

**Chapter Title:** Sufism and Ethics in the Works of Shāh Walī Allāh

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**Book Title:** Mysticism and Ethics in Islam

**Book Editor(s):** Bilal Orfali, Atif Khalil, and Mohammed Rustom

**URL:** <https://www.aub.edu.lb/aubpress/Pages/Mysticism-and-Ethics-in-Islam.aspx>

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# SUFISM AND ETHICS IN THE WORKS OF SHĀH WALĪ ALLĀH

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Let me introduce this chapter on Shāh Walī Allāh and Sufi ethics in the eighteenth century by taking note of the distinction made in Sufism between the concepts of purifying the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) and following a spiritual path (*sulūk*). This distinction sets up a fundamental conceptual issue in the study of Islamic Sufi ethics—that between ethical theories grounded in the “given-ness” of the human soul versus those drawing on the potential for individual movement and mutability through following a “path.” The teleological element of whether this path is ultimately a return to what was set in pre-eternity or whether it incorporates a transformative element that may even transcend determinism is both a cosmological and an ethical issue. The cosmological element leads us to discussions of temporality and its relationship to eternity. For Sufis, conceptualizations of the individual person or soul as well as its place in cosmology have continued to be elaborated in the light of advances in Islamic philosophy and theology to which Sufis, as thinkers within a particular historical context, have responded. The ethical element, in turn, draws on the resources of the Quran and sunna while incorporating insights drawn from the *akhlāq* tradition derived from the insights of Greek philosophy and its Muslim interpreters.

## Reasons for Looking at Sufi Ethics

A stated aim of the conference on which this volume is based was to address the precise connection between mysticism and ethics in pre-modern, early modern, and contemporary Islam. In my view, there are three main aspects of this project:

- First, a historical approach that considers the sources, development, and periodization of the mystical ethical tradition in Islam.
- Secondly, a project of revisiting and possibly revisioning how mystical ethics have been situated within Islamic discourses, for example, challenging an over-emphasis on philosophical ethics (*akhlāq*) alone or the privileging of law as the basis of morality in Islam.
- Third, a constructive element through which we can explore the relevance of mystical or Sufi ethics to Islamic ethics/thought today.

This chapter will therefore consider the case of Shāh Walī Allāh’s ethical thinking in terms of these three aims. In terms of the historical strand, this chapter will attempt to situate, summarize, and analyze the contributions to ethical reflection of an eighteenth-century mystical thinker, Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi (d. 1762). Let us briefly consider the positionality of that historical epoch. For example, in periodizing Sufi ethics within the development of Islamic thought, Michael Sells offers the following schema:

1. Pre-Sufi (sources-Quran, hadith, asceticism (*zuhd*))
2. Early Sufi sayings and writings—for example those of Ḥasan of Basra, Rabī‘a, al-Muḥāsibī, and Junayd (728–965).
3. A formative phase of Sufi literature, often in the form of manuals, that expound on the Sufi path, terminology, stages and states, and so forth, from al-Sarrāj (d. 988) to al-Qushayrī (d. 1072/3).
4. Sufi synthetic works such as those of Ibn ‘Arabī, Rūmī, and ‘Aṭṭār.<sup>1</sup>

Like many introductions to Islamic thought, this work on early Islamic mysticism concludes at the high point of the thirteenth century, leaving us with the impression that whatever comes after is either commentary on or expansion of previous achievements, hampered in originality and significance by the onset of decline and stagnation.

Shāh Walī Allāh’s case provides an example of Islamic mysticism and ethics in the eighteenth century, a period of transition, pivotally situated at the time variously known either as late pre-modern or early modern Islam. It is hoped that this chapter will contribute a sense of the continued vitality of mystical ethical thinking within Islam even in the later periods. Shāh Walī Allāh is a figure who thought systematically,<sup>2</sup> making especially clear for us the frameworks within which he developed his understanding of the elements necessary for constructing a “systematic” ethics grounded within the broader schemata of ontology, cosmology,

1. Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 17–18.

2. A. J. Halepota, “Shāh Waliullah and His System,” *Systematics* 6 (1968): 141–155.

psychology, and even a sort of proto-sociology that he strove to make coherent and congruent with one another. In terms of periodization, Shāh Walī Allāh is located fairly late in the historical development of Sufism—either late in the pre-modern or in the early modern period. The significance of this temporal location bears further reflection.

As Dipesh Chakrabarty observes,

. . . historians, when they have not abjured the word “modernity,” have been busy democratizing its use, distributing the epithet over a wide period of time (thus the “early modern period”) or between classes. Others have discovered alternative, multiple and vernacular modernities in an attempt to rid the idea of modernity of all exclusivist and judgemental pretention.<sup>3</sup>

Chakrabarty further cites historian Randolph Starn’s observation that, “the conceptual muddle surrounding the category ‘early modern’ is symptomatic of a ‘democratic’ temperament that has come to pervade the discipline of history over the last several decades.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, “early modernity has become a patent remedy for the problem of periodizing the time between medieval and modern history.”<sup>5</sup> In the study of Islamicate and other non-European civilizations, sensitivities around the demarcation and provenance of the modern further lead to ambiguity in establishing exactly what modernity consists of.

