

Chapter 1

Tirmidhī, Ibn ‘Arabī, and Others on Sanctity

Tirmidhī on *Walāya*

The earliest thinker to systematically address the subject of sanctity was al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. cir. 300/910).¹ Of course he was not the only thinker to discuss saints and sainthood; two Iraqī contemporaries, al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899) and Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 281/894), also reflected on the subject.² Their work however, did not approach that of Tirmidhī in coherence or sophistication.³ One eleventh-century writer tells us that there were even earlier books written on sainthood, but that these have been lost.⁴ These books may have been simple compilations of sayings by sufi masters on the subject, or thematic collections of *aḥādīth*, or perhaps something more discursive. Since these sources may never be recovered, we might never be fully able to assess the originality of Tirmidhī’s contribution to this field. Nevertheless, in his *Kitāb khatm al-awliyā*, (or *Kitāb sīrat al-awliyā*)⁵ Tirmidhī presents us with the earliest coherent doctrine of *walāya*. In light of what we do know was being written at the same time on the subject, and even later, this book is truly impressive in its detail and creativity.

Tirmidhī was probably the most prolific writer on mystical topics of his time. Beyond the *Kitāb khatm al-awliyā*, there are a number of works pertaining to *walāya* that await analysis.⁶ In spite of his contribution to Islamic mysticism, Tirmidhī has always been somewhat on the periphery of the tradition. Regarding the history of his doctrine of sanctity, it is clear that from the time of his death at the end of the third/ninth century, up into the seventh/thirteenth, there is almost no mention made of it. As we shall see below, however, there were some criticisms of certain sufi doctrines that are described as privileging

sainthood over prophecy. We cannot be completely certain, but in most cases it seems fair to suspect that these are criticisms of Tirmidhī's teaching that the sainthood of the Prophet is in one way superior to his prophecy. We shall discuss this doctrine in some detail below. Historically, Tirmidhī's doctrine of *walāya* (more particularly his theory of the Seal of saints—*khatm al-awliyā'*) finally made its way into currency with the attention given it by Ibn 'Arabī in the midseventh/thirteenth century. It is also of note that al-Shādhilī—who probably had not read Ibn 'Arabī—held *Kitāb khatm al-awliyā'* in high regard and read it with his inner circle of followers (see chapter 2).

Another factor in Tirmidhī's relative obscurity was the fact that he was an "Easterner," that is, he was from Tirmidh, south of Samarqand, in present-day Uzbekistan, as opposed to the dominant center of Baghdad. Little is known of the details of his life, including his education. Of particular interest to our subject at hand is the religious milieu of Khurāsān. It seems that Tirmidhī participated in the spiritual debates of his time. By the end of the third/ninth century the asceticism (*zuhd*) that had dominated the early devotional landscape, in Khurāsān and elsewhere, had largely been displaced by the Malāmatiyya movement (established in Nishāpūr by Ḥamdūn al-Qaṣṣār d. 271/884). This movement stressed *malāmat al-nafs*, subjecting the lower-self, or ego, to blame with the intention of diminishing it.⁷ Although the debates of the time have left little record of themselves, there do exist letters from Tirmidhī in which he criticizes the Malāmatiyya.⁸ In general, he objects to the great attention this group devotes to their *nafs* and accuses them of underestimating the role of faith in spiritual development. Another important school of the time in Nishāpūr was the ascetic-minded Karrāmiyya, established by Muḥammad Ibn Karrām (d. 255/869).⁹ Undoubtedly, Tirmidhī would have disapproved of their emphasis on asceticism, but he seems to have made no direct mention of them.

With regard to his theory of *walāya*, Tirmidhī presents a novel understanding of a number of elements. First, he distinguishes between the divine communication to the prophet and that to the saint. The general theological position is that a prophet is inspired by *wahy* and that a saint is inspired by *ilhām*. Tirmidhī elaborates on this, adding that revelation reaches the prophet as God's *kalām* (speech) and the saints as God's *ḥadīth* (speech).¹⁰

The difference between prophethood and [sainthood] is that prophethood consists of speech (*kalām*) which detaches itself from God as revelation (*wahy*), and it is accompanied by a spirit (*rūḥ*) from God. Revelation comes to an end and God seals it with the spirit and the spirit causes (a prophet) to accept it.¹¹ Moreover, this must be accepted as true. If anyone were to reject it, he would be an infidel because he would have rejected the word (*kalām*) of God. As for the one possessed of [sainthood]—God is in charge of the speech (*ḥadīth*) (he hears)¹² from the celestial treasure chambers, and God causes it to

reach him. Thus he receives supernatural speech [*ḥadīth*]. This supernatural speech detaches itself from God [and reaches the saint] by means of a tongue [of truth], and accompanying supernatural speech (*ḥadīth*) is God-inspired peace of mind (*sakīna*)¹³ which occurs in the heart of the man drawn to God [*majdhūb*].¹⁴

So the saints have their own connection to the divine, distinct from that of the prophets. It is also mentioned that the message received by the prophet may not be rejected by the believer. Tirmidhī mentions in a following passage that the speech received by the saint is useful, but its acceptance is not obligatory for the believer. He says that “if anyone rejects it, he is not an infidel. And yet in rejecting it, he will suffer failure and undergo evil consequences, and his heart will be confounded.”¹⁵ It is later explained why ignoring the saint who has received *ḥadīth* is a bad idea.

