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THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUFISM AND SHI'ISM AS REFLECTED IN THE CONCEPT OF *WALĀYAH*

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Abstrak

Tulisan ini mencoba meneliti konsep *walāyah* dalam tradisi Sufisme dan Syi'isme. *Walāyah* adalah salah satu prinsip yang paling penting dalam Sufisme dan Syi'isme, menempati status mendasar dalam seluruh struktur doktrin metafisik mereka. *Walāyah* merupakan ide tentang kelanjutan otoritas spiritual Nabi Muhammad kepada otoritas tertentu setelah beliau mangkat. Berangkat dari sumber-sumber agama yang sama, kedua pihak tampaknya mengembangkan konsep yang sama tentang *walāyah* dan karakteristik mereka yang layak atas otoritas rohani, meskipun mereka mengartikulasikan konsep tersebut dalam terminologi dan fungsi yang berbeda.

Kata-kata Kunci: *Sufisme, Syi'isme, walāyah, manusia sempurna, keimaman (imāmah), penutup para nabi, risalah.*

Abstract

This paper tries to examine the concept of *walāyah* in Sufism and Shi'ism. *Walāyah* is one of the most important principles in both Sufism and Shi'ism, occupying such a fundamental status within the whole structure of their metaphysical doctrines. *Walāyah* constitutes the idea on the necessary continuation of the spiritual authority of the Prophet Muhammad to particular authorities after the prophet's death. Drawing from the same religious sources, both parties seem to develop the same concept of what constitutes *walāyah* and what the characteristics of those who deserve that spiritual authority, although they articulated the concept in different terminologies and functions.

Keywords: *Sufism, Shi'ism, walāyah, perfect man, Imāmate, seal of the prophets, risālat.*

Introduction

The concept of the *walāyah* is foundational to both Sufism and Shi'ism,¹ although the two parties give different meaning and function to this concept. In Shi'ism, the term conveys a special sense of the devotion, allegiance, and closeness to the *Imāms* on the part of their followers as well as of the *Imām* function as a spiritual authority. In Sufism, it denotes the role played by the Sufi masters (*walī*) in spiritual path. The slightly different vocalization, *wilāyah*, is also used which suggests a complex variety of meanings in the political, religious and legal spheres. Thus, the distinction made between *walāyah* and *wilāyah* does not just bear different vocalization but also different meanings. Whereas *walāyah* denotes devotion, or the acceptance of the authority of a *walī* or *Imām*, *wilāyah* is the rule or governing authority of a *walī* or *Imām*. The former is more technical and specialized while the latter is a common term denoting the delegation of authority by a king or sultan to a deputy or governor.²

It is not the purpose of this paper, however, to discuss the meanings and functions of this concept in Islamic legal or political realms. Rather, it will examine the meanings and functions of *walāyah* in Sufism and Shi'ism and how it is differently understood by both parties. It is also to analyze the interplay and relationship between Sufism and Shi'ism by investigating the concept of *walāyah* in which

¹ Throughout this paper, Shi'ism and Shi'ite refer to Imami (Twelver) Shi'ism unless otherwise indicated.

² It is important to note that, as Landolt indicates, the vocalization is not normally indicated in the texts, and there is no a common agreement among the classical Arab lexicographers on this point (Hermann Landolt 1987, 316). According to Moojan Momen, the concept of *walāyah* or *wilāyah* is one of the most difficult Islamic terms to translate, particularly since in different contexts its meaning varies (Moojan Momen 1985, 157).

the Shi'ites root in the Sufi structure can be observed, and vice versa. This question seems important to answer since, as Henry Corbin notes, it is one of the problems that the history of Islamic philosophy cannot pass over unanswered because "they dominate the entire perspective of Islamic spirituality (Corbin 1933, 26-28)."

Sufi Perspectives on *Walāyah*

As stated earlier, *walāyah* is one of the most fundamental concepts in Sufism and many Sufis deal with this concept in their works. According to al-Ḥujwīrī in his eleventh-century systematic exposition of the Sufi doctrine, the *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, the very principle and foundation of Sufism rests on *walāyah* (al-Ḥujwīrī 1976, 210). Jami, a Persian Sufi poet who came three centuries after Ḥujwīrī, began his discussions concerning the history of Sufism with a paragraph on saintship (Schimmel 1975, 199). On the other hand, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 298/910) in his work, *Khatm al-Awliyā'*,³ as Schimmel commented in her classical work on Sufism, considers that the works of al-Tirmidhī on the subject of *walāyah*, confirm the fact that "the theories of saintship, *wilāyah*, have formed one theme that has been discussed by the Sufis since the late ninth century (Schimmel 1975, 55&199)."

At the beginning of his work, al-Tirmidhī

³ This is the traditional title given to this al-Tirmidhī's main work, most probably since a large part of the book is devoted to discuss this idea of *khatm al-awliyā'*, probably also the same reason for 'Uthman Yahya to use that title for his well-known edition of the book ('Uthman Yahya 1965), henceforth *Khatm al-Awliyā'*. With some reasons, Radtke suggested that the original title of book was *Ṣirāt al-Awliyā'* and thus picks up this title for his new edition and translation of the book (Bernd Radtke 1999, 483-484). For a full English rendition of *Ṣirāt al-Awliyā'* together with al-Tirmidhī's autobiography, *Bad' Sha'n Abi 'Abdillah* (Radtke and John O'Kane 1996) (henceforth, *The Concept of Sainthood*).

prefaces his remarks by declaring that in his view there are two groups of friends of God: one of whom he calls *awliyā' ḥaqq Allāh*, and the other 'the friends of God,' *awliyā' Allāh* (al-Tirmidhi n.d., 117).⁴ It is interesting to note that al-Tirmidhi's main word for mystic is *walī*, which Radtke understands to mean someone who is 'close to God,' and therefore 'a friend of God'. But it is God who determines the nature of this relationship rather than man (Radtke 1999, 488). *Walī Allāh* is a person who by God's eternal decree becomes close to God and becomes his friend because God wishes it and chooses him. In other words, he reaches the state of sainthood by God's grace through the act of loving. Meanwhile, for the other type of mystic, the *walī ḥaqq Allāh*, things are more difficult because he has to strive to be nearer to God by faithful adherence to every detail of Law (*shari'a*) and the Path (*tariqa*). This includes renouncing the world (*tawba*), educating of the soul, and following the initial mystical experiences. Regardless of the hardship of his struggles, his rank will always be below that of the *walī Allāh* (Radtke 1999, 489).

