



BEHBAHĀNĪ, MOḤAMMAD-‘ALĪ

BEHBAHĀNĪ, ĀQĀ MOḤAMMAD-‘ALĪ B. MOḤAMMAD-BĀQER (1144-1216/1731-1801), Shi‘ite *mojtahed* celebrated primarily for his ferocious hatred of Sufis. He was a son of the celebrated [Āqā Moḥammad-Bāqer Behbahānī](#) who was also his first teacher. He was born and received most of his training in Karbalā’, but he is said also to have spent two years in Mecca. Returning from Mecca to Karbalā’, he was dissuaded from settling there by an outbreak of the plague, and he took up residence in Kermānšāh, which remained his home for the rest of his life. In his learned attainments and determination to exert the juridical prerogatives of the *mojtahed*, he proved a worthy successor to his father, who is related, however, to have denounced him for excessive worldliness (Moḥammad b. Solaymān Tonokābonī, *Qeşaş al-‘olamā’*, Tehran, n.d., p. 200). According to a Sufi and therefore possibly prejudiced source Āqā Moḥammad-‘Alī was extremely rich and “gave much attention to pomp and adornment” (Zayn-al-‘Ābedīn Šīrvānī, *Riāz al-sīāha*, ed. A. Ḥ. Rabbānī, Tehran, 1339 Š./1960, p. 834). He was able to hold his own with Āgā Moḥammad Shah, the first Qajar king: when he tried to expel Behbahānī from the shrine of Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Aẓīm, in order to avenge a slight he had offered him some years earlier, Behbahānī successfully defied him, and Āgā Moḥammad Shah ended by paying him a deferential visit in his lodgings (*Qeşaş al-‘olamā’*, p. 200). Behbahānī also had great influence with Āgā Moḥammad Shah’s successor, Faṭḥ-‘Alī Shah. Sir John Malcolm, who was acquainted with Behbahānī and acknowledged his great learning, wrote that



in 1800 “he enjoyed the highest respect and confidence of the king” (*History of Persia*, London, 1829, II, p. 271). The most important consequence of this royal trust was the freedom with which Behbahānī was able to go about the persecution of the Sufis.

The first victim of Behbahānī’s hostility to the Sufis was Ma‘šūm-‘Alīšāh, the celebrated renewer of the Ne‘matallāhī order in Iran. With the cooperation of the secular authorities, Behbahānī had Ma‘šūm-‘Alīšāh arrested in Kermānšāh in 1211/1795, and then publicly interrogated him on vital points of doctrine. Finding his answers incriminating, he had him poisoned and his body secretly disposed of (Širāzī, III, p. 175). Nūr-‘Alīšāh, a close associate of Ma‘šūm-‘Alīšāh, was permitted to leave Kermānšāh in safety, but he was poisoned in Mosul the following year, possibly by emissaries of Behbahānī, although he denied all responsibility (Pourjavady and Wilson, p. 130). A third prominent Ne‘matallāhī, Moẓaffar-‘Alīšāh, was arrested in Kermān at the behest of Behbahānī and sent to Tehran to be viewed as a living specimen of heresy by Faṭḥ-‘Alī Shah. The monarch sent him under escort, to Behbahānī in Kermānšāh, who had him put to death in 1215/1800. Behbahānī also encompassed the death of numerous lesser Sufis, such as Āqā Maḥdī and Mīrzā Maḥdī, who had been spreading the Ne‘matallāhī way in Hamadān, but the total number of his victims is not known: he is reputed to have remarked to a colleague, Shaikh Ja‘far Najafī, “I am constantly obliged to carry out various sentences of execution and corporal punishment (*ḥadd*)” (*Qeṣaṣ al-‘olamā’*, p. 199).

Āqā MoḤammad-Bāqer Behbahānī expounded the reasons for his hostility to the Sufis in the *Resāla-ye kayrātīya*, a collection of letters exchanged by him with various notables between 1211/1794 and 1214/1797 on what he viewed as the menace posed by the Ne‘matallāhīs. They had no concern for ritual purity, he claimed; considered permissible the use of narcotics, regarded themselves as exempt from the need to pray; and—worst of all—designated Ma‘šūm-‘Alīšāh as their *ma‘būd* (object of worship), prostrating themselves before him (Širāzī, III, pp. 176-82).