As for the man who hears [*ḥadīth*], the [*ḥadīth*] he hears is divine support and an increase of awareness with regard to the Holy Law of the messenger (حديثه له تأييد و زيادة بينة في شريعة الرسول). When he [the saint] dispenses that awareness to the servants of God, this is a means and a direction to God which he [the saint] disposes over. Whoever rejects him [the saint] loses his blessing [*baraka*] and his light, for this is a matter of a righteous guide who points the way to God.¹⁶

Here we see Tirmidhī laying out the distinction between the authority of prophecy and that of sainthood.¹⁷ Both are of divine inspiration, and the lower assists in understanding the Law brought by prophecy, but the authority of sainthood is not binding upon the believing community. This is a significant point, which will be taken up later by Ibn ‘Arabī and also the early Shādhiliyya. The epistemology of *walāya* is thus twofold. Mystical knowledge entails not only an understanding of spiritual realities (e.g., experience of the divine, merging of the self with the eternal, etc.), but it also bestows insight into the seemingly more mundane reality of God’s Law on earth.¹⁸

In addition to this distinction between prophecy and *walāya*, Tirmidhī also describes two grades of sainthood. As in the distinction between *walāya* and *nubuwwa*, this difference hinges on modes of communication from the Divine. There are those saints, mentioned above, who receive *ḥadīth*, and there are those who only converse (*yunājūna*) with God. Tirmidhī’s unknown interviewer asks, “You have described the difference between the prophet and those who receive *ḥadīth*. What then are the other saints like?” He answers as follows:

The people of the Way converse (يتناجون) [with God], while those who receive *ḥadīth* are thus informed (يحدثون). I explained this *ḥadīth* to

you earlier. Conversation [with God], on the other hand is a gift (*ʿaṭāʾ*). The recipient receives utterances (*maqālāt*) in the form of light as if someone were saying this or that to him. But with these utterances are neither . . . the Spirit [by which the prophets are informed], nor the God-inspired peace of mind [found in those who receive *ḥadīth*]. Thus, the recipient experiences doubt and is not sure whether the Enemy (Satan) is in some way associated with it or whether the lower soul, with its deception and cunning wiles, is mingled in it.¹⁹

Like the greater, this lesser sainthood is of divine origin, but without the God-inspired *sakīna* to accompany it, its bearer is unsure. One who holds the lesser sainthood is informed by “utterances,” in contrast to the superior communication, which would have been by *ḥadīth*. This “conversation” with God is not confirmed by the accompanying form of Spirit known as *sakīna*. These lesser saints, because they cannot be sure of their communications, are thus not able to offer the guidance in matters of Law that their superiors can.

The following hierarchy is established. At bottom is the class of monotheists made up of the pious (*ʿubbād*), the ascetics (*zuhhād*),²⁰ and so on. Then there is the first level of saints, those whose dialogue with God is left unconfirmed either by *sakīna* or by the divine Spirit. This is followed by the higher saints, whose *ḥadīth* is confirmed; and finally there is the level of the prophets/messengers, whose *kalām* is confirmed by the Spirit. Tirmidhī, in his description of this hierarchy, also presents a cumulative relationship between the levels. In other words, the powers of the lower levels are included in those of the higher. “The *muḥaddath* receives *ḥadīth*, and *firāsa* (clairvoyance), and *ilhām* (inspiration) and truthfulness. The prophet has all this as well as prophethood, and in turn the messenger has all this and messengerhood. The others from among the saints (i.e. those of *najwa* and the *maqālāt*) have only *firāsa*, *ilhām*, and truthfulness.”²¹ Thus, although the mode of divine communication at each of the three levels is distinct—at least in name—each one leads to its superior, with the highest level encompassing the two lower. It is interesting to note the phenomenological element here in Tirmidhī’s epistemology. An essential element of higher communication with God is the accompanying Spirit: the *rūḥ* for the prophets and the *sakīna* for the higher saints. This Spirit is so important that without either form of it, even though one may be receiving divine communication, one is not qualified to interpret the Law or to guide souls.

The picture becomes less clear, however, when we introduce another of Tirmidhī’s novel ideas. This is his second typology of saints. Although we noted above his distinction between those saints who receive *sakīna* and those who do not, this typology is quite distinct. In this scheme the superior saint is called the “true saint of God” (ولي الله حقاً), and the inferior is the “saint of what

is due to God” (ولي حق الله).²² The latter is presented as a holy man who controls his lower self by a discipline of piety and correct behavior. Through these efforts he puts himself in a position to receive the mercy of God (*rahma*), which will raise him to a place near God. In contrast, the “true saint of God” is raised to the divine presence by God’s generosity (*jūd*). We read,

For the first of them [*walāya*] comes forth through divine compassion (*rahma*), and God takes it upon Himself to transport him in one instant from the House of Grandeur to the place of divine proximity [*maqām al-qurba*]. For the second of them [*walāya*] comes forth through divine generosity (*jūd*), and God takes it upon Himself to transport him in a single instant from the place of divine proximity through one realm after another to the Possessor of sovereignty.²³

This model of the levels of sainthood follows the system of cumulative *walāya* described earlier. Here, the superior figure has mastered the level reached by the lesser²⁴ (i.e., reaching the *maqām al-qurba*), but for him this is only the first step. His final stage is reached once divine generosity has taken him to the next level. In this model, against the ascetics and Malāmatiyya, we see Tirmidhī again prioritizing divine election over individual effort. That is to say, spiritual discipline is only a first step in the ascent to God.