⁴ According to Radtke, there is no difficulty in the translation of the second term, *walī/awliyā' Allāh*, of which he translates as 'the friends of God,' in contrast to the other term, *walī ḥaqq Allāh* of which he translate 'the Friends of what is due unto God' (Radtke 1999, 43). This difficulty is, in Radtke's view, complicated by the fact that the term *walī ḥaqq Allāh* is used by al-Tirmidhi only in this book. The concept of the different groups of friends of God, however, is to be found in other works also, although using a different terminology. Radtke goes to say that the term *walī/awliyā' Allāh*, as is known, is Qur'anic, whereas *walī/awliyā' ḥaqq/huqūq Allāh* is al-Tirmidhi's own creation since he has not met the concept in any other author, mystical or non-mystical (Radtke 1999 43&488). This last observation by Radtke may not be totally true because, in fact, in the Qur'an we find a terminology quite similar to al-Tirmidhi's second category of *walī Allāh*, that is, *walī ḥaqq Allāh*. The Qur'anic term under discussion is "*ulā'ika awliyā' Allāh ḥaqqan*."

It is important to note that here the ascent of the *walī ḥaqq Allāh* is terminated at the border of the created cosmos which is none other than the throne of God, which is also called by al-Tirmidhi "space" (*makān*) or "nearness to God" (*qurb*). Therefore, although the *walī ḥaqq Allāh* comes close to God, he does not attain God himself (Radtke 1999, 64&490). On the contrary, the *walī Allāh* reaches God himself not through his own effort, but by divine grace. The ascent beyond the throne of God includes traversing the kingdoms of the divine Names which the mystic comes to realize. These kingdoms of light surround the inconceivable unknowable divine Essence. According to Radtke and Landolt, in this respect, al-Tirmidhi is undoubtedly influenced by Gnostic ideas (Radtke 1999, 490; Landolt 1987, 321).

Al-Tirmidhi further argues that upon traversing all the kingdoms of the divine Names so that he realizes God in all his Names, the *walī Allāh* is annihilated in God's Essence (*fanā' fī 'ain al-dzāt al-aḥādīyah*). His ego or his soul (*nafs*) is extinguished and thus be in God's hand (*fī qabdatihi*). His action is God's action through him. However, this state of annihilation, of renouncing the ego, is at the same time a state of the highest possible activity in the world. A proper understanding of this idea would bring us to discuss al-Tirmidhi's most important concept of *khatm al-walāyah*, "the seal of friends of God," which has to be investigated within the structure of his idea of prophethood (Radtke, 95&490).

In al-Tirmidhi's view, Muhammad was the last and perfect prophet. This rank, however, does not concern a matter of time in the sense that he deserves this rank merely because he was the last in time; otherwise, it would not be to bestow a great honor on him, as al-Tirmidhi sarcastically notes. He instead deserved the rank because he has

become the locus on which the perfection of the prophethood can be attained. Therefore, we see that for al-Tirmidhī the term 'seal of prophethood' (*khatm al-nubuwwah*) has nothing to do with a point in time. Rather, the seal in this context indicates the completion of prophethood. Radtke notes that this is the reason why Tirmizi prefers to read the active participle *khātim* instead of the usual *khātam al-nubuwwah* (Radtke 1999, 490).

Furthermore, al-Tirmidhī suggests that Muhammad was entitled to the *khatm al-nubuwwah* because he was the first of creation. In this context, al-Tirmidhī meets with not only Shi'ites ideas, but also with al-Tūstarī (Bowering 1980, 149), whose ideas will be discussed briefly below. Here we have undoubtedly the forerunner of the concept of the *ḥaqīqah al-Muhammadiyah* (Muhammadan reality). According to this concept, being the seal of prophethood, the Prophet Muhammad was consequently also bestowed with other qualities not possessed by ordinary human beings; he was protected from error and sin (*ma'ṣūm*) and was able to take control of his lower nature, soul and ego, and the devil had no power over him. Muhammad was designated to become the leader of the community (*ummah*) through divine revelation (*waḥy*), he had knowledge of the unseen (*'ilm al-ghayb*) and was able to perform miracles (*mu'jizāt*). Because Muhammad had completed, or properly speaking, sealed, prophethood, the coming of another prophet after him becomes something impossible (Radtke 1999, 491).

