

R. D. McChesney

## Editor's Preface

IN MID-1842, THE EXILED RULER OF AFGHANISTAN, DUST MUHAMMAD KHAN, WAS summering in the Indian hill station of Mussoorie. Word reached him there that the British wanted to restore him to the throne, and that he should go to Calcutta and meet with Lord Ellenborough, the governor-general of India. After a discussion of the terms on which the British would support Dust Muhammad's return to Kabul, the two men parted. Writing some sixty years later, the Hazarah Afghan historian, Fayz Muhammad "Katib," recorded their farewell as follows:

Then the two men rose, bade each other farewell, turned and walked a few steps away from each other but had not yet parted when a two-volume set of the *Tafsīr-i Husaynī* enclosed in a silk cover was brought out and presented. Taking this as a good omen, the amir gladly received it, kissed it, placed it against his eyes, and then handed it to one of his attendants to care for it with reverence. (*Sirāj al-tawārikh* [Kabul 1331/1913] 1: 191.)

Such was the fame of Husayn b. ʿAli Kashifi's *Mavāhib-i ʿaliyya* (also known as *Tafsīr-i Husaynī*, or simply *Tafsīr-i Mullā*) among Muslims of South and Central Asia a full three and a half centuries after it was written. The trajectory of this commentary on the Qur'an mirrors the destiny of many other works by Kashifi. His *Rawḍat al-shuhadā* achieved near canonical status among Imami Shʿites as the text for performing the *taʿziya*, the commemoration of the fateful confrontation of Umayyad and ʿAlid forces at Karbala in 61/680, at which the third imam, Husayn b. ʿAli achieved heroic martyrdom. Although we have no bestseller lists or publication statistics to document the popularity of Kashifi's works, opening the catalogue of any major Persian manuscript collection quickly reveals how numerous were the copies of his work and thus how dedicated and loyal was his audience down through time. The advent of print only increased his popularity. Although one cannot say at this distance what the most popular Persian Qur'anic commentary was after Kashifi, the *Tafsīr-i Husaynī* must have been very near the top of the list in the Sunni world of Central Asia, Afghanistan, and India. We might imagine that the two-volume version presented by Lord Ellenborough was one of the very first published editions of the work (Calcutta in 1831–33 and then again in 1837), and certainly the very first Persian Qur'anic commentary published in India (according to Storey).

It is a pleasure to conclude my tenure as editor with this special issue devoted to the legacy of a remarkable figure of the fifteenth-century Persian renaissance and to

thank my colleague, Maria Subtelny, for assembling this series of studies and appreciations of the work of Husayn Va'iz-i Kashifi.

To a large degree, Kashifi embodies the goals of the International Society for Iranian Studies: to be as inclusive and wide-ranging in disciplinary and chronological coverage as scholarship permits. In the view of his admirers, Kashifi took on many forms—at once Sunni, Shi'i, and Sufi; a Qur'anic exegete and esotericist; a bureaucrat and ethicist—in sum, a polymath for whom the Persian language served as the vehicle for the articulation and dissemination of the learned culture, ideals, and values of his time. He and his works also exemplify the approach I have encouraged in the past six years as editor—that Persianate culture has always been, and will undoubtedly remain, ecumenical, multi-ethnic, and multinational.