in 1963 as the foremost leader of opposition to the Pahlavi regime, Qum was a centre of political and social activism as well as scholarship. Not only were grievances against the Shah and his array of foreign patrons insistently voiced; contemporary problems of the Muslim world as a whole were also addressed in lectures, books, and periodicals. Despite his immersion in the scholarly pursuits we have described, Ṭabāṭabā'ī did not remain untouched by these developments. For example, he devoted an essay to the frequently discussed topic of women's status in Islam that went beyond the reiteration of the relevant legal provisions to address certain contemporary concerns.⁵⁹ On another occasion he criticized 'the so-called civilized world' for its complicity in the crimes then being committed by France in Algeria under the pretext that it was an internal affair of the French government.⁶⁰ He was also well aware of what Jalāl Āl-i Aḥmad called *Gharbzadagī* ('Occidentosis') in his 1341 SH/1962 essay of that name, as the following sentence indicates: 'The logic followed by those who run our affairs, the leaders of society, and also the intellectuals, is that today's progressive world—by which they mean the European world—is at variance with religious concerns, and that the norms governing our society must be acceptable to the world—i.e., to Europe'.⁶¹ Numerous topics of contemporary concern are also treated in sections of *Tafsīr al-Mizān* entitled 'baḥṭh ijtimā'ī'.

⁵⁷ Nasr, introduction to *Shi'ite Islam*, 17–18.

⁵⁸ The fourth book of Ṭabāṭabā'ī to have been made available in English, *Islamic Teachings: An Overview* (trans. R. Campbell, New York, 1989), was not part of the same project.

⁵⁹ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Barrasīhā-yi Islāmī*, 93–122. (It is unfortunate that this collection of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's occasional pieces does not provide information about the original places and dates of publication).

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 258.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 31.

Illustrative of the ferment in Iranian society in general and religious circles in particular was another book published in 1962, *Baḥthī dar bāra-yi marja'iyat va rūḥānīyat*, a collective volume that sought to examine and enhance the functioning of the religious leadership. It is remarkable that Ṭabāṭabā'ī's contribution, a lengthy chapter entitled 'Vilāyat va za'āmat' ('Governance and leadership'), was the only one in the book devoted to the topic of Islamic government.⁶² The subject may have been suggested to him by the publishers, but it is equally likely that he selected it himself as urgently relevant to the circumstances of the day. After the death of Burūjirdī in 1961, he is reported to have suspended his classes on philosophy in order to address precisely the theme of Islamic government.⁶³

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's approach to the topic is in the first place philosophical, in that he argues for the necessity of governance as rooted in the essential disposition (*fiṭrat*) of man and confirmed by revelation. Nonetheless, his essay is more than a philosophical exercise, for he takes issue with contemporary political ideologies and systems. Marxism, he points out, has discredited its own view of history by triumphing not in advanced capitalist countries but in the underdeveloped world, and the parliamentary democracies of the West, apart from functioning domestically as dictatorships of the majority, are precisely those states that have done their best to enslave and exploit the rest of the world.⁶⁴ As for the proper system of governance for Shi'a Muslims during the continued occultation of the Twelfth Imām, Ṭabāṭabā'ī appears at first to equivocate. After raising as possibilities the devolution of governance on the whole community, on the collective body of the *fuqahā'*, or on the most learned of the *fuqahā'*, he remarks that 'these are matters which lie beyond our current concern and must be solved in the context of *fiqh*'.⁶⁵ His purpose may therefore have been to stimulate discussion of these various possibilities among the *fuqahā'*. He nonetheless concludes: 'The individual who excels all others in piety, administrative ability (*ḥusn-i tadbīr*), and awareness of contemporary circumstances, is best fitted for this position [the leadership of society]'.⁶⁶ This sentence suggests an endorsement of the thesis of *vilāyat-i faqīh* ('governance of the *faqīh*') as

⁶² *Baḥthī dar bāra-yi marja'iyat va rūḥānīyat* (Tehran, 1341 SH/1962), 71–100. The essay is reproduced in Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Barrasīhā-yi Islāmī*, 169–95.

⁶³ Aḥmad Luqmānī, 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Mīzān-i mā'rifat* (Tehran, 1374 SH/1995), 78, citing Āyatullāh Javādī-Āmulī.