However, there is one of the most important questions in Islamic theology and politics, that is, who was to lead the Islamic community (*ummah*) following the death of the Prophet? There seems to be major answers to the question during the first three centuries of Islamic history, but here we

only deal with the mystics's interpretation. This solution was given, among others, by al-Hakim al-Tirmidhī. Opposing the Shi'ite and the Sunnite belief altogether, al-Tirmidhī declared that neither relationship of blood nor the ordinary knowledge of the Law is in themselves sufficient qualifications for the leadership of the *ummah*. The leadership was to be entrusted to the forty chosen men whom al-Tirmidhī calls either *siddīqūn* (the truthful ones) or *awliyā' Allāh*. After the death of the Prophet these personalities assumed the leadership of the world. Their rank is, however, below that of the Prophet.⁵

Al-Tirmidhī further asserts that, as the second of creation, these forty men establish the second spiritual hierarchy of the cosmos. Their characteristic is not *nubuwwah*, but *walāyah* 'friendship of God'. Like the prophets, but by virtue of *walāyah*, they are endowed with exceptional capacities. The prophetic gift of revelation (*waḥy*) corresponds to their inspiration (*ilhām*). They can perform *karāmat* (miracles of the saint), as the prophets performed *mu'jizāt* (miracles of the prophet). Like the prophets they also possess knowledge of the unseen (*'ilm al-ghayb*). But unlike the Prophets (*rasūl*) they do not bring a new *Shari'a* (revealed Law) to the people, because the Law had been revealed in its totality by Muhammad. However, through their knowledge they assure the perfect explanation and presentation of the *Shari'a* (Radtke 1999, 492).

The knowledge of these friends of God, which al-Tirmidhī terms *'ilm al-bāṭin* (literally, inner knowledge), is at the highest level *al-'ilm bi-Llāh*, 'the knowledge of God,' This is not --as understood in Shiites contexts-- an esoteric knowledge, but rather a knowledge of the inner laws of creation and

⁵ As we have seen, this is the first question dealt with by Abu Sa'id al-Kharraz. See above.

revelation which are hidden from normal consciousness, which the mystic attains by his own endeavor (1999, 493). In the hierarchy of the forty saints, which will be dealt with later, there is also a highest 'perfect one' who corresponds to the rank of the Prophet Muhammad, who is the 'seal of friendship of God' (*khatm al-walāyah*; *khātām/khātīm al-walāyah*). Parallel to the seal of the prophets, he is not a seal because he is the last of friends of God; rather, he deserves this rank because he has perfected his 'friendship with God', that is, he has 'sealed' it. Like the Prophet Muhammad, this 'seal' protects him against his enemies, the lower soul (*nafs*) and Satan but he is not sinless, because his sin was decreed by God (*maqdūr 'alayh*). He is gifted with inspiration, knowledge of the unseen, and is able to perform miracles—for example, can walk on water. His mystical ascent terminates in annihilation in God (*fanā' fī Allāh*). Furthermore, all his gifts are perfected by the seal of the friendship of God. Therefore, his active involvement in the material world cannot risk him any dangers. It becomes clear from his autobiography, *Bad' Sha'n Abi 'Abdillah*, al-Tirmidhī perceives himself as this highest friend of God, as the *khatm al-wilāya* (1999, 493; 1996, 21-22).

It is of vital importance to remember that from among those perfect saints in the context of Sufi *walāyah*, a whole hierarchy of saints has evolved since at least the time of al-Tirmidhī. The highest spiritual authority is the *qutb*, "axis, pole," or *gaūs*, "help." He is surrounded by three *nuqāba*, "substitutes," four *awtād*, "pillars," seven *abrār*, "pious," forty *abdāl*, "substitutes," three hundred *akhyār*, "good," and four thousand hidden saints. It should be also noted that the terms for these ranks and the number of saints in each rank may vary among different Sufi authors, or even interchangeable. Some authorities,

such as Ibn 'Arabī, claim that there are seven *abdāls*, one for each of the seven regions or territories (*sab'at al-aqālīm*) (Schimmel 1975, 200).

From the previous discussion it appears that, with respect to the concept of *walāyah*, one of the major theoretical problems discussed in Sufi circles from the beginning was the exact nature of the relationship between the *awliyā'* and *anbiyā'*, that is, between the Sufi masters and the Prophets or, in a broader context, *walāyah* and *nubuwwah*. In the commentary of Qur'an, the Sufi, Sahl al-Tūstarī (d. 283/896 in Basra), stated that the heart or spiritual reality of Muhammad (*qalb Muhammad*) is seen as the divine element enshrined in him and the source for the illumination of human hearts; his pre-Adamic Light-nature (*Nūr al-Muhammadiyah*) is the source of the prophetic ancestors of mankind, and of "those desired [by God]," that is, *awliyā'* (Böwering 1980, 322).

On the other hand, al-Tūstarī argues that divine *walāyah* is conferred directly on the elect, those who possess the true knowledge of God and of the Qur'an. The basis for this opinion about the divine election is the well-known Qur'anic phrase about *walī'*, "Your guardian can be only Allah; and His messenger and those who believe" (5:55).⁶ In al-Tūstarī's interpretation:

The friendship of God (*walāyah Allāh*) is the election (*ikhtiyār*) of one of whom He takes possession (*istawlahū*). The friendship of the Prophet (*walāyah al-rasūl*) is God's notification of the Prophet that he is the friend of the believers (*walī' al-mu'minin*). Thus the Prophet is bound to be a friend (*yuwallā*) of one

⁶ This and all subsequent citation of the Qur'an are from *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, An Explanatory Translation* by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (New York: New American Library, 1953).

of whose friend is God (*man walā Allāh*)." (Böwering 1980, 234)

In al-Tūstārī's view, it seems there is no an essential distinction between prophets generally and *awliyā'*, although *siddīqun* occupy a lower rank; the charismatic of the *awliyā'* are signs (*āyāt*) of God's power, and al-Tūstārī himself claims to be the "proof of God" (*hujjah Allāh*), a claim which makes him the subject of harsh criticism from several traditional jurists of his time, most notably Abū Yahya Zakariyā' al-Sajī (d. 307/909) and Abū 'Abdillāh al-Zubayrī (d. 317/929) (Böwering 1980, 64). However, his idea of the saints as the heirs of the prophets stands with regard to the relationship between prophethood and sainthood. He says, "There is no prophet who does not have someone similar to himself in this community, that is to say, a *walī* who shares his charisma" (1980, 65).