While European historians rejected epochal divides on “high cultural” grounds, historians of precolonial India in the late 1980s and the 1990s began to reject descriptions of the eighteenth century as a period of decline or disorder in pursuit of two historiographical objectives: rescuing the precolonial centuries in the subcontinent from the stigma of being “premodern,” and denying the colonial period any exclusive claims on “modernity.”<sup>6</sup>

Noting that this was a strategy adopted by those who wished to give the so-called modern period a longer and “indigenous” past extending into the centuries before British rule, Chakrabarty quotes Randolph Starn’s remark that “‘Early, partly, sometimes, maybe modern, early modernity is a period for our period’s discomfort about periodization’ thereby indicating the terminological and conceptual ambiguity around what is late pre-modern as opposed to early modern.”<sup>7</sup>

Another scholar of South Asia, Sheldon Pollock, cautioned that we need to distinguish the clear participation of the non-European world in the material transformations that marked modernity as a global phenomenon from more uncertain evidence regarding corresponding and contemporary developments in thought in Asian cultures. “Should this asymmetry turn out to reveal continuity and not rupture, no need to lament the fact. There is no shame in premodernity.”<sup>8</sup>

3. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Muddle of Modernity,” *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 665.

4. Chakrabarty, “Muddle of Modernity,” 666; quoting Randolph Starn, “The Early Modern Muddle,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 6, no. 3 (2002): 296–307.

5. Chakrabarty, “Muddle of Modernity,” 666, quoting Randolph Starn, “Early Modern Muddle,” 299.

6. Chakrabarty, “Muddle of Modernity,” 666.

7. Chakrabarty, “Muddle of Modernity,” 667.

8. Sheldon Pollock, “Pretextures of Time,” *History and Theory* 46 (2007): 364–381; cited in Chakrabarty, “Muddle of Modernity,” 671.

Chakrabarty's argument is that from our own limited and historically situated vantage point, we inevitably make judgments—in this case, about what exactly constitutes the “modern,” and that this category of the modern both informs and distorts our conceptualizations, especially in the post-colonial environment, for indeed we are “presentists.”<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Shāh Walī Allāh, in his preface to *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*, acknowledges a similar limitation of his own situatedness: “I am only a person on his own, waiting for his death, subject to his times, a student before his destiny, a prisoner of his fate, who takes advantage of what comes to him easily.”<sup>10</sup>

We may observe that certain elements in Shāh Walī Allāh's mystical thought continue earlier themes and concepts in Islamic Sufi ethics while at the same time they suggest, if not ruptures with the past, a trajectory that inclines towards forms of modernity. This element in particular will be important for our consideration of revisionist and constructive potentials of his contributions to Islamic mystical ethics. Scholarly and not so scholarly evaluations of the legacy of Shāh Walī Allāh in Islamic thought usually emphasize his contributions as a reformer, Hadith expert (*muḥaddith*), or, most broadly, as a polymath who wrote in multiple sub-disciplines of the Islamic sciences—rather along the lines of al-Ghazālī. This is not to say that Shāh Walī Allāh did not position himself within a Sufi framework or even a philosophical Sufi framework that was at the same time eclectic and practical. However, many twentieth-century interpreters of South Asian Islam have been more interested in the potentially political, nationalist, and communal relevance of his ideas and were distant from, if not outright hostile to Sufism, and therefore they downplayed or simply overlooked the mystical elements of Shāh Walī Allāh's thought.

Scholars of mysticism and ethics across religious traditions have identified a problem, or tension, that exists for exponents of monism in taking practical ethical positions with regard to others and society at large, in the sense that all is ultimately One. Qualified non-dualism of some sort is often posed as the ontological solution to the dilemma since in such a schema, there is a rationale for judgment and human action at the level of the world and embodied experience despite the fact that ontologically all is one.<sup>11</sup> In later Sufism, especially in the Indian sub-continent, this was often framed as the debate between the *wujūdī* and the *shuhūdī* positions, identified respectively with Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) and the Akbarian school and Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624) and the Naqshbandī-Mujaddidī Sufi Order. In this schema, the unity of existence, *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of Being),<sup>12</sup> was refined or supplanted by *waḥdat al-shuhūd* (the unity of experiencing or witnessing). Perhaps we may term the latter a Sufi ethics of *baqāʾ* (subsistence) after *fanāʾ* (annihilation in the divine),<sup>13</sup> subsistence identified as the modality of the prophetic path that comprehends and then integrates the *fanāʾ* of the saints. We know that this tension

9. Presentism is discussed by Pollock in “Areas, Disciplines, and the Goals of Inquiry,” in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 75, no. 4 (2016): 913–928, 922.

10. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*, trans. Marcia K. Hermansen (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 7.

11. G. William Barnard and Jeffrey J. Kripal (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism* (New York: Seven Bridges Press/Chatham House, 2002).

12. But see William Chittick's important corrective with respect to the South Asian context in “*Waḥdat al-Wujūd* in India,” in *Ishraq: Islamic Philosophy Yearbook* 3, ed. Yanis Esots, 29–40 (Moscow: Institute of Philosophy, Russia Academy of Sciences, 2012).

13. Fazlur Rahman (trans.), *Selected Letters of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī* (Karachi: Iqbal Academy, 1968).

or debate was current in the time of Shāh Walī Allāh since he wrote a treatise in the form of a letter attempting to reconcile the two positions as ultimately encapsulating the same truth.<sup>14</sup>

A notable feature of Shāh Walī Allāh's ethics, then, will be the way in which he conceptually effects a reconciliation of monism and dualism in presenting a concept of the person, the soul, and the universe through a microcosm/macrocosm analogy that retains a concept of a pre-eternal and determined form of the soul yet also leaves room for change to be effected at both individual and cosmic levels through intentional human effort as well as wisdom and spiritual realization acquired both through the refinement of habit and contemplative exercises and disciplines.