Another important element in Tirmidhī’s theory of sanctity is the assembly (*dīwān*) of saints. He is certainly not the first to describe this assembly, since versions of it are mentioned in the hadith literature. One tradition, known as the “hadith of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mas‘ud” describes the assembly of 356 saints: 300 are “on the heart of” Adam, 40 on that of Moses (or Noah), 7 on Abraham, 5 (or 4) on the angel Gabriel, 3 on Michael, and 1 on the heart of Isrāfīl, the angel of resurrection. When one of them dies, one below takes his place. The single one is commonly called “*qutb*” (pole) or “*ghawth*” (rescue), with the *abdāl* (replacements) (either 40 or 7) and *siḍḍiqūn* (sincere) referring either to a class or to saints in general.²⁵ The idea of an assembly of 40 saints certainly predates Islam. Goldziher points to the 40 martyrs of Sebastian as a precedent.²⁶ The Qur’ān mentions the number 40 for the most part in relation to Moses.²⁷

This assembly, according to Tirmidhī and later Muslim thinkers, plays an important role in the preservation of life here on earth. In one passage he says, “These forty are the guarantee of protection for the (Muslim) community. Through them the earth exists and through them the people pray for rain. When they die, the community will suffer what it has been threatened with.”²⁸ So the assembly of saints seems to play an intercessory role for the community. Elsewhere, Tirmidhī describes the end of the rule of the assembly of forty and the subsequent rise of the Seal of saints.

Then when God took his Prophet unto Him, He caused forty strictly faithful men (*siḍḍīqūn*) to emerge in His community. Through them the earth exists, and they are the people of His house and His family. Whenever one of them dies, another follows after him and occupies his position, and so it will continue until their number is exhausted and the time comes for the world to end. Then God will send a [saint] whom He has chosen and elected... and He will bestow on him everything he has bestowed upon the [other saints] but He will distinguish him with the Seal [of Sainthood] with God (*khātim al-walāya*). And he will be God's proof (*hujjat Allāh*) against all other [saints] on the Day of Judgement. By means of this Seal he will possess the sincerity of [sainthood] with God, the same way that Muḥammad possessed the sincerity of prophethood.²⁹

Here we have first a restatement of the dependence of the world upon the forty. The existence of the community seems to be tied to prophetic revelation and saintly inspiration. The time Muḥammad was on earth has ended—and thus so has prophetic revelation; the community is then sustained for a period by the forty. Tirmidhī does not elaborate on these forty, rather his primary concern seems to be their Seal. This figure, at the end of the above passage, has his role explicitly compared to that of Muḥammad, the Seal of the prophets. With this figure Tirmidhī provides us with a third level of saint. Not only is this Seal of sainthood superior, but he also has an apocalyptic function. We are told that when these forty die, the community will “suffer what it has been threatened with,” that is, divine judgment and retribution—judgment day. The Seal will appear at the end of time.

The spiritual authority of this Seal is based first on his passing through God's attributes and reaching the divine essence. Tirmidhī says,

[In the realm of each divine name] there is an assembly of intimate converse (*najwā*) and gifts of honour for the people of that realm. And there God has made stations for the hearts of His chosen few. They are the ones who go forward from the place [of divine proximity] to God's realm. Many [a saint] has his station in God's first realm . . . and many [have] advanced to a station in the second, third or fourth realm of God. And whenever [one] advances to another realm, the name of that realm is bestowed on him until he is such that he has advanced through all these realms to the realm of Unicity and Singleness (*mulk al-waḥdāniyya al-fardiyya*) . . . He is the chief [*sayyid*] of the [saints of God] and he possesses the seal of [sainthood] from his Lord . . . He has reached God's interior [*bāṭin*].³⁰

Thus, the Seal has access to the most intimate contact with God. Tirmidhī then raises the question of the relationship between this sainthood and prophethood. In describing the Seal he says, “He is very close [in rank] to the prophets, in fact he has almost attained their status”³¹ and describes him as drawing on the treasure chambers of the prophets. Tirmidhī concludes, “Indeed, the covering has been removed for him from the stations of the prophets, and from their ranks, and from their gifts and their rare presents.” Elaborating on this relationship between the Seal and prophethood, Tirmidhī describes the levels of participation in *nubuwwa* accorded to the various levels of *walāya*. He writes, “[T]here are ranks amongst those drawn to God (*majdhūbūn*) and those who hear (*ḥadīth*). Some of them have been given one-third of prophethood, while others have been given half, and others still have been given more. But the most highly endowed in this respect is the one who possesses the Seal of (Sainthood).”³² Thus, we see that the boundary between the greatest saint and the realm of prophecy is rather flexible. This final saint, although he does not function as a prophet, in some way can access prophethood.

It is also striking to note the parallels Tirmidhī draws between the Seal and the prophet Muḥammad. He describes the Prophet thus:

The first thing God thought was the thought of Muḥammad . . . Then he was the first, on the [Well-guarded] Tablet (*lawḥ*). Then he was the first in the covenant with God (*mīthāq*) . . . He will be the first to whom God speaks (*khiṭāb*). He will be the first to go before God (*wifāda*) and the first to practice intercession (*shafā’a*).³³

Later on, Tirmidhī describes the Seal of saints:

This [saint, the Seal,] was what God thought of first in the primal beginning . . . Then he was the first on the [Well-guarded] Tablet, then the first in the Covenant (*mīthāq*). And then he will be the first on the Day of Congregation [of the dead] (*yawm al-maḥshar*), then he will be the first whom God will address (*khiṭāb*), then the first to go before God (*wifāda*), then the first to undertake intercession (*shafā’a*).³⁴

Further, in an earlier passage, Tirmidhī mentions that the Seal’s position among the saints is like that of Muḥammad among the prophets.