The issue was yet brought to light again, and enriched with elements of a breathtaking complexity by Ibn 'Arabī (1164-1240). According to Michel Chodkiewicz, "the doctrine of *walāyah* is the cornerstone of all initiatic in Ibn 'Arabī's work" (Chodkiewicz 1993, 47). Put it briefly, Ibn 'Arabī's concept of the relationship between the two Seals can be described like this: the Seal of the Prophets, considered from the point of view of his own *walāyah*, is toward the One who seals the *walāyah* in the same position as all other prophets and lawgiving messengers (*anbiyā'*) are toward him because he is *walī*, lawgiving messenger, and prophet. But *walāyah* itself is divided into two, and, consequently, there are two Seals of *walāyah* in Ibn 'Arabī's doctrine: Jesus, Seal of "General *Walāyah*," and Ibn 'Arabī himself, or his spiritual reality, Seal of "the Particular Muhammadan *Walāyah*." According to Landolt, although this doctrine may appear provocative, it is, however, "balanced by the self-evident necessity for

both Seals of *Walāyah* to follow the law of the Seal of Prophecy; and everything is placed under the primordial 'reality of Muhammad' (*ḥaqīqah Muḥammadiyyah*), also called 'reality of realities,' or the logos" (Landolt 1987, 322).

In chapter fourteen of the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikām*, Ibn 'Arabī elucidates some aspects of *walāyah* which are of major importance.

Know that *walāyah* is the sphere which encompasses all the other spheres, and for this reason it has no end in time.... On the other hand, legislative prophethood (*nubuwwah*) and the mission of the Messengers (*risālāt*) do have an end which they have reached in the person of Muhammad, since after him there is neither any other prophet - meaning a prophet who brings a revealed Law or submits himself to a previously revealed Law - nor any other legislating Messenger. (Ibn 'Arabī 1370, 134)

Ibn 'Arabī elaborates this idea further that since no being can henceforth term himself *nabīyy'* or *rasūl* - names which properly belong only to created being because they form no part of the divine Names - the only name which remains available is *al-walī*, which is one of the Names of God. For the spiritual man, awareness of his '*ubūdiyyat* (his servitude or ontological nothingness) goes contrary to such a sharing with God of the same name, for it implies participation in the *rubūbiyyat*, or Lordship. But, he adds that if prophethood, in its strict sense, is ended 'general prophethood' (*nubuwwah 'ammah*) remains. This is what more commonly termed *walāyah*, and although it is not accompanied by the legislative authority which characterizes the prophets in the narrow sense of the word, it actually contains a legislative aspect because it implies the possibility of interpreting

the statutes of the Law. This is one of the interpretations of the afore-mentioned *ḥadīth* that says that the learned (*al-‘ulamā’*) - and the *awliyā’* alone, according to Ibn ‘Arabī’, are truly worthy of the name - are ‘the heirs of the prophets’ (Chodkiewicz 1993, 51).

In several chapters in the *Futūḥāt*, Shaykh al-Akbar draws our attention to a meaning of *walāyah* which has a connection with this etymology but is distinct from it. *Walāyah*, he suggests, is the *naṣr*, meaning help or assistance. This help can be envisaged as active (the help that one gives) or as passive (the help that one receives). It is help in the first sense that is discussed here, and specifically *walāyah* to the extent that it is a divine attribute (1993, 55-56). Ibn ‘Arabī’ makes the observation that the Qur’anic verse 2:257, which states that “Allah is the Protecting Guardian [*walī*] of those who believe” (*wa Allāh walīy al-mu’minīn*), actually refers to ‘those who believe’ in general, not just to ‘monotheistic believers’ (*muwahḥidūn*). He concludes that the *walāyah* of Allah extends to the *mushrik* (polytheist), and that the latter’s faith, no matter what its immediate object may be - a stone, an idol, a star - in fact has no object but God. He resonates the Qur’anic notion that all that is in the universe, believing or unbelieving, glorifies God (1993, 56).

Shaykh al-Akbar makes a clear distinction between *walāyah ‘ammah*, *walāyah* in its broadest sense, which consists in the co-operation of created beings, each of them occupying its place and playing its part in the hierarchy of being, and *walāyah khassah* or *walāyah* in the limited sense, which consists of the capacity of the saints to receive, according to the circumstances, the authority and power of one of the divine Names, and to manifest justice or Mercy or Majesty or Beauty, according to what is required by the state of things at any given moment. Among these

saints, we must also distinguish between the *ashab al-ahwāl*, the beings who are governed by their spiritual states, and the *ashab al-maqāmāt*, who master the ‘stations’ while remaining masters of their states, and are the most potent men along the Way. The former are relatively imperfect, but their *walāyah* can be seen by most people. The *walāyah* of the latter, in a certain way, is even more obvious, but its very brilliance covers it up from man’s eyes: “They manifest themselves endowed with the divine Attributes (*bi-ṣifāt al-Ḥaqq*) and for this reason they are unnoticed’ (1993, 57). Here we encountered the idea of perfect sainthood as occulted and implies the interplay between this Sufi idea and the Shi’ites doctrine of the hidden *Imām* (will be shown after this part).

