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The Threshold of the Sacred: A Phenomenology of Pilgrimage in Iranian Islam between *Tašbīh* and *Tanzīh*

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Abstract

This article offers a phenomenological analysis of pilgrimage (*ziyārah*) in Iranian Islam, arguing that its defining feature is a threshold character that sustains the dynamic theological tension between divine immanence (*tašbīh*) and transcendence (*tanzīh*). Moving beyond the singular *axis mundi* of Mecca, the study examines the proliferation of sacred shrines in Iran as multiple sacred centers. It first establishes the theological and mystical foundations of sacred space by exploring debates on God's attributes and key concepts in the thought of Ibn ʿArabī (the *barzakh*) and Mullā Ṣadrā (gradational unity of existence). It then employs the frameworks of Mircea Eliade (mythic time) and Henry Corbin (the imaginal world, *malakūt*, and subtle time) to analyze the pilgrim's spatiotemporal experience. The article identifies a central paradox: the multiplication of sacred sites, while fulfilling a desire for proximity to the divine, risks dissolving the sacred–profane distinction essential to hierophany. It resolves this paradox by introducing the concept of the threshold. This is demonstrated both in the liminal architecture of Iranian shrines (e.g., the vestibule or *hashtī*) and in the theological function of these sites as mediators (*tawassul*) that facilitate nearness to God while rigorously preserving His transcendence. Ultimately, pilgrimage is presented not as a final arrival but as a liminal practice of perpetual approach, embodying the enduring interplay of presence and absence.

Keywords: pilgrimage (*ziyārah*), Iranian Islam, phenomenology, *tašbīh* and *tanzīh*, threshold, sacred space

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1. Introduction

Pilgrimage, as a profound spiritual practice, occupies a central place in the Islamic tradition, serving as a bridge between the divine and the human, the sacred and the mundane. Its significance is deeply rooted in the Qurʾān and the life of the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH), who envisioned the pilgrimage to the Sacred Mosque in Mecca as a pivotal moment in the early Islamic community. In 6 AH, the Prophet's vision of entering the Sacred Mosque with his followers (Qurʾān 48:27) marked the beginning of a transformative journey that culminated in the Farewell Pilgrimage (*Ḥajjat al-Widāʿ*) in 10 AH. This event, described as the perfection of the Islamic faith (Qurʾān 5:3), not only solidified the rituals of Hajj but also established pilgrimage as a cornerstone of Muslim identity. The Kaʿba, believed to be the highest elevated place on earth and aligned with the center of heaven (Eliade 1985, 42), symbolizes this divine connection, making pilgrimage a unique act of worship.

While Hajj is universally recognized as the most important pilgrimage in Islam, the practice of visiting sacred sites extends beyond Mecca, particularly within the Shīʿī tradition. Shīʿī scholars justify such practices through Qurʾānic verses (e.g., 9:84; 4:64) and Hadith (both in the Sunni and Shīʿī tradition) emphasizing the spiritual and intercessory role of the Prophet in the first place and then the Imams. However, pilgrimage in Iranian Islam[1] goes beyond a mere ritualistic journey; it is a deeply lived experience that interweaves theology, mysticism, and culture. A phenomenological approach, which focuses on the pilgrim's lived experience, offers a valuable framework for understanding this phenomenon. If one aspect of the phenomenology of pilgrimage involves the creation of sacred space through the pilgrim's intentions and rituals (Poupard 1984, 1300–1301), this paper seeks to explore its dimensions in Iranian Islam by examining its theological and mystical foundations, analyzing the lived experiences of pilgrims, with a focus on the role that thresholds play in this ritual. Through this inquiry, we aim to reveal the profound meanings and transformative impact of pilgrimage within Iranian Islam, highlighting its enduring significance in both spiritual and societal contexts.