This model of *walāya* is rather simple. Just as there were prophets before Muḥammad, there are saints before the Seal; and just as Muḥammad was the completion of the era of prophecy, the Seal of saints is the completion of the age of sanctity. Although the Qur’an distinguishes between the prophets (17:55), it praises those who make no distinctions between them (2:136). However, the

Qur'an does mention Muḥammad specifically as the *khātam al-nabiyīn* (33:40), a title that was taken up by hadith scholars in an effort to portray Muḥammad as the superior, rather than simply the final, prophet.³⁵ Regarding Tirmidhī's doctrine of the Seal of sainthood, it is clear that it reflects the ideas of both final and superior. Our discussions above have shown that the Seal of saints is both last of the saints and also best. In Ibn 'Arabī's model of *walāya*, as will be seen below, there must be more than one Seal of *walāya* since there is more than one kind of *walāya*. Ibn 'Arabī will also elaborate greatly on the cumulative relationship mentioned by Tirmidhī in his description of the prophet having his prophesy in addition to all that the saint has.

Sahl Tustarī on *Walāya*

An important contemporary of Tirmidhī's was Sahl Tustarī (d. 283/896). Although he did not influence the understanding of *walāya* to the degree Tirmidhī did, and as we shall see he was probably not read by the Shādhiliyya or the Wafā'iyya, he did have some interesting things to say about sanctity.

As Tirmidhī has noted, *walāya* endows its holder with a unique understanding of the Law—but this understanding is not authoritative. In a similar vein Tustarī claims that the mystical understanding of the Qur'an granted to the saints provides guidance to the community in both the exoteric and esoteric aspects of scripture.³⁶ He also describes the categories of saints in the *dīwān*. He claims to have met the one thousand five hundred sincere ones (*ṣiddīqūn*), and among them the forty substitutes (*budalā'*) and the seven pegs (*awtād*). These classes will become very elaborate three and a half centuries later with Ibn 'Arabī.

In a novel discussion, Tustarī draws on the various forms of the root *WLY* to describe the relationship between saints and the prophet Muḥammad. He writes,

The *walāyat Allāh* (friendship with God) is the election (*ikhtiyār*) of one of whom He takes possession of (*istawlāhu*). The *walāyat al-rasūl* (friendship with the prophet) is God's notification of the Prophet that he is the *walī al-mu'minīn* (friend of the faithful). Thus the Prophet is bound to be a friend (*yuwālā*) of one whose friend is God (*man walā Allāh*).³⁷

Beyond this, Tustarī distinguishes between the *himma* (spiritual aspiration)³⁸ of the prophet and that of the saint. It is by this *himma*, which is clothed in lights, that the prophets reach the throne of God. In the case of the saints, their *himma* is clothed in robes of confirmation (*ta'yīd*), and they may only approach the divine presence thanks to permit passes they have been given.³⁹

In what is certainly his greatest contribution to mystical thought, Tustarī elaborated on the idea of the Muḥammadan Light as the first of God’s creation.⁴⁰ The gnostic echoes are clear, yet this concept for later thinkers gave rise to the all-encompassing notion of the Muḥammadan Reality. For Tustarī, this Muḥammadan Light, in preexistence, is the source of the prophets and the elite mystics (the *murādūn* versus the *murīdīn*). In preexistence they are derived from Muḥammad, which explains their latent spiritual abilities when they are in creation.⁴¹

Lesser Treatments of *Walāya*

Although Tirmidhī’s work on *walāya* presented a more or less coherent theory, and Tustarī had reflected seriously on the subject, most other early sufi thinkers seem to broach the topic only in passing.⁴² They did not produce a theory of *walāya* per se. This fact should not surprise us since a quick look at almost any of the sufi literature of the classical period will show that sanctity itself is not a separate mystical theme or issue for discussion. Of course all mystical thought itself is predicated on some kind of sanctity; virtually all reflection on spiritual realities or spiritual discipline assumes a rapprochement with the divine. It may be said that whenever God is approached, sanctity becomes an issue. Nevertheless, discussions of the details of a theory of *walāya* were not common. One interesting example is that of the Persian writer ‘Alī ibn ‘Uthmān al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī (d. 464/1071). In a wide-ranging survey of sufis and sufi doctrine, he says of Tirmidhī that “he was one of the religious leaders of his time and the author of many works on every branch of exoteric and esoteric science. His doctrine was based on saintship (*walāya*), and he used to explain the true nature of saintship and the degrees of saints and the observance of the proper arrangement of their ranks.”⁴³ Despite this promising introduction, Hujwīrī’s account of Tirmidhī avoids any mention of the Seal of saints.⁴⁴ This omission, in light of the high esteem in which Hujwīrī holds Tirmidhī, must have been the result of self-censorship.

Although a coherent doctrine of *walāya* was rare among sufi masters before the seventh/thirteenth century, by the very nature of their spiritual concerns they all had something to say on the matter. Simple descriptions of the saints as God’s elect were common. One early writer of mystical exegesis was Ibn ‘Aṭā’ (d. 309/921). He interprets *Sūrat al-Mulk* (Q. 67:5) “We have adorned the lower heaven with lamps” as meaning “We have adorned the hearts of the saints with lights of gnosis (*ma’rifā*).”⁴⁵ A simplified presentation of *walāya* is found in al-Kalābādhī’s well-known sufi manual *Kitāb al-ta’arruf*. Here he describes two quite rudimentary levels of sainthood,

The first is merely a departure from enmity, and in this sense is general to all believers; . . . it is only to be regarded in a general sense, as in the phrase “The believer is the friend (*walī*) of God.” The second is a sainthood of peculiar election and choice . . . When a man possesses this, he is preserved from regarding himself, and therefore he does not fall into conceit; . . . He is saved from the faults inherent in human nature, although the stamp of humanity remains in him. . . Nevertheless, he will not be divinely preserved from committing lesser or greater sins [versus a prophet]: but . . . repentance will be close at hand to him.⁴⁶

Although al-Kalābādī wrote some one hundred years after Tirmidhī, it seems he never elaborated seriously on the nature of sainthood.

