

**Kernel of the Kernel, Concerning the Wayfaring
and Spiritual Journey of the People of Intellect,
A Shi`i Approach to Sufism**

Sayyid Muhammad Husyan Husayni Tihrani, ed.

Mohammad H. Faghfoory, trans.

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Kernel of the Kernel is a recension by Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Husyan Husayni Tihrani (d. 1995) of the oral teachings of Allamah Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai (d. 1982), one of the most prominent Iranian ‘ulama of the twentieth century. The main text has chapters entitled “Kernel of the Kernel,” “Description of the Realms Preceding the Realm of Khulus,” “Undifferentiated Description of the Path and Methods of Wayfaring toward God,” and

“Differentiated Description of the Path and Methods of Wayfaring toward God.” *Kernel of the Kernel* concludes with a general index, an index of Qur’anic verses and *ahadith*, an index of the sayings of the Shi’i Imams, and an appendix of notes on saints and scholars cited in the text that contains brief biographies of 37 people.

The book consists of Allamah Tabatabai’s teachings, which are augmented by an interesting commentary/introduction by the editor, Allamah Tihrani. Its core part is further prefaced by the translator’s (Muhammad H. Faghfoory) introduction and informative notes on Allamah Tihrani’s life and work. Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s foreword is the external shell that puts the text’s general esoteric trajectory and the characters involved in composing it in context. Nasr’s foreword, the translator’s notes, and the editor’s introduction are interspersed with teachings and stories of the lives of the Shi’i sages and scholars of the past several centuries. This makes the text of interest to students of Sufi hagiography in general, and of Shi’i intellectual life in particular.

Kernel of the Kernel is in the genre of the Shi’i tradition of explicating the stages of the spiritual path and the doctrinal foundations of wayfaring. Allamah Tihrani begins by discussing the complementary relationship between Islam’s *exoteric* and *esoteric* aspects, and argues that the straight path means combining both of these aspects. As much as contemplation, intellection, logic, reason, and rational argumentation are praised, it is by submitting the heart that inward witnessing is achieved. This complementary relationship is the book’s underlying theme. Thus, the discussions on “the spiritual traveler” and “immersion in the Divine essence of the Lord,” for example, are balanced with such topics as “the station of being present in the world of multiplicity while simultaneously witnessing and experiencing the realms of Divine Lordship.” The text follows with a description of the inner meanings of Islam, faith, migration, spiritual struggle, submission, and ritual practices. At every step of the spiritual path, the author affirms the complementary nature of the relationship between wayfaring in the spiritual realm and being in this world. The last chapter is a condensed description of the path and the methods of wayfaring.

In addition, this book is a fine example of the kind of writing that demonstrates the continuing tradition of esoteric commentaries. The author’s readings of the Qur’anic verses provide a wealth of information on Sufism’s Qur’anic origins. And, emphasizing the role of the Twelver Shi’i Imams illuminates Sufism’s special relationship with Shi’ism. The ease with which other readings of Qur’anic verses and Hadith commentaries blend with Persian mystical poetry to illustrate a point is noteworthy. This flexible

approach to the latent meanings of traditional sources of Islamic knowledge puts this book in the area of nonlinear commentaries on the Qur'an and Hadith. The lucid method of argumentation, brought about by drawing from a variety of sources, offers great potential for countering the reified and reductive readings of traditional Islamic sources.

Whereas usually not much is known about the personal lives of the authors writing in this genre, the translator's introduction provides an interesting examination of the intellectual life and political activities of Allamah Tihrani, who lived during one of Iran's most turbulent historical periods. Thus, in this book we have teachings on spiritual wayfaring by an esoteric master who was, to some extent, involved in his time's major political events and instantiated the combination and balance of spiritual wayfaring and worldly activities.

The translator notes that Allamah Tihrani was active in organizing the clergy and in defying the Shah's government and its reforms in the early 1960s (pp. xxvi-xxvii). He advised the late Ayatullah Khomeini on different issues and was instrumental in downgrading the plans for Ayatullah Khomeini's execution after his arrest in 1963. After the 1979 Islamic revolution, Allamah Tihrani presented Ayatullah Khomeini with a twenty-point program to consolidate the new regime. The list of Allamah Tihrani's publications (pp. xxix-xxx) includes works on political theory and Islamic government. A parallel reading of *Kernel of the Kernel* with one of his more "worldly" books would be particularly interesting for a study of the effects of an esoteric master's spiritual wayfaring on his sociopolitical views.

Finally, it should be noted that a gender-sensitive reading of *Kernel of the Kernel* would find it problematic that no women are found among all the Shi'i scholars and masters of esoteric sciences. While the thrust of many of the book's arguments is directed at liberating oneself from "society's customs and habits" (p. 52), the sociocultural constructions of gender and class are nevertheless operative. For instance, the all-pervasive themes of traveling as well as of (spiritual) battle and warfare are all masculine in character. This is not to negate that the average female or male believer can identify with the text's esoteric message. However, *Kernel of the Kernel* addresses (and is about) an exclusive class of (male) saintly souls. The subtitle of the book, *Concerning the Wayfaring and Spiritual Journey of the People of Intellect [Ulu al-Albab]* might just as well have been translated as ... *Spiritual Journey of the "Men" of Intellect*.

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