This reconciliation is conceptually accomplished by Shāh Walī Allāh through developing a model of the person along the lines of qualified non-dualism or a stage theory that posits the realm of conflict as existing at lower levels of the soul embedded in the physical world and the animalistic passions. These, in turn, can be intentionally sublimated and refined (*tazkiya*) at the middle levels of the human heart and intellect so as to open up to increasingly higher spiritual realizations and influences once balance among conflicting elements or tendencies at the lower stages is achieved.

## Shāh Walī Allāh

The figure of Shāh Walī Allāh is one of a relatively limited set of Muslim thinkers featured in introductions to the study of Islam, perhaps due to the comprehensive nature of his writings and also because his contributions to Islamic thought are presented as "reformist" in the midst of what was previously considered an age of stagnation and decline.

By way of a brief introduction to Shāh Walī Allāh, a major influence in his formation was his father, Shāh 'Abd al-Raḥīm (1056/1646–1131/1719), a notable Naqshbandī Shaykh as well as a jurist. Shāh Walī Allāh (1114/1703–1174/1762) was one of the towering figures of the Islamic intellectual tradition in South Asia. His major work, *Hujjat Allāh al-Bāligha* [The Conclusive Argument from God] has been compared to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* [Revival of the Religious Sciences] in terms of its project of explicating the "inner" or deeper spiritual and transformative aspects of complying with the injunctions of the sharī'a. Shāh Walī Allāh authored works in Arabic and Persian across a number of genres and fields including Quranic and Hadith studies, Sufi theory and practice, and Islamic law. A two-year stay in Arabia, where Shāh Walī Allāh studied with the prominent Sufi Shaykh and Shāfi'i scholar, Muḥammad Abū Ṭāhir al-Kurdī, (d. 1145/1732), was formative in his spiritual and intellectual development.<sup>15</sup> He returned to India in 1732, continuing his career as head of the Raḥīmiyya madrasa in Delhi and known

14. See the extensive discussion found in Muhammad U. Faruque, "Sufism contra Shariah? Shāh Walī Allāh's Metaphysics of *Wahdat al-Wujūd*," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 5, no. 1 (2016): 27–57. A translation of the original is found in Shāh Walī Allāh, *al-Tafhimāt al-Ilāhiyya II*, ed. G. M. Qāsīmī (Hyderabad, Sindh: Shāh Walī Allāh Academy, 1967), 263.

15. John O. Voll, "Hadith Scholars and Tariqahs: An 'Ulema' Group," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 15 (1980): 262–273.

as a muḥaddith, or expert in Hadith studies. Among his primary areas of interest, as evidenced by his writings, are: Quranic Studies, Hadith and Legal Studies, practical and philosophical Sufism, and to an extent, social and political theory.

In his two lengthy and comprehensive works, *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha* and *al-Budūr al-Bāzigha* [*The Rising Full Moons*],<sup>16</sup> Shāh Walī Allāh lays out comprehensive and overarching schemas of cosmology, human societal and political orders, and individual human development, both moral and spiritual. Pertinent to our concerns here, sections of these works feature multiple and extensive lists and descriptions of virtues that should be cultivated for the attainment of human felicity, as well as how these should be developed. Shāh Walī Allāh also authored a range of texts with a more explicitly Sufi focus, some with details of *sulūk*, including a discussion of the characteristics of specific Sufi *tariqas* and the cultivation of virtues,<sup>17</sup> and some more cosmological. As part of this chapter, reference will be made to two other Sufi works of Shāh Walī Allāh, one on spiritual psychology, *Altāf al-Quds*,<sup>18</sup> and the other, *al-Taḥmīmāt al-Ilāhiyya*, a collection of shorter writings that contain significant mystical theory.

Broadly traced, the sources of Shāh Walī Allāh's Sufism were his family and childhood education, most particularly his father, but also other close relatives;<sup>19</sup> these included both Chishtī Sufi influences and the teachings of the Naqshbandī-Mujaddidī Order. The list of works read as part of his education includes a number of works representative of the *ḥikmat* school of Shiraz following Mullā Saḍr al-Shīrāzī that were popular among Indian Sufis of that period. A further exposure to diverse Sufi orders occurred during his stay in Arabia, where Walī Allāh was part of the circle of the aforementioned Muḥammad Abū Ṭāhir al-Kurdī, son of Ibrahīm al-Kurānī. Shāh Walī Allāh's multiple *tariqa* affiliations are listed and enumerated in his work *Anfas al-ʿarīfīn*.<sup>20</sup>

In attempting to understand the Sufism of Shāh Walī Allāh, then, we have evidence of both a theoretical and practical nature derived not only from his own writings, but also from biographical observations, especially those made by his cousin and closest disciple, Muḥammād ʿĀshiq (d. 1773).<sup>21</sup> Despite a certain hyperbole in his works not untypical for Sufis of that epoch, it is unclear what the practical implications are of Shāh Walī Allāh perceiving himself as ushering in a new era of Sufi potential. While he functioned during his lifetime as the Sufi master to a limited number of disciples and maintained correspondence with some of them that has been preserved in collections of letters, evidence for his intention of creating a distinct "Waliullāhī" Sufi *ṭarīqa* is somewhat sparse. His closest disciple preserved a practice of devotional litanies and readings from the works of the master, but this does not seem to have persisted, at least not among any broader circle.