Another significant figure in the history of sufi theory is al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1073). His *Risāla* is probably the most widely cited work among subsequent thinkers. Yet, here too we find an absence of teaching directly on *walāya*. Although he provides a short chapter on *walāya* in his *Risāla*, he does not seem to add much to our understanding. In one passage he compares the passive to the active nature of *walāya*. He tells us, “The word “saint” has two meanings: in its passive sense it means he whom God takes care of (*yatawalla*) . . . and in its active sense it is he who takes care of God’s worship and piety.”⁴⁷ Further along, a discussion is provided of the saint being protected (*maḥfūz*) from grave sins, as distinct from the prophet being infallible (*ma’sūm*). Turning to another important thinker, the Persian sufi Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209), it should be noted that he had a significant impact on Ibn ‘Arabī and other mystical theorists. However, his own writings were much more concerned with accounts of his dramatic spiritual life than systematic expositions on the theory of *walāya*.⁴⁸

It is interesting to note that Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), in his *Kimiyā-i sa‘ādat* describes the divine knowledge available to both saints and prophets; this is *‘ilm ladunī* (knowledge from God’s presence). Although Ghazālī does not elaborate on *walāya* per se, it seems this kind of knowledge would be key in any understanding of sanctity. He also mentions that the common people may partially access this knowledge from God’s presence through their dreams.⁴⁹ This is not such a novel idea, however, since in the hadith literature dreams had been described as part of prophecy. Abū ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Hanbal both report the following: “Anas ibn Mālik related: The messenger of Allāh said: Mission (*risāla*) and prophecy have come to an end and there will be no messenger or prophet after me. (Mālik) said: This fell hard upon the people. (The Prophet) said: But the *mubashshirāt* (remain). They said: Oh messenger of Allāh, what are the *mubashshirāt* ? He said: The dream of the Muslim. It is a part of prophecy.”⁵⁰ Al-Bukhārī also mentions that “the dream of the believer is one of 46 parts of prophecy” (*Ṣaḥīḥ*, Aḥkām, 4).

One recurring issue among sufi theorists was that of the question of the superiority of the prophet over the saint. In his *Kitāb al-kashf wa al-bayān*, al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899) attacks some unnamed sufis for having placed the saints above the Prophet. He asserts instead that *walāya* existed before *nubuwwa* (prophecy), and that *nubuwwa* simply confers an additional superiority.⁵¹ This criticism is echoed a century later by al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988). He warns against those unnamed sufis who would situate *walāya* over *nubuwwa*.⁵² There were a few early figures who were considered to have held this position, but conclusive documentation is lacking. Two in particular were al-Dārānī (d. 215/830) and Ibn Abī al-Ḥawārī (d. 246/860).⁵³ It is not clear at this point how we are to understand this accusation. The accusers, al-Kharrāz and al-Sarrāj, seem to be referring to an established doctrine. The only substantive exposition of a *walāya* that might be seen to rival prophecy would be that of Tirmidhī. Elements, noted above, such as his claim that the Seal of saints receives a substantial portion of prophecy may have been enough to draw these accusations. We have also noted that Hujwīrī omitted the Seal of saints in his account of Tirmidhī’s teaching. However, the target is not necessarily Tirmidhī, since Hujwīrī says, “Certain Shaykhs formerly composed books on this subject, but they became rare and soon disappeared.”⁵⁴ Perhaps an expressed priority of *walāya* over *nubuwwa* had been made by earlier mystics.⁵⁵ In a recent work G. Elmore has suggested that this issue was the *cause célèbre* in debates of the tenth century. He sees the crucifixion of the extatic mystic al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) as marking the final victory for the tenet of the superiority of the prophet. The centrality Elmore proposes for this issue is intriguing, but the fact that he presents his analysis as grounds for understanding Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine of the Seal of saints must make us wonder if things are actually this neat and tidy. The possibility must be held out, I believe, that this was not a doctrine actually held by anyone. It would not be the first case of phantom opponents in the history of Islamic thought (e.g., the Ḥashwiyya, the Ḥulūliyya).⁵⁶ This issue requires further research, including a close rereading of the relevant ninth- and tenth-century texts. Because our discussion here does not address this question, we shall leave this task to others.

Walāya and Shī‘ism

The Shī‘ī worldview has always hung on an understanding of *walāya* particular to it. Whatever the form taken, Ithnā ‘Asharī (Twelver) or Ismā‘īlī, a central tenet of Shī‘ism was recognition of the transfer of religious authority (*walāya*) from the prophet Muḥammad to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 41/661). This included both temporal authority, as leader of the community, and spiritual authority. Recognition of the Shī‘ī Imāms, who one after another took up this *walāya*, came to be a central tenet in the Shī‘ī doctrine of salvation.