Pilgrimage has often been scrutinized for its compatibility with the monotheistic essence of the faith. Some scholars, such as Mircea Eliade, have argued that pilgrimage practices might appear to contradict Islamic monotheism (*tawḥīd*), suggesting that they were adopted by Prophet Muḥammad to align Islam with the Abrahamic traditions (Eliade 1985, 79). However, this perspective overlooks the profound theological and mystical underpinnings of pilgrimage in Islam, particularly as articulated in the Qurʾān and Islamic philosophy. To understand pilgrimage in Iranian

Islam, it is essential to explore how the cosmos is related to Allah, how sacred places are distinguished from profane ones, and how these sites symbolize divine presence. This discussion begins with an examination of Allah's attributes and the human capacity to comprehend them, as these form the foundation for understanding the sacredness of pilgrimage sites.

2. Theological and Mystical Foundations of Pilgrimage in Iranian Islam

The Qurʾān presents a complex discourse on Allah's attributes, which can be categorized into three types: (1) verses emphasizing Allah's transcendence and incomparability, such as "Naught is like unto Him, yet He is the Hearer, the Seer" (42:11);[2] (2) verses describing Allah through positive attributes, such as mercy and knowledge; and (3) verses employing anthropomorphic language, such as Allah mounting the Throne[3], having hands[4], eyes[5], or a shin[6]. These verses have sparked significant theological debates, leading to three primary interpretive approaches in Islamic thought:

1. **The Literalist Approach (*tašbīh*):** Advocates of this approach, such as the Ashʿarīs, interpret anthropomorphic verses literally, affirming that Allah possesses attributes like a body, albeit one that is incomparable to human forms (*bi-lā kayf*—without asking how). This position, known as *tajsīm* (embodiment), asserts that Allah can be observed in the afterlife (al-Ashʿarī 1980, 213–218; al-Juwaynī 1950, 174–185).
2. **The Transcendentalist Approach (*tanzīh*):** The Muʿtazilīs and Shīʿī theologians, however, reject any resemblance between Allah and creation, emphasizing His absolute transcendence. They argue that the doctrine of *tawḥīd* necessitates Allah's uniqueness and interpret anthropomorphic verses metaphorically (*majāz*). This approach condemns literal interpretations as akin to idolatry (*širk*) (ʿAbd al-Jabbār 1988, 128; Ibn Bābawayh 1978, 101–107).
3. **The Suspension Approach (*tafwīḍ* or *taʿṭīl*):** Some scholars, such as the followers of *tafwīḍ*, argue that anthropomorphic verses are beyond human comprehension and should be accepted without interpretation. They advocate for suspending judgment on these matters (al-Shahrastānī 1985, 92–93; al-Subḥānī 1415 AH, 105–107).

These debates highlight the tension between *tašbīh* and *tanzīh*, which are central to understanding the relationship between Allah and the cosmos. *Tašbīh* refers to the

immanence of Allah, where His attributes are reflected in creation, while *tanzīh* emphasizes His absolute transcendence and incomparability. The interplay between these concepts is crucial for understanding the sacredness of pilgrimage sites, as they symbolize both Allah's presence (*tašbīh*) and His transcendence (*tanzīh*).

The mystical tradition in Islam, particularly in Sufism, offers a nuanced resolution to the *tašbīh–tanzīh* dichotomy. Mystics like Aḥmad al-Ghazālī and Rumi emphasize the experiential dimensions of these concepts. For Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, the journey of love (*ʿišq*) begins with seeing the beloved (Allah) in everything (*tašbīh*) but culminates in seeing nothing but the beloved (*tanzīh*), transcending duality (al-Ghazālī 1989, 58). Rumi, on the other hand, in his famous parable of Moses and the shepherd, illustrates how different perspectives on Allah's nature are valid, as everyone relates to the divine in their unique way (Rūmī 1926, 311).