Whereas the passages from the *Futūḥāt* which we have been considering portray *walāyah* in the sense of ‘taking charge’ or ‘helping’, and are thus concerned with the function of the *walī* rather than with what constitutes the *walī* as such, in the concluding chapter of the series, Ibn ‘Arabī’ considers *walāyah* inasmuch as it is nearness to God. According to al-Ghazālī, the coming of Muhammad put the stage of prophethood out of bounds once and for all, the highest level attainable by human beings is the stage of *siddīqūn*, a word derived from the surname of the Caliph Abū Bakr al-Shiddīq, ‘the truthful’. In this as in other texts Ibn ‘Arabī’ contradicts the author of the *Ihyā’*, saying that there is a spiritual station which is higher than the *siddīqūn*, intermediate between that and the ‘prophetic station’ (1993, 57-59). This is the ‘station of nearness/closeness’ (*maqām al-qurbā*), which represents the ultimate point in the hierarchy of the saints, a point which he also calls the station of non-legislative prophethood (*ghair nubuwwat al-tashrī’*) or ‘commonality of prophethood’ (*al-nubuwwah*

al-'ammah). This station is accessible only to the *afrād* (people who hold a highest position of sainthood), known as the *muqarrabūn*, 'those who are close to God' - a term which originates in the Qur'an (*ulā'ika al-muqarrabūn*). One of these is the Pole, *qutb*, the one being in this world who is "the place of Allah's gaze", and who therefore carries out the 'mandate of heaven' in all the universe. But the superiority he possesses in respect of his function does not make him superior in spiritual rank - he is *primus inter pares* (the first among others) and has no authority over others. Prophethood and sainthood, therefore, are related. But there exist another relationship as well, in virtue of which the saints are the heirs of the prophets (1993, 58-59).

One may assume a close structural relationship between the concept of the *qutb* as the highest spiritual guide of the faithful and that of the hidden *Imām* in Shi'ism. As we have seen, there are a number of mystics or Sufis who claimed to be the *qutb* of their time, and quite a number of them assumed the role of the Mahdi, the manifestation of the hidden *imām* at the end of time. Therefore, we observe that the devotion shown to the *imām* and the *qutb*, as manifested in the mystical preceptor, is common to Sufism and Shi'ism. As we shall discuss in the following section of this paper, one of the most important teachings of Twelver Shi'ism is: "*Who dies without knowing the imām of his time, dies as an infidel.*" Similarly, some Sufi authors, such as Jalāluddīn Rumi, though a relatively moderate Sufi, in his *Mathnawī* once said: "*He who does not know the true sheikh -i.e., the Perfect Man and qutb of his time- is a kafīr, an infidel.*" (1925-40, 3225). In the Sufi perspective, "the world cannot exist without a pole or an axis" -just as a mill turns around its axis, it turns around him and is otherwise worthless (Schimmel 1975, 200).

Before going further to discuss this interplay between Sufism and Shi'ism on the concept of *walāyah*, we should devote the next part of this paper to discuss the Shi'ite's point of view of *walāyah*.

***Walāyah* in Shi'ism**

As we have seen, in the administrative, social, and religious language of the beginnings of Islam and, particularly, later in the technical terminology of Sufism, the term *walāyah* has a rather complex meaning. On the contrary, according to Amir-Moezzi, in early Shi'ism, the term *walāyah* denotes a simple meaning. He states that, in principle, the term has two interdependent and complementary meanings. *First*, it refers to the ontological status or the sacred initiatory mission of the *imāms* of different prophets. In this meaning, we find such terms as the *walī - imām* or the "friend" and closest "helper" of God and His prophet. In this context, *walī* is a synonym of *wasī* (the inheritor, the heir [of the Sacred Cause of the prophets]) or *mawlā* (applied to the *imām*, this term means the master, the guide, the protector, the *patronus*). *The second* meaning is related to the faithful of the *imāms*. In that sense, *walāyah* denotes the unfailing love, faith, and submission that the initiated owe to their holy initiating guide (Moezzi 1994, 159). Therefore, the term becomes the equivalent of *tawallī* (being the faithful friend or the obedient protege of someone). In fact, according to Amir-Moezzi, "true Shi'ites" are called the *mutawallī* of the *imāms* (1994, 159).

Shi'ism is recognized with the concept of *walāyah* (with, it should be noted here, a slightly different vocalization) as devotion to 'Ali and "the *imāms* from the house of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*)," that is, descendants of 'Ali who are considered *imāms*. *Walāyah* applies also to the position of 'Ali ibn Abi

Talib as the single, explicitly designated heir and successor to Muhammad in whom all responsibility for the guidance of the Muslims was subsequently vested. Due to this position, it is understandable, therefore, if in Shi'ism, rejecting 'Ali's *walāyah* was and is equivalent to apostasy. The Shi'ites authors emphasize that without the *walāyah* there will be no faith which is approved by God (Corbin 1971, 248). As Sachedina states, the *walāyah* of 'Ali in Shi'ites doctrine has become the sole criterion for judging true faith and the entire spiritual structure of the Shi'ism was established on the *walāyah* (love and devotion) of 'Ali, who became the first Shi'ites *imām* (Sachedina 1981, 6).

In this context, we see that the transfer of *walāyah* from the Prophet Muhammad to 'Ali was believed as part of a universal process of revelation in which the *imāms*, being the inheritors of the esoteric knowledge and substance of the previous prophets (*baṭīn al-nubuwwa*) came to complete the process. Shi'ism insists that only the transfer of *walāyah* from Muhammad to 'Ali and subsequent *imāms* makes Islam the "perfect religion" (as in the Qur'an, 5:3, see below). Moreover, because in the Shi'ites' perspective, *walāyah* designates the adherence to the *imāms* and the recognition of their mission as the true "holders of the [divine] Command" (*'ulu al-'amr*) as well as the exclusive possessors of the true meaning of the Qur'an and the "knowledge of the hidden" (*'ilm al-ghayb*), it remains the key to salvation, without which no pious act of obedience to God (*tā'ah*) is truly valid. Due to these reasons and contrary to Sunni's belief on the doctrinal status of the profession of monotheism (*tawhīd*), *walāyah* in Shi'ism attains the status of doctrine and it is considered one of the pillars of Iman (Landolt 1987, 320). Al-Kulayni, for example, indicates this in his chapter on the *da'ā'im* (pillars) in

his *al-Kaḥfī* when he cites a number of *ḥadīth* wherein the *imāms* have enumerated these pillars – usually four, including prayer, alms, fasting, pilgrimage, plus *walāyah*— and have singled out *walāyah* as especially important (Heffening n.d.).