[A]ccording to standard Shīʿī doctrine, its major dogma insists that only the transfer of *wilāya* from Muḥammad to ʿAlī and subsequent imams makes Islam the “perfect religion” (Sura 5:3). In fact, *wilāya*, as adherence to the imams and as recognition of their mission as the true “holders of the (divine) Command” (*ūlī al-amr*) and the exclusive possessors of the true meaning of the Qurʾan and the “knowledge of the hidden” (*ʿilm al-ghayb*), remains the key to salvation, without which no pious act of obedience to God (*tāʿa*) is truly valid. It is for these reasons that *wilāya*, and not the profession of monotheism (*tawḥīd*) as in Sunnī Islam, appears as the principal “pillar of Islam” in the classical collections of Shīʿī traditions.⁵⁷

This cycle of *walāya* picks up with ʿAlī when it was passed on to him by Muḥammad,⁵⁸ as described in the traditions of Ghadīr Khumm.⁵⁹ In turn, the Imāms (the true *awliyāʾ*) initiate their followers into the esoteric reality of prophecy.⁶⁰ The parallel with the sufi idea of the rule of saints extending from the death of Muḥammad to the end of the world is clear.

The last of the Imāms, in the Ithnā ʿAshari tradition, is understood to remain alive in occultation (*ghayb*), awaiting his return at the end of time.⁶¹ A further elaboration on the office of Imam was the belief that in spite of the various historical figures to whom it has adhered until 260/874, it is in essence atemporal. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī (d. 672/1274) described the imam thus: “L’Imam—à sa mention soit le salut—n’a pas eu de commencement à l’origine; entre temps, il ne subit ni altération ni changement; il n’a pas de terme à la fin.”⁶² It will be seen later, in our discussion of Ibn ʿArabī, that a Sunnī understanding of an eternal *walāya* (as represented in the Muḥammadan Reality) was possible.

One interesting figure who did make a significant effort to reconcile Twelver Shīʿism with sufism was Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. end of eighth/fourteenth century). He wrote his *Jāmiʿ al-asrār* to reconcile the secrets of God (*asrār Allāh*), the secrets of the prophets, and the secrets of the Imāms (*asrār al-awliyāʾ*).⁶³ The work stresses common elements between the two groups, such as the lofty status recognized for ʿAlī and affiliations with Jaʿfar al-Sādiq, the sixth Imām, through early sufi figures such as Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728). But Āmulī’s most significant foray into the the sufi concept of *walāya* was certainly his commentary on Ibn ʿArabī’s *Fuṣūṣ*, called “*Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*.”⁶⁴ Here he takes up Ibn ʿArabī’s version of the Seal of sainthood and inserts the Shīʿī Imams into the model.⁶⁵

Ibn ʿArabī and *Walāya*

Beyond Tirmidhī’s initial discussions of sanctity in the tenth century, the most important elaboration of the topic came from Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240). This

Andalusian mystic left an immense body of writing.⁶⁶ The best known of his works are the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* and the voluminous *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, which in modern printings occupies eight volumes.⁶⁷ In addition to being an avid writer, he also traveled extensively throughout his adult life. He was born in the city of Murcia in the year 560/1165, into a family of means. The family moved to Seville, where Ibn ‘Arabī was educated and probably worked in government service until he left Spain in 590/1193. He studied and taught across the Maghreb, visited Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey, and spent his last years in Damascus, where he is buried.⁶⁸

The thought of Ibn ‘Arabī, or the Greatest Shaykh (*al-shaykh al-akbar*), has been the subject of a number of academic studies. Some of the earlier highlights in this field are the contributions of H. Corbin,⁶⁹ M. Asín Palacios,⁷⁰ A. E. ‘Affīfī,⁷¹ and T. Izutsu.⁷² Particularly useful additions to the field have been made recently by W. C. Chittick.⁷³ In our particular subfield of interest, that is *walāya*, the most outstanding study is that of Michel Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des Saints* (Gallimard, 1986).⁷⁴ This impressive monograph is the only sustained analysis of sainthood written to date.

The writings of Ibn ‘Arabī are numerous and often dense. It is not possible for us to address fully the many insights he brought to Islamic mystical thought. For example, his understanding of divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*) and the so-called Oneness of Being⁷⁵ are two important theories we will not explore here. However, his doctrine of *walāya* is certainly central to his mystical legacy. Chodkiewicz himself says, “It would not be untrue to say that in one sense Ibn ‘Arabī, from the first to the last line of his work, never spoke of anything other than sainthood, of its ways and its goals.”⁷⁶

The *dīwān* of saints, for Ibn ‘Arabī, is quite complex. Strictly speaking, there are 84 classes (*ṭabaqāt*) of saints in the assembly of saints. However, the first 49 differ from the remaining 35. The first group consists of the lesser saints who are those people who have attained a certain degree of spiritual life. As a group, their number varies. The second group, that of the 35 levels, is constant in number—a total of 589 individuals.⁷⁷ Both groups consist of *ṭabaqāt*, which we may call a “horizontal” system of classes, yet there also exists what we may call a vertical system of classification. This system is based on the idea of prophetic inheritance (*wirātha*); that is, every saint can be classified according to the prophet from whom he draws his spiritual inheritance. Chodkiewicz describes this inheritance as conferring “a precise and visible character on the behaviour, virtues and graces of the *walī*.”⁷⁸ The most outward manifestation of a saint’s inheritance is the type of miracles he performs; if he is Moseslike (*Mūsāwī*), then his face or hand might glow (cf. Q. 27:12), if he is an inheritor of Jesus (*‘Īsawī*) then he might walk on water or raise the dead.⁷⁹

So the saints may be classed horizontally according to their spiritual function and vertically according to their distinguishing prophetic inheritance. This

makes for a great variety of specific sainthoods, but the complexity does not stop there. Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of the assembly of saints claims that each level a saint reaches includes all the levels below it. That is, if the seventh level, for example, is reached, that individual may be found at each preceding level. Progress up the *ṭabaqāt*, in other words, is cumulative.⁸⁰ It would appear then, that with all three elements of classification in play—the inheritance, the horizontal classes, and the cumulative nature of the latter—the varieties of sainthood in the *dīwān* are innumerable.