While these approaches are more epistemological, Ibn ʿArabī gives a profound ontological dimension to *tašbīh* and *tanzīh*. Although he borrowed the terms from *kalām* (Chittick 1989, 69), there is a slight difference between Allah and God in itself (*aḥad*). While *aḥad* is as close as we can get to a name that denotes the God in itself, Allah "designates the divine Essence inasmuch as It comprehends all attributes in an exclusive manner" (Chittick 1998, 53). Therefore, Allah belongs to the state of first manifestation of names (*wāḥid*). In this regard, he argues that God in itself (*aḥad*) is absolutely transcendent (*tanzīh*), but His names and attributes manifest in creation (*tašbīh*). *Tanzīh* refers to *aḥad* in itself, and *tašbīh* refers to Him as manifested by His names (al-Qayṣarī 1997, 127). As he says: God does not disclose Himself in the name One, and there cannot be self-disclosure within it, nor in the name Allah. But self-disclosure does occur in the other names that are known to us.

This duality is encapsulated in the Qurʾānic verse already mentioned, "Naught is like unto Him, yet He is the Hearer, the Seer" (42:11), which affirms both Allah's transcendence and immanence. Hence, the cosmos as such only has access to God in His state of being manifest or immanent, which itself is a result of His divine name, the Manifest (*ẓāhir*). This is why Ibn ʿArabī says, "every name in the cosmos is His name, not the name of other than He. For it is the name of the Manifest in the locus of manifestation" (Chittick 1989, 95). On the other hand, in His hidden or transcendent state, He remains forever unknown to the cosmos, which is a result of His name, the Hidden (*bāṭin*).

For Ibn ʿArabī, *tanzīh* refers to Allah in Himself, beyond all creation and comprehension, while *tašbīh* refers to Allah as He manifests through His names and attributes in the cosmos. He writes: "If you affirm transcendence (*tanzīh*), you confine

Him; if you affirm similarity (*tašbīh*), you limit Him; but if you affirm both, you are on the right path and are a leader in the sciences of divine knowledge" (Ibn ʿArabī 1405 AH, 194).

Ibn ʿArabī introduces the concept of the *barzakh*, a metaphysical realm where Allah's attributes are reflected in creation, bridging the gap between the divine and the cosmos. Without the *barzakh*, God would be incomparable but in no way similar. In other words, there would be no creation. It is the *barzakh* that brings the cosmos into existence and allows us to speak of His similarity to the creatures and the creatures' similarity to Him. The *barzakh* is the ontological locus for *tašbīh* (Chittick 1989, 181). The *barzakh*, which in Islamic eschatology refers to the state after one's personal death before the Day of Judgment, for Ibn ʿArabī functions as a realm of divine self-disclosure. It is an "isthmus" between two realities, non-delimited Being and the nonexistent things. He refers to this intermediary nature in language, thought, and being. As he conceives it, the *barzakh* separates and conjoins at once, establishing the two sides of the in-between in a mutual relationship.

This framework allows for a dynamic understanding of sacred spaces, where pilgrimage sites serve as loci of divine manifestation (*tašbīh*) while simultaneously pointing to Allah's transcendence (*tanzīh*). Thus, God for Ibn ʿArabī can be both unique and multiple, exoteric and esoteric, creator and creature, and they are all correlated (Jahāngīrī 1996, 281–288), and this resonates with the verse in the Qurʾān saying that "He is the First, and the Last, and the Outward, and the Inward; and He is Knower of all things" (57:3).[7]

Mullā Ṣadrā further develops Ibn ʿArabī's ideas within a philosophical framework. He posits the primacy of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*), asserting that all beings share in the same existential reality (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), albeit in varying degrees of intensity. This gradational unity (*waḥdat tashkīkī*) explains how Allah's attributes are reflected in creation: while all beings possess attributes like knowledge and power, only Allah possesses them in their absolute form (Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī 1981, 6:335). This philosophical perspective provides a metaphysical basis for understanding pilgrimage sites as spaces where Allah's presence is most intensely manifested, yet always in a manner that affirms His transcendence. Thus, when we read in the Qurʾān that "Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God"[8] (2:115), one can have an insight of the meaning that it reveals. This might even provide an explanation why there are always the names of Allah in the sacred places in Islam.