In Shi'ites perspective, the Prophet explicitly declared 'Ali's elevation to this status at Ghadir Khumm upon returning from the farewell pilgrimage in Mecca when he uttered the famous declaration: "*Of whomever I am the master (mawlā), 'Ali is his master*" (*Man kuntu mawlā fa 'Alī mawlā*) (Ṭabaṭaba'i 1977, 68). This pronouncement was made by the Prophet after the Qur'anic verse (5:3) was revealed to him that says, "*This day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My favour unto you, and have chosen for you as religion al-Islam.*" This verse is commonly understood by both Sunni and Shi'ites that it indicate the end of Muhammad's prophetic mission.

To fully understand the concept of *walāyah* in Shi'ism, it is also important to take into account a number of statements which both Sunni and Shi'ites sources agree were made by Muhammad and to which the Shi'ites regard as the evidence of the *walāyah* of 'Ali and his family and of 'Ali's divinely election as Muhammad's successor. It is not necessary here, however, to consider all such statements or traditions. It may be relevant to focus on those traditions in which the term *walī* is employed the following quotation gives us examples of the *ḥadīth* of this kind which also includes the statements made by 'Ali which, in Shi'ism, are also regarded as traditions:

On one occasion when four of the Muslims complained to the Prophet concerning something that 'Ali has done, the Prophet grew angry and said: 'What do you want from 'Ali?

'Ali is from me and I am from 'Ali. He is the guardian [*walī*] of every believer after me" (Tirmidzi n.d., 298). And in another context: "You are my successor [*walī*, the guardian of the religion] in this world and the next." (Ibn Hanbal n.d., 331)

'Ali said: 'I am Muhammad and Muhammad is I'; 'Ali said in the *Hadīth al-Nurāniyyah*: 'Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets (*khātim al-anbiyā'*) and I am the Seal of the Successors (*khātim al-wasīyyun*)." (Momen 1985, 17)

Besides such *ḥadīth*, several Qur'anic verses are considered to provide a theological foundation for 'Ali's *walāyah*. Probably the most important ones being: (1) "Your guardian [*walī*] can be only Allah; and His messenger and those who believe, who establish worship and pay the poordue, and bow down (in prayer)" (5:55). In this particular verse, the word *walī* can denote friend, helper or master. Many of the commentators, both Sunni and Shi'ite, agreed that this verse refers to 'Ali and was revealed after 'Ali had given his ring away to someone in need who had entered the mosque while prayers were in progress (1985, 17; Āmulī 1969, 400); (2) 'Lo! We offered the trust [*amāna*] unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it. Lo! he hath proved a tyrant and a fool' (33:72). In Shi'ites' perspective, the trust or the divine charge (*amāna*) in this context referred to the *walāyah* or *Imāmate* of 'Ali and the subsequent *imāms*, whereas the sinful and ignorant men are those who took the rightful place of the *imāms* (1987, 17; Ayoub n.d., 58).⁷

In respect of Twelver Shi'ism, the

⁷ According to M. Ayoub, *walayah* here means both the imams' nearness to God as His friends (*awliyā'*) and their authority (*walāya*) over people.

Imamate conception is characterized by the "occultation" (*ghaybah*) or absence of the Twelfth *Imām* who is believed to have "disappeared" in 260/873. At his appearance (*zuhūr*) at the end of time he will "fill the earth with justice as it is now filled with injustice." In the absence of the *imām*, the 'ulama' assumed authority in theological and juridical matters much like their Sunni counterparts before. They insisted, however, on the presence of the infallible (*ma'ṣūm*) Hidden *Imām* as a "grace necessary upon God" (*lutf wajīb*) that would validate their consensus (*ijmā'*)! ref. Gnostic Shi'ism reappears within Twelver Shi'ism by the fourteenth century in a Sufi form but uses different name, *irfan* (esoteric knowledge). The fourteenth century Shi'ites author, Sayyid Haydar 'Amuli (d. after 1385) interprets Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine of the "two seals of *walāyah*" in terms of Twelver Shi'ites imamology, with 'Ali as the "seal of absolute *walāyah*" and the twelfth *imām* as the "seal of particular Muhammadan *walāyah*" (Āmulī 1969, 396-400).

From the very beginning, *walāyah* is represented largely in the teaching of the *Imāms* themselves. The Shi'ites authors repeat over and over that the *walāyah* is the esoteric aspect of prophecy (*baṭīn al-nubuwwah*). The *awliyā' Allāh* are the 'Friends of God' (and the 'Beloved of God'); strictly speaking, they are the prophets and the *Imāms*, the elite of humanity to whom the divine secrets are revealed through divine inspiration. The 'friendship' with which they are favored by God makes them the spiritual Guides of humanity. It is by responding to them with his own devotion, as a friend, that each of their initiates, under their guidance, arrives at knowledge of himself and shares in their *walāyah*. Therefore, the notion of the *walāyah* is, essentially, indicative of the initiatic and supervisory function of the *Imām*

who initiates his disciples into the mysteries of the doctrine. Thus *walāyah* embraces, in an inclusive sense, both the idea of knowledge (*ma'rifa*) and the idea of love (*mahabbah*) - a knowledge which is by its nature a salvatory knowledge. That is probably why, in this respect, Corbin considers Shi'ism as truly gnosis of Islam (Corbin 1971, 371).