16. Shāh Walī Allāh, *al-Budūr al-bāzigha* (Hyderabad: Shāh Walī Allāh Academy, 1970); English translations by J. M. S. Baljon (Lahore: Ashraf, 1988) and G. H. Jalbani (Islamabad: Hijra Council, 1985).

17. In particular, *Hama'āt* (Hyderabad: Shāh Walī Allāh Academy, 1964).

18. Shāh Walī Allāh, *al-Taḥmīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* and *Altāf al-quds* (Gujrānwāla: Madrasa Nuṣrat al-ʿUlūm, 1964).

19. Maulānā Ḥakīm Maḥmūd Aḥmad Barakātī, *Shāh Walī Allāh aur un kā khāndān* (Lahore: Majlis Ishāʿat-e Islām, 1976).

20. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Anfas al-ʿarīfīn* (Urdu translation of the Persian original), ed. Sayyid Muḥammad Farūqī al-Qādirī (Lahore: Al-Maʿārif, 1974).

21. See Marcia Hermansen, "Shāh Muḥammad ʿĀshiq: The Closest Disciple of Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi," *Oriente Moderno* XCII, no. 2 (2012): 420–436.

## Shāh Walī Allāh's Ethics as Revisionist

As the present volume so clearly shows, scholars can and should interrogate not only the discourses of Sufi ethics, but also the forms of their expression. Indeed, while the term for ethics in Arabic is “*akhlāq*,” the term *akhlāq*, itself, and its variations of *khuluq*, *khalq*, *takhalluq* and the like provide rich ramifications of meaning that point to diverse emphases regarding the processes involved in the human experience of ethical development as being cultivation, realization, self-fashioning, and so on in addition to the contemplation of the good and the virtuous as conveyed in the Hellenic tradition of philosophical ethics. Alongside the content of *akhlāq* we must acknowledge the important additional component of Sufi *adab* both as a practical method for cultivation and a moral system, as well as its contributions toward achieving the highest ontological as well as moral stature for a human soul.<sup>22</sup>

It is natural that we find explicitly Islamic philosophical and, in particular, Sufi influences on Shāh Walī Allāh's formulations of the means to the acquisition of virtue and the reasons for distinctions and differences among people in terms of these virtues. Of course, much of the conceptual framework within which Shāh Walī Allāh lays out his ethical theory is familiar to us from earlier periods in Islamic Sufism and, in fact, al-Ghazālī's articulation of the inner aspects of faith and the tension between the animalistic and angelic aspects of the person provide the background to some aspects of ethical theorizing and explaining human differences and potentials in the acquisition of virtue. At the same time Walī Allāh tends to favour a mystical philosophical orientation to both ontology and ethics. Intellectually formed in a Persianate environment in early eighteenth-century India, Shāh Walī Allāh also imbibed and in some cases taught a curriculum that included a number of works of the school of Shiraz.<sup>23</sup>

## Shāh Walī Allāh's Frameworks of Purpose, Virtue, and Reconciliation

As previously noted, Shāh Walī Allāh authored certain comprehensive works in which Sufism, while not the central focus, is treated within broader frameworks. These also feature significant sections on ethical and virtue theory. The most prominent is *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*, a two-volume work on hadith studies that features a systematic/integrative approach combining the traditional Islamic disciplines of qur'anic and hadith studies with more rational and speculative approaches that adopt historical, sociological, and psychological perspectives in explaining difference in perspectives in the light of individual and societal development over time. While the early chapters of the first volume of the two-volume work that deal with creation, destiny, and the spirit are symbolic and mystical, subsequent sections address topics of human flourishing, virtue theory,

22. With this point on *adab* in mind, one may profitably consult this volume: Francesco Chiabotti et al., *Ethics and Spirituality in Islam: Sufi Adab* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

23. See Hermansen, “Shāh Muḥammad ‘Ashiq,” 420–436.



and the development of human societies through increasingly complex socio-political stages (*irtifāqāt*), leading to a discussion of religious systems in human history. A concept undergirding this work is “*asrār al-dīn*,” the secrets or inner dimensions of religion. In explaining not only specific religious symbols, practices, and rulings but also the cosmology and cosmic sacred history underlying their establishment, Shāh Walī Allāh invokes broader frameworks of the secrets (*asrār*) as well as the greater purposes (*maṣāliḥ*) of sharī‘a regulations.

If we step back to gain a broader sense of Shāh Walī Allāh’s approach to explaining the spiritual dimensions as well as benefits to the individual and society of conforming to sharī‘a regulations, we find that *maṣlaḥa* (beneficial purpose) is a seminal concept. This beneficial purpose is often not explicit in the revealed sources—therefore ‘aql, or reason, must be invoked. Recognizing that historical context and individual inclinations can lead to differences of opinion and practice, from the perspective of Shāh Walī Allāh these differing opinions and views of scholars initially need to be analyzed and understood, and based on this analysis, many misunderstandings and tensions can be resolved. The approach to this analysis may be historical—as when assessing the development of Hadith studies, law, or Sufism. It may further be rhetorical, as in his work on Quran interpretation (*tafsir*), or it may even be epistemological.