This theological-mystical framework is vividly enacted in the lived rituals of Iranian pilgrimage. For instance, the canonical *ziyārat-nāmah* of Imam Riḍā (ʿa) recited at his

shrine in Mashhad begins with salutations that affirm both the Imam's exalted status and his ultimate servitude: "*al-salām ʿalayka yā waliyya Allāh… al-salām ʿalayka yā ʿabda Allāh*" (Peace be upon you, O friend of God… Peace be upon you, O servant of God). This encapsulates the *tašbīh*/*tanzīh* dynamic: the Imam is a "friend" (*walī*), a locus of divine grace and nearness, yet simultaneously a "servant" (*ʿabd*), distinct and subordinate to the One. The pilgrim's physical circumambulation (*ṭawāf*) of the tomb, mirroring the *ṭawāf* of the Kaʿba, is a kinetic affirmation of this sacred center as a point of connection (*tašbīh*), while the intention (*niyyah*) directing the act solely to God upholds *tanzīh*.

For Henry Corbin (1903–1978), this notion identifies a unique dimension within Iranian thought, from Suhrawardī (1154–1191) to Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī (1753–1826). For Corbin, this realm symbolizes both bodily and intelligible substances because it is essentially composed of light (*nūrānī*). This realm is immaterial matter and the intangible corporealized into a subtle body, functioning as the boundary that both separates and unites them. In the speculative theosophy of Shīʿism, this universe is typically referred to as *barzakh* (Corbin 1979, 105). Corbin also highlighted that this concept has appeared in various forms in Iranian Islam, such as "huitième climat" (*iqlīm-i hashtum*), the "*mundus imaginalis*" (*ʿālam-i mithāl*), and "nowhere" (*nākojā-ābād*).

The *barzakh*, which is best described as a climate, has direct implications for the practice of pilgrimage. Sacred sites, such as the shrines of Imams in Iran, serve as spaces where Allah's presence is symbolically manifested (*tašbīh*), enabling pilgrims to experience a sense of divine proximity. At the same time, these sites reinforce Allah's transcendence (*tanzīh*), ensuring that worship remains solely directed toward Him. This dual dynamic shapes the pilgrim's experience, as rituals performed at these sites embody both closeness to and separation from the divine—like the function of the *kiswa* (veil) of the Kaʿba. For example, the act of entering a shrine (*tašarrof*) symbolizes the pilgrim's spiritual journey toward Allah, moving from one sacred space to another, while the recitation of supplications (*duʿāʾ*) acknowledges His ultimate transcendence.

While this dynamic can be seen in other forms of Islamic pilgrimage, it is more pronounced in Iranian Islam and in the role the threshold plays both in theory and practice—that is, in architecture. The theological and mystical dimensions of pilgrimage in Iranian Islam reveal a profound interplay between *tašbīh* and *tanzīh*. Pilgrimage sites are not merely physical locations but metaphysical spaces where the divine is both immanent and transcendent. This understanding deepens the pilgrim's

experience, transforming it into a journey of spiritual realization and divine connection. Despite accusations that the Shīʿa worship the graves of Imams, they assert that, even when bowing at these shrines, their intention is not to worship them as God but to seek nearness to Him. This also manifests the dynamics of presence and absence at work in these shrines.

This intention is rigorously codified in Shīʿī legal and theological texts. For example, the prominent jurist Shaykh al-Ṭāʾifah al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067) dedicates sections in his juridical works to the *ādāb al-ziyārah* (etiquettes of visitation), emphasizing that gestures of respect—such as touching or kissing the shrine's grille—are forms of veneration (*tabrīk*, *iḥtirām*) for the "signs of God" (Qurʾān 22:32) and a means of seeking intercession (*tawassul*). He explicitly contrasts this with acts of worship (*ʿibādah*), such as prostration (*sujūd*), which are permissible only for God. Thus, the ritual practice itself is architecturally and legally designed to navigate the threshold, allowing for an embodied *tašbīh* while legislating the boundaries of *tanzīh*.