Accordingly, the cycle of *walāyah* is the cycle of the *Imām* succeeding the Prophet; that is to say, of *baṭīn* succeeding the *dhāhir*, the *ḥaqīqa* succeeding the *sharī'a*. According to Corbin, there is no question here of dogmatic magisterium. The fact is that it would be more appropriate to speak of the simultaneity of *sharī'a* and *ḥaqīqa* rather than of their succession, thereby adding the latter to the former.

The *baṭīn* or esoteric aspect, as the content of knowledge, and the *walāyah*, which configures the type of spirituality postulated by this knowledge, come together and show Shi'ism to be the gnosis of Islam ('*irfan* or theosophy). Analogous relationships come to mind: the *dhāhir* is to the *baṭīn* what literal religion (*sharī'a*) is to spiritual religion (*ḥaqīqa*), what prophecy (*nubuwwa*) is to the *walāyah*. It would be better to speak of the cycle of *walāyah* as the cycle of spiritual initiation, and the *awliyā'* *Allāh* as the 'Friends of God' or 'men of God.' (1993, 27)

Finally, there is the following decisive statement: "Ali was sent secretly with every prophet; with me he was sent openly" (*Ba'atha 'Alī ma'a kulli nabiyyīn sirran wa mā'iya jahran*) (Āmulī 1969, 401). This last is as precise a statement as could be wished for. The Muhammadan *Imāmate*, as the esotericism of Islam, is in fact the esotericism of all previous prophetic religions (Corbin 1993, 41-42; Āmulī 1969, 399-400).

It is thus evident that the essence (*ḥaqīqa*) of the Seal of the prophets and that of the Seal of the *awliyā'* is one and the same, viewed both exoterically (as prophecy) and esoterically (as the *walāyah*). The situation confronting us is as follows. Everyone in Islam is unanimous in professing that the cycle of prophecy came to an end with Muhammad, Seal of the prophets. For Shi'ism however, the closing of the cycle of prophecy coincided with the opening of the cycle of the *walāyah* the cycle of spiritual Initiation. What in fact came to an end, according to the Shi'ite authors, was 'legislative prophecy' (Corbin 1993, 43). Prophecy pure and simple characterizes the spiritual state of those who before Islam were called *nabīy*, but who from then on were designated *awliyā'*: the name was changed, but the thing itself remained. Such is the vision which typifies Shi'ite Islam, inspiring the expectation of a future to which it remains open. It is a conception based on a classification of the prophets, itself founded on the prophetic gnosiology taught by the *Imāms* themselves. It also establishes an order of precedence between *walī*, *nabīy* and *rasūl*, the receiver Shi'ite understanding of which differs from that of Isma'ilism (1993, 43).

Nevertheless, in thus affirming the superiority of the *walāyah* the Twelver Shi'ites do not mean to imply that the person of the *walī* pure and simple is superior to the person of the *nabīy* and the Messenger. What is meant is that of the three qualities, viewed in the single person of the Prophet of Islam, the *walāyah* is pre-eminent, because it is the source, foundation and support of the two others. Hence the apparent paradox: that even though the *walāyah* is pre-eminent, in concrete terms it is the prophet-Messenger who takes precedence, because he contains all three qualities: he is *walī-nabīy-rasūl* (1993, 44).

***Walāyah* and the Complex Relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism**

In his *Sufi Essays*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr asserts that “one of the most difficult questions touching the manifestation of Sufism in Islamic history is its relation with Shi'ism” (Nasr 1991, 104). The complexity of this relationship, according to Nasr, is due to the fact that Sufism and Shi'ism cannot be dealt with on the same structures of Islamic tradition. Although both Sufism and Shi'ism represent the esoteric dimension of Islam, Shi'ism represents another division of Islam, that is, of Shi'ism and the Sunni. While the esoteric dimension of Islam in the Sunni is crystallized in Sufism, this Islamic dimension “poured into the whole structure of Shi'ism” (1991, 105).

Nasr goes on to argue that, from the Sunni perspective, the relationship between Sufism and Shi'ism is, in essence, a matter of similarity and assimilation. On the other hand, from the Shi'ites point of view, Shi'ism – understood here in its general sense as the esoteric instructions of the Prophet - is the origin of what later came to be known as Sufism. However, to follow Nasr's conclusion, looking at the historical manifestation of both Sufism and Shi'ism in later period, “neither Shi'ism nor Sunnism, nor Sufism within the Sunni world, derive from one another” because the fact is, “they all derive their authority from the Prophet and the source of the Islamic revelation” (1991, 105).

Henry Corbin presents a different conclusion from Nasr's in this respect. Corbin seems to understand Sufism-Shi'ism relationship in terms of the transposition (and the denaturation) of Shi'ite concepts in Sufism, especially the doctrine of the *Imāmate* or *walāyah*. Corbin insists that, “The Sufi notion of the person who is the Pole

(*Qutb*) and the Pole of Poles, as well as the notion of the *walāyah*, have a Shi'ites origin is something that cannot be denied” (Corbin 1993, 190-191). The same influence is also observed within the tradition of the ‘cloak’ of Sufism which, to Corbin, cannot be explained without reference to the same origin, that is Shi'ism (1993 190-191). Even with regard to Haydar Amuli's admiration to certain of Ibn 'Arabī's ideas which were also accepted by many other Shi'ites authors in later periods, Corbin frequently states that Shi'ism in this case was simply “taking back its own” (1971, 219). It is not surprising, if when comparing many of Ibn 'Arabī's ideas with those of Shi'ism, Corbin states that many pages of the shaykh can be read as the work of a Shi'ite author. Corbin also observes that despite the fact that Ibn 'Arabī's writings undoubtedly demonstrate an exposition of the concept of the *walāyah* with “perfect correctness,” the *walāyah* itself is separated from its origins and supports (1993, 28-29).