⁶⁴ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 'Vilāyat va za'āmat', 91–2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

propagated by Imām Khomeini, and bears indeed some similarity to Article 109 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, which spells out the qualifications required in the leader (*rahbar*).⁶⁷ It seems indisputable that Ṭabāṭabā'ī endorsed the theory of *vilāyat-i faqīh*, at the very least in its general outlines.

This essay was by no means the only contribution made by the 'Allāma to the theoretical elaboration of Islamic governance. He touches on the theme at numerous places in *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, most notably perhaps in his discussion of Qur'ān, 3. 200 ('O you who believe, persevere in patience and constancy...'), where he lists what he regards as the ten essential elements of Islamic government.⁶⁸ Āyatullāh Muṭahharī, who chaired the Council of the Islamic Revolution from its inception in January 1979 until his assassination in May of that year, went so far as to remark, 'I have not yet encountered any problem relating to Islamic government the key to solving which I was unable to find in *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*'.⁶⁹

To all outward appearances the very quintessence of the ascetic and retiring scholar, Ṭabāṭabā'ī was thus by no means negligent or unaware of the political sphere. Nonetheless, he played little if any discernible role in the intense and prolonged struggle led by Imām Khomeini and his associates that culminated in the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 and the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Only once did Ṭabāṭabā'ī sign a joint communiqué issued on topics of the day by the '*ulamā*' of Qum. This was in late 1962, when he joined eight other signatories in denouncing government plans for the enfranchisement of women.⁷⁰ By the time the revolution began, he was too physically frail to have participated even marginally. However, the leading role played by many of his students in the revolution indicates that the attitudes and teachings he had inculcated in them were at the very least compatible with support

⁶⁷ *Qānūn-i asāsī-yi jumbūri-yi islāmī-yi Īrān* (Tehran, 1372 SH/1993), 54–5.

⁶⁸ *Tafsīr al-Mīzān* (Tehran, 1362 SH/1983), iv. 97–141. See also Subḥānī, 'Shakhsiyatī ki ba tanhā'ī millatī būd', 114.

⁶⁹ Cited by Mişbah Yazdī, 'Hukūmat dar Qur'ān az naẓar-i *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*', in *Yādbūd: Yādvāra-yi 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī dar Kāzarūn*, 204. On Ṭabāṭabā'ī's political philosophy, see further Muḥammad Javād Şāhibī, 'Falsafa-yi siyāsī az didgāh-i 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī', *Kayhān-i Andīsha*, 36 (Mihr-Ābān, 1368/September–October, 1989), 13–19.

⁷⁰ Sayyid Ḥamid Rūḥānī, *Nahzat-i Imām Khumaynī* (Najaf, n.d.), i. 296–302. While undeniably rejecting the religious permissibility of female enfranchisement, the declaration lays heavy stress on the unconstitutional manner in which the measure was about to be implemented, as well as the conditions of severe repression prevailing at the time.

of the new Islamic order.⁷¹ Several of them were assassinated: Āyatullāh Murtaḍā Muṭahharī in May 1979; Āyatullāh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Bihishtī in June 1981; and Āyatullāh 'Alī Quddūsī, Ṭabāṭabā'ī's son-in-law who had served as revolutionary prosecutor-general, in September 1981.⁷²

Finally, among the interests of the 'Allāma, some mention must be made of his devotion to Persian poetry and its traditions. He was in particular an avid reader of the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfīz, whose verse he would often cite and interpret in the course of his lectures on philosophy, despite his general insistence on keeping separate the language and topics of philosophy on the one hand and gnosis on the other. Ṭabāṭabā'ī is thus said to have found the following line helpful for understanding the relationship between the Necessary Existent and contingent existents: 'How did it happen that the shadow of the beloved fell on