Recently, numerous scholars have employed the concept of political theology and, in particular, sovereignty, in pointing out the parallelisms between real world human affairs and the models through which intellectuals—in this case, religious scholars—have grappled with architectures of meaning in their respective epochs. This framing is apposite in identifying the source of Shāh Walī Allāh’s reconciliatory ethic. In this vein, recognizing the context of the turbulent times in which he lived and wrote, the noted scholar of Islam, Fazlur Rahman, in a brief but insightful 1950s article, coined the epithet “thinker of crisis” for Shāh Walī Allāh.<sup>24</sup> Commenting on the political situation of the early eighteenth century (Shāh Walī Allāh was born in 1707), Sajjad Rizvi observes that,

As the central authority of the Mughal Empire collapsed and was replaced with multiple centers of power and culture, in historiography the eighteenth century in India is often considered through the lens of crisis, disintegration, and instability. Along with this decentering, provincial towns rose to prominence and often became sites for further contestation across Sunni vs. Shi‘i, scripturalist vs. rationalist, nomocentric vs. mystical views.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, this political and intellectual context of fragmentation may have given rise to Shāh Walī Allāh’s approach to reconciliation, which we may consider to be an ethical principle on his part in which he explicitly aims to reconcile differences of epistemology, perspective, and method. Shāh Walī Allāh highlights an emergent issue that was becoming increasingly apparent in his time of a growing disjuncture

24. Fazlur Rahman, “The Thinker of Crisis: Shāh Waliy-Ullah,” *The Pakistan Quarterly* 6 (1956): 44–48.

25. Sajjad Rizvi, “Faith Deployed for a New Shi‘i Polity in India,” in *The Shi‘a in Modern South Asia: Religion, History and Politics*, eds. J. Jones and A. Qasmi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 12.

between the content and the methodology of the Islamic sciences, as well as increasingly exclusivist epistemological claims made by scholars who specialized in one of the Islamic sciences, whether Hadith studies, jurisprudence, or Sufism. He, on occasion, presents a schema of three broad epistemological categories: *burhān* (demonstrative proof), *kashf/wijdān* (visionary experience in the Sufi mode), and *naql* (transmitted, revealed sources—Quran and sunna) that each may have a place in determining truth. Similarly ‘Abd al-‘Aal observed:

Again, in his *Tafhīmāt*, he [Shāh Walī Allāh] explains the totality and comprehensiveness of the approach which he adopts in his mission when he declares that his system of thought is compatible with the findings of demonstrative proof, *burhān*; intuition, *wijdān*; and the science of traditions, *al-manqūl*.<sup>26</sup>

But Sufism itself is not a static system, and Shāh Walī Allāh offers more than one way of viewing its changes over time. Shāh Walī Allāh may thus be understood as “revising” Sufi ethics through taking a developmental approach in explaining the changing emphasis or mode of Sufi practice and theory as evolving over time. For example, in the work *Hama‘āt*, he describes the early generations of mystics as being characterized by pious devotions, sobriety, and the fear of God. Shāh Walī Allāh then identifies Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 910 CE) as a pivotal figure whose era initiated a shift beyond piety towards connecting the heart to Allah, thereby introducing an emotional aspect to ascetic Sufism. Subsequently, according to Shāh Walī Allāh, the Sufis of eleventh century Khurasan ushered in the ecstatic mode in Sufism through a process of eradicating the *nafs* and striving for the achievement of *fanā’* (annihilation in the divine). The next stage of development is that of philosophical Sufism, epitomized by Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī, based on a refined understanding of the process of emanation from the Necessary Being and the divine self-disclosure.<sup>27</sup>

## Shāh Walī Allāh’s Ethics

One of the correctives to prevailing constructions of the Islamic ethical tradition that is offered by considering Shāh Walī Allāh as a Sufi ethicist is his incorporation of *akhlāqī* elements as just one implement in a multifarious tool box for ethical reasoning. This is primarily evident in his iteration of the classical four virtues in Islamicized garb: purity, humbling oneself before God, magnanimity, and justice augmented by additional virtues unique to his formulation—*al-ra‘y al-kullī* (a comprehensive outlook), *zarāfa* (refinement), and *takammul* (the urge to perfection or wholeness).

As outlined in Mohamed Ahmed Sherif’s treatment of al-Ghazali’s theory of virtue, the Islamicate tradition of ethics, for example, Ibn Miskawayh, following Aristotle through Ibn Sīnā, listed the four cardinal virtues as wisdom (*ḥikma*),

26. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Tafhīmāt*, 2:217; cited in Khalil ‘Abdel Ḥamīd ‘Abdel-‘Aal, “God, the Universe, and Man in Islamic Thought: The Contribution of Shāh Waliullah of Delhi (1702–1762)” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1970), 481.

27. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hama‘āt* (Hyderabad: Shāh Walī Allāh Academy), 1964.

courage (*shajā'a*), temperance (*iffa*), and justice (*'adl*).<sup>28</sup> Shāh Walī Allāh varies somewhat from this model in identifying the four cardinal qualities (*khiṣāl*) as purity (*taḥāra*), humility (*khushū'*),<sup>29</sup> magnanimity (*samāḥa*), and justice (*'adl*). The attempt to reconcile Islamic lists of virtues towards norms resonant with Muslim theological values had occurred in earlier Sufi writings on this topic. Various strategies could effect this, for example, developing subsidiary traits under each of the categories. In the case of al-Ghazālī, Sherif terms this move an elaboration of “theological virtues” as opposed to the “philosophical virtues.”<sup>30</sup> In his other works, including *al-Budūr al-bāzigha*, Shāh Walī Allāh proposed an additional three important virtues that had been on occasion mentioned as subsidiary traits within the previous tradition. He identifies these distinctive human virtues or qualities as *al-ra'y al-kullī* (comprehensive outlook), *zarāfa* (refinement), and *takammul* (urge to perfection/wholeness).