3. The Phenomenology of Pilgrimage: From Mythic Time to Subtle Time

The pilgrim's journey reflects the relationship between *tašbīh* and *tanzīh*, as discussed in the previous part. On one hand, the sacred site—whether the Kaʿba, the shrine of an Imam, or another holy place—serves as a "hierophany," a manifestation of the divine in the material world (*tašbīh*). The pilgrim's physical journey to the site is an act of seeking proximity to the divine through its immanent presence. On the other hand, the spiritual ascent into the transcendent represents the pilgrim's surpassing of the material realm, embodying *tanzīh*—the absolute transcendence of God. This dual movement between immanence and transcendence, similarity and difference, lies at the heart of the pilgrim's experience.

This gives sense to Mircea Eliade arguing that pilgrimage is not merely a physical journey but a sacred act that restores the pilgrim to mythic time (*in illo tempore*), the primordial era when gods, heroes, and ancestors performed foundational acts. Through pilgrimage, the pilgrim re-enacts and reactivates these sacred events, transcending profane, historical time and entering a timeless, mythic reality. Eliade writes:

> Through repetition of the cosmogonic act, concrete time, in which the construction takes place, is projected into mythical time, *in illo tempore* when the foundation of the world occurred. Thus the reality and the enduringness of a construction are assured not only by the transformation of profane space into a transcendent space

> (the center) but also by the transformation of concrete time into mythical time. (Eliade 1954, 20–21)

For Eliade, sacred rituals during pilgrimage are not mere commemorations but actual reactivations of mythic history. The pilgrim's journey to a sacred site, such as the Kaʿba, is equivalent to an ecstatic journey to the *axis mundi* (the center of the world). Upon reaching this center, the pilgrim experiences a breakthrough into another state of being, transcending profane space and entering a "pure region" where the sacred manifests in its totality (Eliade 1952, 43). This experience is a hierophany, where the sacred site becomes a receptacle of transcendent power, differentiating it from its mundane surroundings and imbuing it with meaning and value (Eliade 1954, 4).

Eliade's concept of mythic time is central to understanding the pilgrim's experience. Pilgrimage rituals unfold not only in consecrated space but also in sacred time, which is qualitatively different from profane, historical time. Sacred time is *in illo tempore*—the time of origins ("once upon a time" [*ab origine*])—when the ritual was first performed by divine or heroic beings. By participating in these rituals, the pilgrim becomes contemporaneous with these primordial events, experiencing a return to the sacred origins of the world (Eliade 1954, 20–21).

Henry Corbin, whose work dialogues with Eliade's notions of sacred time and space,[9] extends this framework into the mystical and esoteric dimensions of Iranian Islam. Corbin's phenomenology of pilgrimage emphasizes the pilgrim's orientation toward the *malakūt*—the imaginal world—and the experience of "subtle time" (*zamān laṭīf*). For Corbin, pilgrimage is not merely a journey to a physical site but a spiritual voyage into the *malakūt*, where the pilgrim's "body of light" is transformed and reintegrated into the divine order.

Corbin describes the Kaʿba as the center of the worlds, where the pilgrim's rites have a direct configurative action on the formation of their "body of light" (*jism malakūtī*). He writes:

> For the mystical pilgrim, the pilgrimage and the rites of pilgrimage performed at the Temple of the Kaʿbah have a direct configurative action on the formation of his body of light, on his body's *malakūt*—that is to say, on the attainment of his total form, in the sense that his body of light becomes simultaneously center and periphery of his essential, total being. (Corbin 1989, 208)

The *malakūt* is one of the four realms (*ʿālam al-arbaʿa*) in Islamic cosmology, situated between the material world (*nāsūt*) and the divine realms that are either exclusively for God (*lāhūt*) or that which also includes immaterial entities (*jabarūt*). It is the world of subtle forms and imaginal realities, where every physical entity has a

corresponding imaginal counterpart (*mithāl*) and thus resonates with the notion of *barzakh* in Ibn ʿArabī (Shayegan 1990, 97). Corbin explains that for each thing in the sensible world, there is an Image (*mithāl*) in the *mundus imaginalis* of the *malakūt*, and for each Image there is an archetypal Reality of pure light (Corbin 1991, 181). In Suhrawardī's term, this is the "*nākojā-ābād*" (literally non-where land, i.e., placelessness).