⁷¹ S. H. Nasr has sought repeatedly to insinuate, however, that a basic discrepancy exists between 'the traditional Islamic perspective' represented by 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī and the fundamental tendencies of the Islamic Revolution. Thus in 1979 he remarked that an anthology of Shi'ite texts prepared by Ṭabāṭabā'ī was 'particularly pertinent at the present moment when volcanic eruptions and powerful waves of a political nature associated with Islam in general and Shi'ism in particular have made an authentic knowledge of things Islamic imperative' (introduction to *A Shi'ite Anthology*, ed. and trans. William C. Chittick (London, 1980), 11). Seven years later, Nasr went so far as to speak of 'the current aberrations propagated in the name of Islam in general, and Shi'ism in particular', these again supposedly furnishing a particular reason for reading the works of the 'Allāma (Nasr, foreword to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *The Qur'an in Islam: Its Impact and Influence on the Life of Muslims*, trans. Assadullah Yate (London, 1987), 13). Nasr, the only prominent associate of Ṭabāṭabā'ī to leave Iran in the wake of the Islamic Revolution, wrote the following in a text prepared for a seminar to be held in the summer of 1960 but published in 1967, a full four years after the Shah's massacre of demonstrators in June 1963: '... in Shi'ite political theory, until the re-establishment of the true caliphate by the Hidden Imām, kingship is the best possible form of government, and so it is that in Persia, with the coming of the Safavids, kingship became the major support of Shi'ism and has ever since been inextricably tied to the religious life of the country' (see his *Islamic Studies* (Beirut, 1967) 18). This view—which may be fairly characterized as an 'aberration'—can hardly be supported by reference to any of the writings of the 'Allāma.

⁷² It has been plausibly suggested that the 'cultural revolution' Ṭabāṭabā'ī inaugurated with the teaching of philosophy and *tafsīr* served as the necessary complement to the political movement that was launched by Imām Khomeini at around the same time. See Muḥammad Taqī Mišbāḥ, 'Naqsh-i 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī dar ma'ārif-i islāmī', *Yādnāma-yi 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī*, 190.

the lover?/We were needy of him, and he was yearning for us.⁷³ Among Arabic poets, he felt a special kinship with the Sufi, Ibn al-Fāriḍ.⁷⁴ He composed a certain amount of poetry himself, including versified treatises on learned topics such as grammar, logic and calligraphy, as well as *ghazals* of gnostic content, some of the latter being in ‘pure Persian’ (*fārsī-yi sara*), i.e., a Persian making no use of Arabic loanwords.⁷⁵

Weakened for many years by cardiac and neurological problems, Ṭabāṭabā’ī withdrew from teaching activity and became increasingly absorbed in private devotion as the end of his life drew near. In 1401/1981, he stopped as usual in Damavand while returning to Qum from his annual summer visit to Mashhad. He fell seriously ill and was taken to hospital in Tehran. The prospects for recovery were seen to be dim, and he was therefore taken to his home in Qum, where he was rigorously secluded from all but his closest students. Somewhat later he was admitted to hospital in Qum, and after roughly a week he passed away, at nine o’clock in the morning of Muḥarram 18, 1402/November 7, 1981. It is said that during the last moments of his life he had a vision of the Ma’sūmīn, and remarked with perfect lucidity to those present: ‘Those whose arrival I was awaiting have now entered the room.’⁷⁶ He was laid to rest the following day, close to the tombs of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karīm Ḥā’irī and Āyatullāh Khwānsārī; the funeral prayers were led by Āyatullāh Gulpāyagānī.⁷⁷

This sketch of the events and scholarly accomplishments that constitute the biography of ‘Allama Ṭabāṭabā’ī falls inevitably short of depicting the totality of his spiritual persona, that essential nature of which his various achievements were so many manifestations. The deficiency may, however, be remedied to some degree by drawing on reminiscences by his foremost students and associates.

⁷³ Aḥmadī, ‘Akhlaq-i ‘Allāma va yek baḥth-i falsafī’, 174–6.

⁷⁴ Al-Tihrānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭī’a*, 83.

⁷⁵ No complete collection of Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s poetry appears to have been published. For samples, however, see *Kayhān-i Farhangī*, 6.8, 4, 7, and 9; Ja’far Subḥānī, ‘Shakhṣiyatī ke ba tanhā’ī millatī būd’, 114; the newspaper *Āstān-i Quds* (Mashhad), 2.249 (24 Ābān 1368/November 15, 1989); and al-Tihrānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭī’a*, 83–92.

⁷⁶ Subḥānī, ‘Shakhṣiyatī ki ba tanhā’ī millatī būd’, 116.

⁷⁷ Al-Tihrānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭī’a*, 123. For Imām Khomeini’s message of condolence to the family and students of the ‘Allāma, see Khomeini, *Saḥīfa-yi Nūr* (Tehran, 1361 SH/1982), xv. 220.