Corbin further argues that there is possibly no single concept in Islamic esotericism which was not mentioned or initiated by the Shi'ites *Imāms* in conversations, lessons, and sermons, and other means of communication. To provide an example for this, he gives a critical analysis on the relationship between the *walāyah* and prophecy (*nubuwwah*) in al-Tirmidhī's doctrine. As we have discussed earlier, al-Tirmidhī develops the theses on the all-encompassing nature of the *walāyah* as the source and foundation of the prophetic mission and inspiration; the idea of the dual *walāyah* (of which Corbin thinks to be first propounded and established by Shi'ites doctrine); the superiority of *walāyah* to prophecy because of its permanence mission; the historical completeness of the cycle of prophecy with the coming of the last Prophet; and the ever-existence of the cycle of the

walāyah through the presence of ‘the *awliyā’*. 12).

A similar thesis is developed in a more historicist fashion by Kāmil Muṣṭafā al-Shaybī in *al-Ṣilah bayna al-tasawwuf wa al-tashayyū’*. According to al-Shaybī, it is highly probable that Shi’ism provided Sufism with numerous ideas in many fields. In this book, he attempts to demonstrate the influence of Shi’ism on Sufism, arguing that from many similarities found between both parties, we can infer that Shi’ism came first and had established its whole body of doctrine upon a spiritual foundation, just as Sufism did afterwards. When dealing with Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysical ideas, for instance, al-Shaybī asserts that the latter had actually borrowed many of his ideas from Shi’ism. For example, Ibn ‘Arabī’s idea of the limited prophecy of the *awliyā’*, the idea of Muhammadan reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muhammadiyah*), the *awliyā’*s (represented by *Imāms* in Shi’ism) intercession for people, and the two resurrection at the end of the world (resembling the Shi’ite’s conception of *al-raj’ā* (the second coming) and *al-qiyyāma* (the resurrection)); all of these ideas, al-Shaybī argues, were borrowed from Shi’ism (al-Shaybī 1969, 64).

Based on these assumptions, he then ventures to prove that “Sufi *Wilāya* (Sainthood) formed a complete *Imāmate* with all its divine privileges and God’s support.” Furthermore, al-Shaybī contends that it is particularly with regard to the concept of *walāyah* that the Sufis could not deny their dependence upon the Shi’ites doctrines, and, to a large extent, were even “obliged to associate all their doctrines with the person of ‘Ali” (1969, 11-12). Al-Shaybī concludes that the relationship between Sufism and Shi’ism passed through two independent phases: first, the establishment of Sufi ideas identical with those in Shi’ism; and secondly, the influence of Sufism on Shi’ism in its later periods (1969,

12). Michel Chodkiewicz provides different analysis from that of Corbin and al-Shaybī pertaining to the influence of Shi’ism on Sufism. He asserts that it is certainly pointless to deny the terminological and conceptual connection and, therefore also, interaction that exist between Shi’ism and Sufism, especially prior to the coming of the Safavids. But, Chodkiewicz argues that these influences were reciprocal, and he points out to the influence of Ibn ‘Arabī –whose importance was acknowledged by many Shi’ites authors, such as Haydar ‘Amuli– on the Shi’ites doctrine of *walāyah* as an obvious proof for this reciprocity (Chodkiewicz 1993, 49). As we have discussed earlier, the *Imām* is seen as the spiritual friend or supporter who guides and initiates mankind into the mystical or inner truth of religion. It is through him that God’s grace reaches the Earth. As the apostles or prophets are concerned with external aspects of the religion, in particular with the legislation of religious laws and ordinances, the *Imām* is concerned primarily with the inner or esoteric aspects of religion (conclusion without basis), guiding mankind onto the path of spiritual enlightenment and progress. The *Imām* is therefore, at one and the same time, master and friend in the journey of the spirit. This theme is, of course, very close to the Sufi idea of the *wilāya* possessed by a Sufi Shaykh or *awliyā’* (Momen 1985, 157).

Other most important doctrine of Sufism that should also be taken into account when we are dealing with the idea of *walāyah* is the concept of the Perfect Man (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*), most importantly as expounded by Ibn ‘Arabī and after him elaborated by ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (1365-1428). This doctrine states that there always must exist upon the earth a man who is the perfect channel of grace from God to man. This man who is called the Qutb

(Pole or Axis, of the Universe) is considered to be in a state of *walāyah* (here to mean sanctity, being under the protection of God). We have repeatedly stated that there are great similarities between the concept of the Qutb in Sufism and the Shi'ites Imam. As a matter of fact, many of the Traditions referring to the Imam are also to be found among Sufis' teachings and doctrines regarding the Qutb. For example, there are the well-known Sufi sayings such as "There can only be one Qutb on the earth at any one time"; "Anyone who dies without recognizing the Qutb of his time has died the death of the Jahiliyyah"; again "Only recognition of the Qutb confers true belief," and some other similar traditions (1985, 209).

The authority to teach the Sufi path has been handed down from master (Qutb, Shaykh, Murshid or Pir) to pupil (*Murīd*, *Ṭalīb*, *Sālik*) through the generations. Most of these 'chains' of authority (*silsīla*) traditionally go back through various intermediaries to 'Ali who among Sufis is considered to have received initiation into mystical truth from Muhammad.

Conclusion

Closely associated with *walāyah* is the concept of the Imam in Shi'ism, for the *imām* is he who possesses the power and function of *walāyah*. The role of *imām* is central to Shi'ism, though we can not deal with all ramifications. But from the spiritual point of view it is important to point out his function as spiritual guide, the function that closely resembles that of the Sufi master. Though the primarily conclusions to be drawn from this complex relationship may appear hard to reconcile, they come to the close point that *walāyah* encompasses *nubuwwah* and *risālah* which proceed from it, and hence it is superior to them in the person of him who

combines the three qualifications. Although there are a number of issues in which the vast and intricate relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism can be well observed.

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