While laying out the character of these virtues as part of his comprehensive works, Walī Allāh emphasizes strategies for their cultivation, at the same time noting the causes and manifestations of human variation in the natural affinity for one or another trait. For example, in the fourth section of the *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*, Shāh Walī Allāh discusses ways to achieve ultimate human felicity through the cultivation of four main virtues that he lists as being purity, humbling oneself before God, magnanimity, and justice. Subsequently, he considers three barriers or veils to this felicity: the veils of custom, conventions, and misunderstanding the nature of God, as well as ways to overcome these veils.<sup>31</sup>

Similar to Plato and Aristotle, Shāh Walī Allāh's model of the just social and political order was that of a healthy organism, where all the parts function for the benefit of the whole, and the whole benefits the parts. For the Hellenic tradition, justice meant sticking to one's role, doing one's own work and not interfering with others. Justice, along with the other virtues of a state, temperance, courage, and wisdom, contributed to the excellence of that state. Indeed, justice is necessary for the other three virtues. According to the concept of person within the Platonic model, rationality, the passions and the “spirit” needed to be maintained in harmony with one another. Thus the human virtue of *'adl* (justice) had a Quranic resonance with the idea of an order that should be based on justice, ultimately the order and apportionment of the divine plan. The term *'adl* is frequently paired in Islamic thought with *iḥsān* (righteousness, doing things beautifully) based on the Quranic verse (16:90): “God enjoins justice and righteousness, and giving to relatives, and he forbids immorality, abomination and rebellion. He exhorts you so that you may be reminded.”

In the Sufi tradition, *iḥsān* is equated with Sufism itself as being the deepest or ultimate level of spirituality, as in the famous Hadith of Gabriel according to which Muhammad is sequentially questioned about *islām*, *īmān*, and *iḥsān* by a mysterious visitor who is ultimately revealed to be the angel himself. The Prophet provides the

28. Mohamed Ahmed Sherif, *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 38ff.

29. For Aristotle, humility was not a virtue. In the West, humility came to prominence largely with Christianity.

30. Sherif, *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue*, 78 ff. Al-Ghazālī associates theological virtues with divine assistance in the forms of *hidāya* (divine guidance), *rushd* (direction), *tasdīd* (leading), and *ta'yīd* (support).

31. Hermansen, preface to the translation of *Ḥujjat Allāh*, xx.

answer that “*ihsān* is worshipping God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him He sees you.”

In terms of the ultimate goal of *akhlāqī* ethics—felicity (*sa‘āda*)—Shāh Walī Allāh conceives that inherent human capacity determines the manner in which individuals may be expected to attain it. Chapter <sup>30</sup> of *Ḥujjat Allāh* presents “The Differences among People in Felicity.” According to the Shāh Walī Allāh, in some people a virtue—for example, “courage”—is completely lacking and will not be attainable. Others, although deficient in this virtue, may be trained to acquire it through education, imitation, and being exposed to accounts of the brave. Yet other persons have the virtue inherent in them and only need exposure and encouragement to abundantly manifest it. Finally, there are those who will neither need training nor encouragement to master and embody a certain virtue that is naturally easy and abundant for them. It is such people who should teach and lead others in acquiring this virtue.<sup>32</sup> Another source of individual distinctiveness is that a particular person’s ultimate felicity may depend on a specific virtue.

In summary, some of the main points made by Walī Allāh in his chapter about differences in felicity are:

1. There is an innate variation in human capacity for specific virtues.
2. Individuals will further differ in the traits that will bring them ultimate felicity.
3. Based on these differences, an assessment can be made of the means and methods for the refinement of the soul (in other words for mystical cultivation and ethical training).

Such methods are based on a certain cosmology as well as a particular theological anthropology. The following passage synthesizes the Aristotelian idea of cultivating virtue through habitus or practice in perfecting virtue, the Platonic ideal of the form of the soul, and Islamic elements of both the Primordial covenant and eschatological reckoning.

As for virtues going back to the rational soul, it is because when some person carries out an action, the habituation of his soul to it increases, and it is easier for this action to originate from the soul, as he will need no deliberation and have no need to take up a (fresh) motivation. Inevitably, the soul will be influenced by this and accept its tone. Unavoidably, each one of these similar acts participates in this influence even if it is minute and its role is obscure. This is the import of his saying, may peace and blessings be upon him, “Temptations strike the heart in the way that a reed mat is woven stick by stick. Any heart that is influenced by them becomes marked with a black dot, and any heart which rejects them becomes marked by a white dot. The result is two hearts; one like a white stone, and no calamity or test can harm it “as long as the heavens and earth endure;”<sup>33</sup> while the other heart becomes black and clouded, like an inverted jug, which neither knows good (*ma‘rūf*) or evil (*munkar*) but only

32. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*, 81.

33. Quran 11:107–8.

what it absorbs of its own desire.”<sup>34</sup>

As for acts clinging tenaciously to the soul, this is because initially a soul is created as prime matter, free from everything with which it later becomes tinged. Thereafter it continues to emerge from potentiality into actuality, day by day, and every subsequent one of its states is prepared for it, and all of the preparations constitute an ordered sequence, and later states cannot precede the earlier ones. Associated with the attitude of the soul existing now is the decree of everything which preceded, although this may be hidden from the soul due to its preoccupation with what is external to it. Indeed, [one does not expect changes] unless whatever supports the faculty which produces these acts from the soul fades away, as we already mentioned in the case of the old man and the sick man,<sup>35</sup> or if an attitude from Above should assail it, changing its regime, such as the change cited in the case mentioned above.