Āqā MoḤammad-‘Alī Behbahānī died in 1216/1801, according to Ne‘matallāhī legend as the result of the imprecations of a dervish called Bodalā, whom he had put to death the previous year. Of the four sons he left behind, the youngest, Āqā Maḥmūd, is said to have totally contradicted his father’s predilections and become a Ne‘matallāhī initiate himself (Širāzī, III, p. 182). In general, too, the violent hostility to Sufism that Behbahānī had practiced found



few imitators after his passing, and Ne‘matallāhī Sufism became established in Iran as a subordinate form of religious expression.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

One of Behbahānī’s sons, Āqā Aḥmad, wrote a lengthy autobiography including mention of his father (*Mer’āt al-aḥwāl*, BM ms. add. 24.052).

See also concerning his career Sir John Malcolm, *History of Persia*, London, 1829, II, pp. 271-99; Rieu, *Persian Manuscripts I*, pp. 33-34; Moḥammad b. Solaymān Tonokābonī, *Qeşaş al-‘olamā’*, Tehran, n.d., pp. 199-201; Moḥammad-Bāqer K̄vānsārī, *Rawżāt al-jannāt fī aḥwāl al-‘olamā’ wa’l-sādāt*, Tehran, 1304/1887, p. 660; Zayn-al-Ābedīn Šīrvānī, *Rīāz al-sīāḥa*, ed. A. Ḥ. Rabbānī, Tehran, 1339 Š./1960, p. 834; idem; *Bostān al-sīāḥa*, ed. S. ‘A. Mostawfī, Tehran, 1315 Š./1897, pp. 88, 234, 494; Ma’šūm-‘Alīšāh Šīrāzī, *Ṭarā’eq al-ḥaqā’eq*, ed. M. J. Maḥjūd, Tehran, 1345 Š./1966, III, pp. 174-82, 196, 207-08, 469-71, 591; Moḥammad Ḥerz-al-Dīn, *Ma’āref al-rejāl*, Najaf, 1384/1964, II, pp. 309-10; Javād Nūrbakš, introd. to Nūr-‘Alīšāh, *Jannāt al-weşāl*, Tehran, 1348 Š./1969, pp. xii-xiii; Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969, pp. 39-40, 43, 63; Moḥammad Šarīf Rāzī, *Ganjīna-ye dāneşmandān*, Tehran, 1354 Š./1975, VI, pp. 355-58; Nasrollah Pourjavady and Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Kings of Love*, Tehran, 1978, pp. 128-131; ‘Alī Davānī, *Āqā Moḥammad-Bāqer b. Moḥammad Akmal Eşfahānī ma’rūf be Waḥīd-e Behbahānī*, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1362 Š./1983, pp. 275-331; Mo‘allem Ḥabībābādī, *Makārem al-āṭār*, 2nd ed., Isfahan, 1362 Š./1983, II, pp. 561-69.

Behbahānī’s *Resālā-ye kayrātīya* appears never to have been published. Extracts from it have been printed in Ma’šūm-‘Alīšāh, *Ṭarā’eq al-ḥaqā’eq* III, pp. 176-82, and Sa‘īd Nafīsī, *Tārīḳ-e ejtemā‘ī wa sīāsī-e Īrān dar dawra-ye mo‘āşer*, Tehran, 1344 Š./1965, II, pp. 43-44, and a quite full account of the work is given in Malcolm, *History of Persia* II, pp. 271-87.

Another work in refutation of Sufism has been attributed to Behbahānī: *Qaṭ‘*



al-maqāl fī radd ahl al-ẓalāl, but this may be simply a different title for *Resāla-ye kayrātiya*. For lists of Behbahānī’s other writings, many of them polemical in nature, see *Qeṣaṣ al-‘olamā’*, pp. 200-01, *Ma‘āref al-rejāl* II, p. 309, and *Makārem al-āṭār*, II, pp. 562-65; these include a treatise on the permissibility of being simultaneously married to two female descendants of the Prophet, written in refutation of Shaikh Yūsof Baḥrānī (d. 1186/1773), the well-known Aḳbārī scholar.