For the lower group of saints, its 49 levels consist of spiritual categories described largely by certain Qur’anic terms, such as “those who submit,” “the believers,” or “the devout.” To these names are attached interpretations that far surpass their usual meanings.⁸¹ At the top of this horizontal classification is the level of the *malāmiyya* (men of blame). Within this group are the *umanā’* (trustworthy) and the *afrād* (solitaries). Little is known of the trustworthy “since they behave with creatures according to the normal demands of faith . . . It is at the Day of Resurrection that their eminent degree will appear to creatures, while here below they were unknown among men.”⁸² The category of the solitaries includes such figures as the *quṭb* (pole), *awṭād* (pegs), *abdāl* (substitutes), *nuqabā’* (representatives), *nujabā’* (nobles), and *rajabīyyūn* (those whose spiritual state only manifests during the month of Rajab). At any point in time there is only one pole, two imams, four *awṭād*, and seven *abdāl*. The pole is described as “the centre of the circle of the universe . . . the mirror of God, and the pivot of the world.”⁸³ This pole and the two imams are joined by the substitute of al-Khaḍīr, to form together the four pegs.⁸⁴

Thus, at the pinnacle of the congress of saints we find a group of four mortal saints. But Ibn ‘Arabī then adds another dimension that ties the *dīwān* of the saints to the realms of prophethood and mission. In short, he claims that these four pegs are actually only the substitutes of the four true *awṭād*. These four are the four living messengers: Idrīs (Enoch), Jesus, Elijah, and al-Khaḍīr.⁸⁵ So like the vertical classification mentioned earlier, which produced prophetic inheritances among the saints, the ultimate saints are essentially messengers (whose representatives are saints). Ibn ‘Arabī writes,

These four beings exist in the flesh in this world below, and are its . . . *awṭād*. Two of them are the two Imams and one of them is the Pole, who is the place of God’s beholding on this earth. Messengers have not ceased and will not cease to be in this world until the Day of Resurrection . . . Within this community, there corresponds at all times to each of these Messengers a being who is “on the heart” of that Messenger and is his deputy (*nā’ib*). [Most know these four] only through these deputies.⁸⁶

This incorporation of *nubuwwa* into the congress of saints is far removed from the *dīwān* as conceived by Tirmidhī. It will be remembered that in that earlier system not only was there no presence of messengers, but the entire congress apparently came into existence only after the death of the prophet Muḥammad.

In a final twist, Ibn ‘Arabī again transforms the apex of the hierarchy of the congress of saints. He writes, “As for the pole, it is the spirit of Muḥammad (*rūḥ Muḥammad*), by which all the Messengers and all the Prophets are sustained.” Chodkiewicz then concludes, “Iḍrīs, Elijah, Jesus and Khaḍīr are, likewise, simply differentiated projections of the *ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya*: in a certain sense, they too are only ‘deputies.’”⁸⁷

Beyond this description of the *dīwān*, Ibn ‘Arabī takes Tirmidhī’s concept of the Seal of sainthood and elaborates upon it. As we saw above, for Tirmidhī the Seal is essentially the final saint. But, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s model, the Seal has three manifestations. The first is the “Seal of Muḥammadan sainthood,” the second is the “Seal of general sainthood” and the third is the “Seal of children.” The Seal of children is not a well-developed idea; it simply signifies the end of time, being the last human born.⁸⁸ On the other hand, Muḥammadan and general sainthood are fully developed concepts. Legislative prophecy (*nubuwwa tashrī‘*), with the death of Muḥammad, has ended. However, general prophecy continues and is synonymous with *walāya*. This *walāya* takes two forms, Muḥammadan sainthood and general sainthood—each with its own Seal.

This general prophecy (*nubuwwa ‘amma*) is what God leaves open for humanity’s guidance. Ibn ‘Arabī writes,

Know that *walāya* is an all-inclusive and general function that never comes to an end, and which brings general [divine] communications. As for the legislative function of prophecy and mission, this came to an end with Muḥammad, since there will be no law-bringing prophet after him or community to receive such, nor any messenger bringing divine law. This statement is a terrible blow to the friends (*awliyā’*) of God because it implies the cessation of the experience of total and perfect servanthood . . . God, however, is kind to his servants and has left for them general prophecy, which brings no law with it. He has also left to them the power of legislation (*tashrī‘*) through the exercise of individual judgement (*ijtihād*) concerning rules and regulations.⁸⁹

In the second half of this passage Ibn ‘Arabī is implying that the saints, referred to here as his servants, through general prophecy, have a function in legislative interpretation. Ibn ‘Arabī goes on to describe this function of interpreter as it is found in Muḥammad. It is through the same *walāya* (or *nubuwwa ‘amma*) mentioned above left for the saints that Muḥammad interprets the

divine law that he himself—in his function as messenger—has brought. We read,

When the Prophet speaks on matters that lie outside the scope of law, he is then speaking as a saint and a gnostic, so that his station as a knower [of truth] is more complete and perfect than that as a [messenger] or lawgiver. If you hear any of the [People of God] transmitting sayings from him to the effect that Sainthood is higher than Prophecy, he means only what we have just said. Likewise if he says that the saint is superior to the prophet and the [messenger], he means only that this is so within one person. This is because the [messenger], in his Sainthood, is more perfect than he is as a prophet or a [messenger]. It does not mean that any saint coming after him is higher than he.⁹⁰