The pilgrim's journey to the *malakūt* is an initiation into the esoteric meaning of pilgrimage, where the physical rites symbolize spiritual transformations. Corbin emphasizes that this journey is not an escape from reality but an ascent into a higher, more real dimension of existence. The pilgrim, guided by the Imam or a spiritual master, may momentarily enter the *malakūt* with the "eyes of inner vision," witnessing events that transcend historical time and space (Corbin 1973, 150).

Unlike the dense, opaque time of the material world (*zaman-i kathīf*), "subtle time" (*zaman-i laṭīf*)—the temporality of the *malakūt*—is the form of temporality that encompasses the spiritual movements and events of the *malakūt*. Corbin writes:

> Subtle time is the form of temporality that comprises all the movements that are accomplished in the world of the Soul, both in the higher *malakūt* which is the world of the *Angeli caelestes* (the 'driving Souls' of the Heavens), and in the lower *malakūt* which is the world of human souls. (Corbin 1991, 180)

Although there can be even higher temporality for higher levels of the cosmos (*zamān alṭaf*), in subtle time the pilgrim experiences a synchronism of past, present, and future, becoming contemporaneous with the primordial events of sacred history. This experience is akin to the "eternal now" of mystical consciousness, where time becomes space, and the pilgrim stands at the intersection of the temporal and the eternal. Corbin draws on the imagery of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* to illustrate this transformation: "Here Time becomes space" (Corbin 1991, 140). Each being has a *res divina* (*amr rabbānī*), a divine Word (*kalimah ilāhīyah*) that is its own *malakūt*, its "esoteric aspect," the inner Man or secret archetypal reality (Corbin 1989, 193). Thus, the sacred site of pilgrimage becomes the manifestation of this *res divina* in the material world (*tašbīh*) but at the same time transcends that toward the esoteric aspect and surpasses that materiality (*tanzīh*).

For both Eliade and Corbin, pilgrimage is an initiation into the sacred mysteries of existence. Eliade frames this initiation as a return to mythic time, while Corbin emphasizes the pilgrim's ascent into the *malakūt* and the transformation of their "body of light." Corbin describes this process as a "pilgrimage of initiation and reintegration," where the pilgrim integrates themselves into the dynamic center of the

Kaʿba, symbolizing the center of their own being (Shayegan 1990, 71).

The pilgrim's journey is also a narrative—a story that unfolds in the imaginal world of the *malakūt*. Corbin explains that the story is therefore not the starting point of the doctrine, but rather the elevation of the doctrine to the level of events which are accomplished in the world of the Soul, in the *malakūt* (Corbin 1971, 216). Through this narrative, the pilgrim becomes an active participant in the sacred history of the cosmos, experiencing the events of hierophany as lived realities rather than distant myths. Sacred time, in Eliade's term, is a primordial mythical time mode present (Eliade 1987, 68). This specific type of temporality and spatiality practice of pilgrimage turns out to be a matter of memory, the way one is related to the past, and thus to the future.

4. The Paradox of Rites and the Multiplicity of Sacred Centers

The phenomenological analysis of pilgrimage, particularly through the works of Eliade and Corbin, emphasizes its role as a spiritual journey to the center of the world. However, as this perspective is extended, it reveals contradictions within its own framework—especially in contexts where the proliferation of sacred sites challenges the very distinction between the sacred and the profane. This contradiction originates in Eliade's very notion of the sacred center, where every pilgrimage site is a symbolic *axis mundi*—a point of contact between the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. He writes: "Not only temples that were thought to be situated at the 'Center of the World,' but every holy place, every place that bore witness to an incursion of the sacred into profane space, was also regarded as a 'center'" (Eliade 1952, 51–52).