They report with unanimity that utter devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt was one of his foremost characteristics. On his annual summer visit to Mashhad, he would kiss the grille enclosing the tomb of Imām Riḍā with great passion, and often spend the night in front of it, engaged in supplication. Throughout the year, but especially during Muḥarram and Ramaḍān, he would attend sessions of *rauza-khwāni* and lament the sufferings that had befallen the Household of the Prophet. As for 'Āshūrā, this was the only day during the year when he suspended his scholarly activities. Apart from these signs of devotion observable to others, it seems plain that Ṭabāṭabā'ī was also one of those select Shī'ī gnostics and scholars who, according to tradition, beheld and conversed with the Ma'šūmīn by way of visionary experience.⁷⁸

A second and no doubt related characteristic was the extreme modesty and humility the 'Allāma displayed throughout his life. He was never heard to utter the pronoun, 'I', whether in Persian or Arabic.⁷⁹ Unlike many if not most of the luminaries of Qum, he would never permit his hand to be kissed, withdrawing it into his sleeve if anyone made an attempt to do so.⁸⁰ He always refused to lead anyone in congregational prayer, even his own students, and when in Qum regularly joined the sunset prayer led at the Fayziya *madrasa* by Āyatullāh Muḥammad Taqī Khwānsārī. The same humility displayed itself in his scholarly and pedagogical activities. When criticizing scholars of the past with whom he differed on certain matters—as, for example, Majlisī—he did so with the utmost courtesy and circumspection. When Āyatullāh Nāṣir Makārim-Shīrāzī, entrusted with the task of translating *Tafsīr al-Mizān* into Persian, informed Ṭabāṭabā'ī that he disagreed with certain of his views, he unhesitatingly authorized him to record his dissenting point of view in footnotes to the translation.⁸¹ When teaching, he never permitted himself to assume the position of authority implied by leaning on a cushion or against the wall, instead sitting upright on the ground, just like his students.⁸² He was patient and forbearing with the questions and objections raised by his students, giving generously of his time even to the immature among them.

⁷⁸ Bid-i-Hindī, 'Mufasssīr va ḥakīm-i ilāhī', 63, 77; Aḥmad Luqmānī, 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Mizān-i mā'rīfat*, 90; Aḥmadī, 'Akhlāq-i 'Allāma va yek baḥth-i falsafī', 172; al-Tihirānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭī'a*, 93.

⁷⁹ Subḥānī, 'Maqām-i 'ilmī va farhangī-yi 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī', 7; Bid-i-Hindī, 'Mufasssīr va ḥakīm-i ilāhī', 63, quoting Āyatullāh Muḥammad Taqī Miṣbāḥ.

⁸⁰ Al-Tihirānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭī'a*, 106.

⁸¹ Luqmānī, 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Mizān-i mā'rīfat*, 82.

⁸² Al-Tihirānī, *al-Shams al-sāṭī'a*, 75.

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's material circumstances in Qum were of a piece with this utter lack of self-importance. As already remarked, he had no access to the funds reserved for the students and teachers of *fiqh*, and sometimes he lacked even the money to light a lamp in his modest home in the Yakhchāl-i Qāḏī district of Qum.⁸³ The house was too small to accommodate the throng of students that would come to visit him, and he would therefore sit on the steps in front of it to receive them. Unlike many scholars, he did not amass a vast personal library, although he did leave behind a small collection of manuscripts.⁸⁴ It was not only his students who benefited from his modest and unassuming nature. Such was his affection for his family that he would often rise to his feet when his wife or children entered the room, and when it became necessary to leave the home and buy those two essential lubricants of daily life, tea and cigarettes, the 'Allāma himself would undertake the task instead of imposing it on his family.⁸⁵

Such was the outward demeanour of one who, in the view of his disciples, had become 'a mirror for the spirits of the Ma'ṣūmīn', who had attained a degree of detachment from this world that permitted him to observe directly the forms of the unseen.⁸⁶

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⁸³ Ibid, 97.

⁸⁴ For a list of these manuscripts, see al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī 'Maktabat al-'Allāma al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī', *Turāthunā*, 8.7–8 (Rabi' II–Ramaḏān, 1407/December, 1986–April, 1987), 150–63.

⁸⁵ Bīd-i-Hindī, 'Mufassir va ḥakīm-i ilāhī', 76.

⁸⁶ Al-Tihrānī, *al-Shams al-Sā'ī'a*, 101; Bīd-i-Hindī, 'Mufassir va ḥakīm-i ilāhī', 63, citing Āyatullāh Muṭahharī.