So Muḥammad can function through sainthood or through his prophecy. His prophecy, however, is limited to a time and place, but *walāya* is universal and timeless. So within his person (or within that of any other prophet or messenger), sainthood is superior to prophecy; but an individual who has sainthood, but not prophecy or mission, is not superior to one who possesses prophecy, or mission. This is the case because *risāla* and *nubuwwa* are cumulative. In other words, the messenger has mission, prophecy and sainthood; the prophet has prophecy and sainthood; the saint has only sainthood.⁹¹

This is the genius of Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine of sainthood. Here *walāya* is extended far beyond the usual understanding of the saint. Unlike the doctrines that preceded it, this version of sainthood does not speak of a graying of the line between the ultimate saints and the lower functions of the prophets, it rather expands *walāya* into a universal medium—it becomes the hyle in which all else operates.⁹²

As we mentioned earlier, there are three Seals. The Seal of the children we have mentioned. As for seals of sainthood, one seals general sainthood, while the other seals Muḥammadan sainthood. Ibn ‘Arabī describes them,

There are in fact two Seals, one with which God seals sainthood in general and another with which He seals Muḥammadan sainthood. ‘Īsā [i.e. Jesus] is the Seal of Sainthood in an absolute sense. He is the saint who *par excellence* possesses the non-legislative prophetic function in the time of this Community [i.e., the Muslim community] . . . When he descends at the end of time, it will be as the heir and the Seal, and after him there will be no saint to be the holder of prophet-hood in general . . . The office of the Seal of Muḥammadan Sainthood belongs to an Arab . . . I met him in 595 AH . . . As God has sealed

legislative prophethood through Muḥammad, through the Muḥammadan Seal he has sealed the sainthood which comes from the Muḥammadan heritage, not the sainthood which comes from the heritage of other prophets.⁹³

So *walāya* from the heritage of the prophet Muḥammad (note the return of the vertical classification) is sealed in the time of Ibn ‘Arabī. Yet general *walāya* continues, manifested among those saints who inherit from prophets other than Muḥammad. This *walāya* will continue to be manifested until the end of time, at which point it will be sealed by Jesus. The identity of this seal of Muḥammadan sainthood is unclear. As noted above, Ibn ‘Arabī claims to have met him, but elsewhere he claims himself to be this figure.⁹⁴ ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, although not specifically called the Seal of Muḥammadan sainthood, may also be the continuation of this *walāya*. In an important passage ‘Alī is singled out as the closest of all humanity to Muḥammad, and most disposed to carrying on the Prophet’s sanctity.⁹⁵

In his description of the seal of saints Ibn ‘Arabī describes a figure who subordinates himself to the law, but in reality possesses a more immediate link to God. In discussing the hadith account of a vision Muḥammad had in which he was the missing brick (i.e., the seal) in a wall symbolizing prophethood, Ibn ‘Arabī adds the vision of the seal of (Muḥammadan) sainthood, here seeing two bricks. He recounts,

The reason for his seeing two bricks is that, outwardly, he follows the Law of the Seal of [Messengers], represented by the silver brick. This is his outer aspect. . . Inwardly, however, he receives directly from God what he appears [outwardly] to follow. . . He derives his knowledge from the same source as the angel who reveals it to the [Messenger].⁹⁶

Thus the seal appears to be essentially superior. Further, this seal of sainthood—in light of the cessation of prophecy and mission—also becomes the medium by which the messengers acquire their knowledge of God.

[N]one of the prophets and [messengers] can attain to [knowledge of God] except from the Niche (*mishkāt*) of the Seal of the (Messengers), nor are any of the saints able to attain to it except from the Niche of the Seal of Saints, so that, in effect, none of the [messengers] can attain to it, when they do so, except from the Niche of the Seal of Saints. This is because the office of [messenger] and prophet (by prophet I mean the bringer of Sacred Law) comes to an end, while Sainthood never ceases. Thus the [messengers], as being also

saints, attain only to what we have mentioned from the Niche of the Seal of Saints, this being even more the case with the lesser saints.⁹⁷

This passage makes it clear that the Seal of sainthood is in reality that by which prophets and messengers—through their *walāya*—attain knowledge of God.⁹⁸ However, this lofty function of the Seal of sainthood is in a sense neutralized. It appears that the Seal of sainthood is in essence simply one aspect of the Seal of messengers. This shift marks the introduction of the eternal, universal Muḥammadan Reality (or Muḥammadan Spirit). Ibn ‘Arabī writes, “As for the Seal of Saints . . . this sainthood is among the excellencies of the Seal of Messengers, Muḥammad.”⁹⁹ In a particularly relevant passage, Ibn ‘Arabī signals that this Muḥammadan Reality is the source for all the highest spiritual offices: “This Muḥammadan Spirit has places in the universe where it manifests itself. The most perfect (of these places) are the Pole of (each) Time, the *afrād*, the Muḥammadan Seal of Sainthood and the Seal of Universal Sainthood, Jesus.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, these figures are simply the various representatives for the Muḥammadan Reality; and the apparent superiority of the seal of sainthood over the prophets and messengers just mentioned is only a priority among aspects of the Muḥammadan Reality. This superiority is not that of one individual over another, but rather that of *walāya* over *nubuwwa* within the Muḥammadan Reality.

This universal Muḥammad is described elsewhere in cosmological terms. We read, “The first being to be endowed with existence was . . . the ‘divine calamus’, the ‘first Intellect’ who is also the ‘Muḥammadan Reality’ or the ‘Reality out of which all things were created’.”¹⁰¹ This Reality is also the medium of divine creation: “The Spirit attributed to God (Q. 32:8, where it is said that God breathed “His Spirit” into Adam) is the Muḥammadan Reality.”¹⁰²