In Iran, this idea of the sacred center has been extended in ways that challenge the singularity of any one *axis mundi*. The tombs of Imams and their descendants, as well as sites associated with mystical experiences, function as multiple sacred centers. In this context, rather than speaking of a single "*axis mundi*," we should refer to "*axes mundi*" to emphasize their plurality.

Eliade himself acknowledges this paradox when he states, "The unlimited number of 'Centers' is common among all Oriental civilizations" (Eliade 1952, 39). However, he claims that this multiplicity or even infinity of the center of the world raises no difficulty for religious thought (Eliade 1987, 57) and does not fully account for how this plurality ultimately undermines the exclusivity of the sacred center. If everywhere is a center, then the very notion of the center loses its significance. This is the paradox of rites: every place aspires to be the privileged location of the sacred, yet the multiplication of such places diminishes their unique status (Eliade 1954, 20).

The phenomenon of sacred centers multiplying in Iran cannot be understood without dealing with the paradox. The number of shrines in Iran has grown significantly, with research indicating that there are 9,056 shrines, 79 percent of which are dedicated to Imams and their descendants, while 14.5 percent honor other religious figures (Āyāz 2010, 88). This proliferation reflects a theological discourse that aims to sacralize space on a national scale. While this covers the possibility of residency in the *malakūt*, according to Eliade the very idea of the distinction between sacred and profane necessitates that there can be no permanent dwelling in the *malakūt*, but only a desire to live as near as possible to the center of the world (Eliade 1987, 43). Mystical traditions also insist on the impossibility of permanent dwelling in the *malakūt*. Ibn ʿArabī describes the true mystic not as one who remains in the sacred realm but as one who returns to the everyday world to convey the divine message. This aligns with Corbin's notion that pilgrimage is a journey of self-discovery rather than a destination (Corbin 1989, 255). The tendency to extend residency in the pilgrimage experience contradicts this fundamental principle. True initiation does not end in permanence but in the reintegration into profane existence.

Eliade himself recognized the tension between the inaccessibility of the sacred and the human desire to experience it in everyday life:

> The fact that the first-mentioned—the 'easy' way which allows of the construction of a Centre even in a man's own house—is found nearly everywhere, invites us to regard it as the more significant. It calls attention to something in the human condition that we may call the nostalgia for Paradise. (Eliade 1952, 55)

However, when this nostalgia for the sacred leads to the sacralization of all space, the very structure of religious experience undergoes a fundamental transformation. If everything is declared sacred, then the sacred loses its distinctiveness, and the concept itself becomes meaningless. It is only by insisting on the threshold character of sacred places that the paradox of rites can be resolved. This threshold character ensures that the dynamics of *tašbīh* and *tanzīh* remain functional, preserving the essential division between the sacred and the profane.

The architecture of shrines in Iran exemplifies this principle. Intermediate spaces, such as the *hashtī* (octagon) or vestibule, play a crucial role in the process of initiation. These transitional spaces, characteristic of Iranian architecture, serve as a liminal zone where the pilgrim is required to remove their shoes before entering the shrine. This act of hesitation—pausing at the threshold—symbolically suspends the moment of entry, creating a space of reflection and preparation. It is here, in this intermediary space, that the dynamics of approaching and distancing are enacted, allowing the

pilgrim to navigate the tension between the sacred and the profane. By maintaining these thresholds, the sacred retains its transformative power, and the pilgrim's journey remains a dynamic interplay of proximity and separation, rather than a collapse into a static unity.

Apart from the architecture of one shrine, one could even claim that the establishment of new shrines in Iran should also be considered in this regard. Despite political rhetorics that intend to delegitimize sacralization, through the dynamic interplay of *tašbīh* and *tanzīh*, one can claim that although these establishments resemble the sacred place, they hesitate in the process of approaching their holiness, i.e., while they themselves are considered sacred, they act as mediation for accessing Him. This aligns with the notion of gradational unity well described in the theosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā.