As God, may He be Exalted, said, “The good deeds will wipe out the evil ones,”<sup>36</sup> and He said, “If you associate others with God, then all your acts will be futile.”<sup>37</sup>

As for the soul being held accountable, its secret, according to what I have learned through mystical experience (*dhawq*), is that in the high realm (the World of Images) a form for every human manifests what the higher order has bestowed on him, and that which appeared in the account of the Primordial Covenant is a ramification of this.<sup>38</sup> When this person comes into existence, this form is congruent with him and is merged with him. When he performs a (good) action, this form rejoices due to this act with an involuntary natural happiness. Perhaps the soul will appear in the afterlife such that its actions will be counted for or against it from Above, for example, through the reading of the scrolls. Perhaps it will appear with its acts clinging to its limbs, and this would be the (meaning) of the hands and feet “speaking.”<sup>39</sup>

## Sufi Psychology as a Background to Mystical Ethics

Sufi psychology was by the eighteenth century building on a long and extensive mystical ethical tradition that incorporated psychology in the sense of the science of the soul, psychological type theory, and concepts of subtle spiritual centers (*laṭāʾif*) or a spiritual body that paralleled the physical organs while connecting the person to higher dimensions of the “soul.”

34. Hadith found in Muslim *Imān* 231, for example; cited in Muḥammad al-Khaṭīb al-Tabrizī, *Mishkāt al-Maṣābiḥ* II, trans. James Robson (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1999), 1120.

35. This refers to Hadith reports that Shāh Walī Allāh cites earlier in the book to the effect that certain rulings can change according to the age or other circumstances of a person.

36. Quran 11:114.

37. Quran 39:65.

38. The Primordial Covenant (*mīthāq*) refers to the occasion in pre-eternity when all of the human souls to ever come into being acknowledged Allah as their Lord. Thus, Shāh Walī Allāh associates the pre-existing form of the soul in the World of Images with this covenant mentioned in Quran 7:172.

39. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*, trans. M. Hermansen, 81. These are all elements of Islamic eschatology. The hands and feet speaking (i.e., bearing witness) is referred to in Quran 24:24. The reading of the scrolls is mentioned in Quran 81:10.

Shāh Walī Allāh, as previously noted, saw the existence of difference at multiple levels as part of the nature of human composition and experience, yet he needed to investigate its sources as a prelude to presenting an ethics of reconciliation. The idea of contesting animal and angelic sides to human nature had been articulated by earlier mystical thinkers. What Walī Allāh adds is a more detailed presentation of how this contestation plays out in distinctive ways in individual persons while maintaining that there are possibilities to recognize and therapeutically intervene as part of Sufi training and moral cultivation so as to maximize individual potential. Even Sufi training itself needs to start from the recognition of innate disposition.

Shāh Walī Allāh explains that there are two distinct ways to obtain felicity.

The first is by sloughing off the animalistic side. This, however, requires a suspension of the demands of nature, turning with complete attention to what lies beyond even the World of Omnipotence (*jabarūt*), and avoiding human contact. This is the method sought after by the philosophers of illuminative wisdom (*al-muta'allihūn min al-ḥukamā'*) and by the mystics who are overwhelmingly drawn to the divine (*al-majdhūbūn min al-ṣūfiyya*). This way is only for the few whose angelic and animalistic sides are in strong opposition or contention with one another, since they neglect their own livelihood and worldly affairs.<sup>40</sup>

The second way is by reforming one's animal faculties. This is primarily achieved, according to Shāh Walī Allāh, through a person's holding the animalistic side to the imitation of acts, attitudes, and memories of the rational soul. The teachings of the prophets were directed to inculcating this second way since it is the best course for maintaining the order of society and it is also the most practical and attainable. Furthermore, the model guides or Imams to the second way are the *mufahhamūn* (those made to understand) who take on the governing of religion and the world at the same time.<sup>41</sup>

In his work *Hama'āt*, a manual of practical Sufism, Shāh Walī Allāh states that some intrinsic human differences might be due to cultural proclivities and thus human attitudes and cultures might be seen as responding to physical or geographical "environments"<sup>42</sup> as per the pre-modern theory of the more temperate regions being most suitable for producing moderate temperaments, which we might imagine as a formulation of nature combined with nurture, or even culture as being formative components of personality—in this case, including its "soulful" or spiritual dimension.

As a further example of Sufi ethics developing in the eighteenth century, we may cite the *latīfa* theory of Shāh Walī Allāh. The idea of *latā'if*, or subtle spiritual centers, is based on Quranic references and goes back to Junayd or even further in a discussion of the soul, or *nafs*. The well-known schema of souls "blaming," "commanding to evil," or being "contented" became, for Sufis, associated with stages along the spiritual itinerary.

40. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*, 153.

41. Paraphrased from Shāh Walī Allāh, *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*, 153–155.

42. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hama'āt*, 68–69.