5. Conclusion: The Threshold in Iranian Islam's Pilgrimage

The phenomenology of pilgrimage in Iranian Islam, as explored through the lenses of Eliade and Corbin, reveals a profound interplay between the sacred and the profane, the immanent and the transcendent. Pilgrimage is not merely a physical journey to a sacred site but a spiritual voyage that bridges the material and the divine, embodying the dynamic relationship between *tašbīh* and *tanzīh*. The pilgrim's experience is shaped by the dynamics of mythic time, sacred space, and the metaphysical dimensions of reality, ultimately transforming their consciousness and reintegrating them into the divine order.

The dissolution of this dynamic also obscures the threshold character of pilgrimage (Eliade 1987, 25), which exists at the boundary between the sacred and the profane, the immanent and the transcendent. Corbin himself speaks of "the threshold of the *malakūt*" when discussing Mullā Ṣadrā's anthropology, emphasizing the soul's ascent from the abyss of material existence to the human form, which emerges onto the threshold of the *malakūt*—the trans-physical spiritual world (Corbin 2001, 343). This idea of the threshold is central to understanding pilgrimage as a liminal practice that bridges the sacred and the profane without collapsing the distinction between them.

The concept of *al-ʿatabāt al-ʿaliyāt* (the sublime thresholds) further underscores the importance of the threshold in pilgrimage. These thresholds are not places of permanent dwelling but points of transition, where the pilgrim encounters the divine and returns to the profane world transformed. The philosopher, as Corbin notes, is called the "pilgrim of the way" (*sālikān*), one who traverses these thresholds in search of spiritual truth but always returns to the everyday world to convey the message of

the divine.

In conclusion, pilgrimage in Iranian Islam is a liminal practice that bridges the sacred and the profane without collapsing the distinction between them. It is a journey that takes the pilgrim from the profane world to the sacred center and back again, transforming their consciousness in the process. By emphasizing the threshold character of pilgrimage, we can preserve its enduring significance as a practice that embodies the dynamic relationship between *tašbīh* and *tanzīh*, and that bridges the immanent and the transcendent without resolving their tension into a static unity. The expansion of rituals and holy places in Iran, while reflecting a deep desire to sacralize the world, must be understood in light of this threshold character, which insists on the experience of transition rather than permanent dwelling in the *malakūt*. Only by maintaining this balance can pilgrimage retain its transformative power and spiritual depth.

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Notes

1. The term "Iranian Islam" is inspired by Henry Corbin's seminal work of the same title, particularly his evocative conclusion in the introduction, where he invites the reader to embark on "Iranian pilgrimages, which are as many pilgrimages of the soul, but requiring a great adventure of the Spirit—the adventure of all those who were invited, because they loved it, to build the 'Abode of Seven Pillars'"

(Corbin 1991, XXIII). It is this "Abode of Seven Pillars" that we intend to explore, a metaphorical and spiritual space where the pilgrim's journey becomes a transformative quest for divine truth and self-realization.

٢. لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ ۖ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ (شوری 11)
٣. الرَّحْمَٰنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَىٰ (طه 5)
٤. وَالسَّمَاوَاتُ مَطْوِيَّاتٌ بِيَمِينِهِ (زمر 67)
٥. وَلِتُصْنَعَ عَلَىٰ عَيْنِيَ (طه 39)
٦. يَوْمَ يُكْشَفُ عَن سَاقٍ (قلم 42)؛ تَعْلَمُ مَا فِي نَفْسِي وَلَآ أَعْلَمُ مَا فِي نَفْسِكَ (مائده 116)
٧. هُوَ الْأَوَّلُ وَالْآخِرُ وَالظَّاهِرُ وَالْبَاطِنُ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ (حدید 3)
٨. فَاينَمَا تُوَلُّوا فَثَمَّ وَجهُ الله (بقره 115)

9. Refereeing to Corbin's notion of pilgrimage (pèlerinage) as implication of Eliade's notion sound reasonable, since they were both active members of the Eranos cycle (Wasserstrom 1999, 3). In a series of lectures which were originally delivered at sessions of the Eranos Conferences in Ascona, Switzerland, Corbin precisely refers to the Ka'bba as the center of the worlds (Corbin 1989, 208).