By the eighteenth century, the numbers of these spiritual centers and the descriptions of their specific functions and inter-relationships combined humor theory, a psychology of the levels of the *nafs*, and itineraries of respective paths of prophethood and saintship as developed, in particular, by Indian Naqshbandi Sufis.<sup>43</sup> Searching for cosmological parallels across systems was characteristic of Shāh Walī Allāh's mystical thinking.<sup>44</sup> Combined with his proclivity to see history, in general, and the history of disciplines of the Islamic sciences, in particular, as developmental led him to a unique and systematic explanation of how and why Sufi discourses, schemas, and emphasis had evolved up to his time. Just as he had previously associated epochal moments in Sufi theorizing with specific figures who might be taken as emphasizing asceticism, ecstasy, or gnosis in terms of *latīfa* theory, he pairs the "opening," or accessibility, of higher spiritual centers with prophetic and even saintly dispensations associated with the spiritual opening of the era of their initiators.

In his mythic explanation of the progressive awakening of human spirituality in *al-Taḥfīmāt al-ilāhiyya*, Shāh Walī Allāh describes the relationship of the micro-cosmic (human) world (*al-ālam al-ṣaghīr*) to parallel developments at the level of the macrocosm (*al-ālam al-kabīr*). According to his description, at the creation of Adam, God emanated the ideal human form with three spiritual centers—the Heart, Intelligence, and the Lower Soul—as its foundation. As the human species progressed and humanity's spiritual capacity developed, Muhammad came as the seal of this (the Adamic) age and the opener of a new era elaborating and explicating the first one. Therefore, at the time of Muhammad, "God's glance of mercy" turned to the higher *laṭā'if*, the *rūḥ* (spirit) and *sirr* (mystery).<sup>45</sup> These were then awakened at the level of the ideal form of the human species. This permitted further spiritual development which continued even without a new revelation so that by the time of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), the possibility of awakening the future spiritual center (*latīfa*), the arcane (*khafī*), was granted by God. At this time, "the People of Guidance," i.e., the Sufis, were inspired with the unity of the divine (*tawḥīd*) and the fading of the world into the One Reality.<sup>46</sup> This refers to Ibn 'Arabī's development of the philosophy that his followers were to elaborate as the Unity of Existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and indicates also how highly Ibn 'Arabī was ranked by Shāh Walī Allāh. Finally, in this schema, Shāh Walī Allāh himself was designated by God to be the spokesperson and wise man of the era in which the final spiritual centers, "the Philosopher's Stone" (*ḥajar-i-baḥt*) and "Selfhood" (*anāniyya*) might be awakened.<sup>47</sup> While previous Sufi theories might be said to feature an interiorization of prophetic modes and qualities, Shāh Walī Allāh reverses the direction of this process in a movement of exteriorization from the developed saintly person, so that transformation of one individual in history can come to influence the ideal form which in turn expands

43. Arthur Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 105ff.

44. As discussed in Hermansen, "Mystical Visions as 'Good to Think': Examples from Pre-Modern South Asian Sufi Thought," *Religion* 27, no. 1 (1997): 25–43.

45. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Taḥfīmāt*, 1:167–68.

46. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Taḥfīmāt*, 1:168.

47. Shāh Walī Allāh, *Taḥfīmāt*, 1:168–9.

the potential of all persons.<sup>48</sup> Although mystical in cosmology and conception, an underlying message is the capacity of individual effort to transform the world.

## The Constructive Potential of Mystical Ethics in Modernity

Finally, as a theological rather than a historical project, one may ask this question: Can the insights garnered from the Sufi ethical tradition be used in contemporary discussions of ethics, moral agency, and ontology? One example of such contemporary analysis is the use of Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings by some contemporary Islamic feminists.<sup>49</sup> In favour of the constructive aspect, it is clear that having more developed articulations of Sufi moral and ethical theory would provide alternative resources for theologizing in the present.

For modern interpreters Sufism offers a way of understanding and addressing individuality and acknowledging personal spirituality within a single religion. In his ground-breaking study, Cyrus Zargar comments on Sufism as a resource for our contemporary need for a philosophy of psychology that probes human intentions and desires.<sup>50</sup> An important point that Zargar makes is that if the *akhlāq* tradition is positioned as Islamicate virtue ethics, this resonates with the turn, at least in Anglo-American philosophy, to considering virtue ethics as a mode of ethical reflection in addition to deontology and consequentialism. If an appeal of virtue ethics as that it is agent centered rather than act centered,<sup>51</sup> the cultivation and, in Sufi terms, “perfection” of that agent become a moral, as well as a spiritual and mystical project.

In this chapter, we have shown how Shāh Walī Allāh, an eighteenth-century Sufi, presents mystical ethics as a way of understanding and addressing individuality and developing personal spirituality within Islamic Sufi religious practice. He further lays out a broader “ethic” of reconciliation of epistemological and interpretive conflict through appreciating the situatedness of any particular view as well as its historical development and context.

While Shāh Walī Allāh’s critical historical approach to elements of Islamic tradition strikes us, in some ways, as “modern,” its epistemology is grounded in mystical understandings of “being,” and its purposes are simultaneously Islamic legal (*sharī*), rational, and grounded in the inwardly spiritual “*asrār*,” while further envisioning a cosmic aspect to the goal of Sufi self-perfection as ultimately transformative of all of humanity.

48. See Hermansen, “Shāh Walī Allāh’s Theory of the Subtle Spiritual Centers (*Laṭā’if*): A Sufi Model of Personhood and Self-Transformation,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 47, no. 1, (1988): 24.

49. For example, in Sa’diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

50. Cyrus Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (London: Oneworld, 2017), 10.

51. *Ibid.*



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