



1982

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Marcia K. Hermansen

Loyola University Chicago, mherman@luc.edu

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Recommended Citation

Hermansen, MK. "Shah Wali Allah's Arrangement of the Subtle Spiritual Centers." *Studies in Islam*, 1982.

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SHAH WALI ALLAH OF DELHI'S ARRANGEMENT OF THE SUBTLE SPIRITUAL CENTRES (LATA'IF)

MARCIA K. HERMANSEN

An Aspect of his thought explained using material from the collection of religious and philosophical letters being edited for publication under the auspices of the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies, Tuhlaqabad, New Delhi (India).¹

This paper will present an explanation of some previously unexamined aspects of Shāh Walī Allāh's (d. 1762) conception of the subtle spiritual centres (*laṭā'if*). For Shāh Walī Allāh these spiritual components of a person were of great importance in explaining the theory and practice of individual spiritual progress on the Ṣūfī path. His arrangement of these centres, together with his explanation of their interaction with one another directly reflects his more comprehensive understanding of cosmology and ontology, and therefore this aspect of his thought is less esoteric than it might initially seem.

The term *laṭīfa* is derived from the Arabic word *laṭīf* meaning gentle, sensitive, or subtle. In Ṣūfī terminology the term *laṭīfa* first emerged in reference to the idea of a subtle body (*jism-e laṭīf*) associated with the spiritual dimension of the person. It was believed by the Ṣūfīs that this non-material part of the person was the most susceptible to spiritual discipline and exercises. Eventually the theoretically oriented Ṣūfīs developed systematic models and a terminology of these centres related to the various spiritual aspects of individuals in which each one of these particular aspects was considered a *laṭīfa*, (pl. *laṭā'if*). The word *laṭīfa*, in this context, has on occasions been translated "subtlety," "subtle point," or "subtle essence." Since some of these *laṭā'if* have been diagrammed in the works of Shāh Walī Allāh with circular shapes² I prefer to translate *laṭā'if* as "subtle spiritual centres" following the usage by Annemarie Schimmel,³ although the concept of "centre" is not necessarily to be understood from the term itself.

Among the Ṣūfī writers, Shāh Walī Allāh provides one of the most detailed explanations of the *laṭā'if*, to which he devoted an entire book,

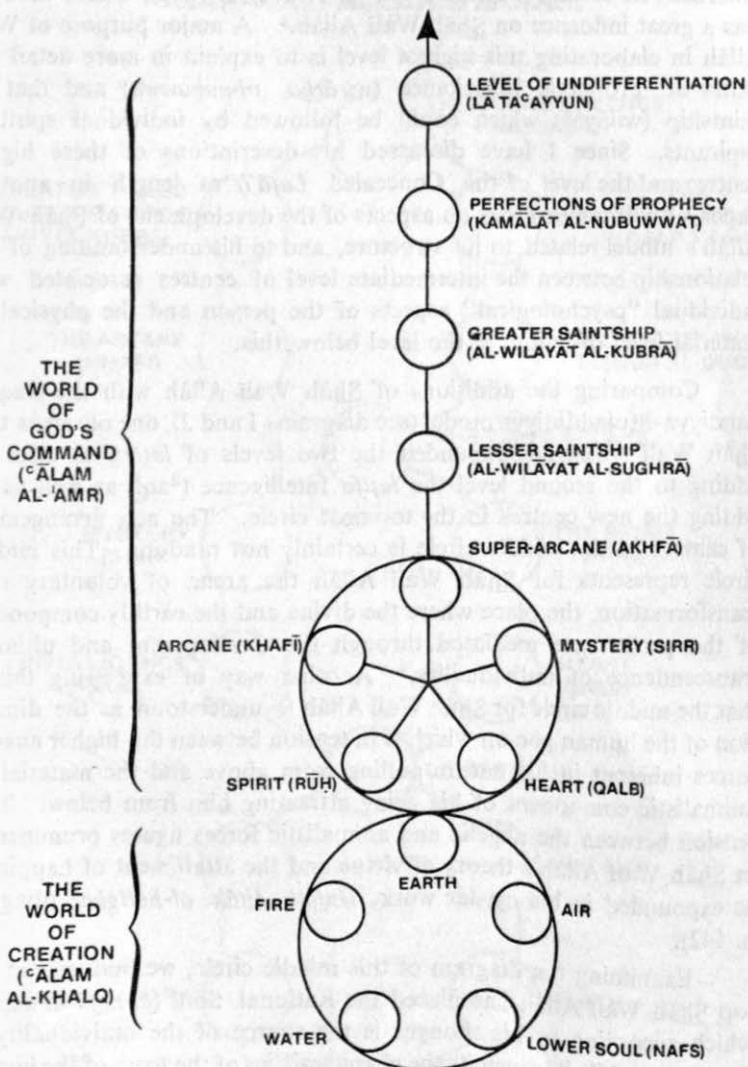
*Alṭāf al-Quds*⁴ as well as many references in his mystical works such as *al-Taḥīmāt al-Ilāhiyya*.

Shāh Walī Allāh in his description of the *laṭā'if* further developed a model existing among the Naqshbandī Ṣūfīs, in particular the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya branch, so called because they followed the tradition of **Shāikh** Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1625) who was known as the Mujaddid or Renewer of the Second Millennium. This system was based on the idea that the human being had ten basic parts—five material and five immaterial. The lower level of the material parts consisted of the Lower Soul (*nafs*) and the four elements (fire, earth, air, and water), while the higher level consisted of the five *laṭā'if*, sometimes referred to as the five jewels (*al-jawāhir al-khamsa*); the Heart (*qalb*), Spirit (*rūḥ*), Mystery (*sirr*), Arcane (*khafī*) and the Most or Super-Arcane (*akhfā*).⁵ (Refer to the diagram on the next page for a depiction of this model.) The two levels of this Naqshbandī system were said to correspond to the distinction between the World of God's Command (*ʿālam al-amr*) and the World of God's Creation (*ʿālam al-khalq*), a distinction based on Qurʾānic terminology and having a long history in Ṣūfī thought. An example is the interpretation of the Qurʾānic verse, "the Spirit is from the Command (*ʿamr*) of my Lord" (17:85), which is understood by the Ṣūfīs to mean that the human spirit (*rūḥ*) originates in the immaterial, timeless world of God's Command (*ʿālam al-ʿamr*) at a level preceding any temporal, physical manifestation.

It is also interesting to note that the five-fold structure of the *laṭā'if* according to the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya model seems to parallel the concept in Hellenized Islamic medical theory (*ṭibb*) in which a person has five inner (mental) and five outer (physical) senses.

While the model of the *laṭā'if* according to **Shāh** Walī Allāh is described most fully in his mystical works such as *al-Taḥīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* and *Alṭāf al-Quds*, he appears to have continually refined these concepts throughout his life since works which are apparently earlier, such as his *Hamʿāt* and *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāliḡha*, allude to aspects of it in an incomplete or preliminary way. In his most complete version of the structure of the spiritual components of the person, **Shāh** Walī Allāh expanded the Naqshbandī model to include a higher, third level comprised of five centres which he termed the Concealed Subtle Spiritual Centres (*al-Laṭā'if al-Kāmina*). The diagram at p. 141 presented in this paper is based on one accompanying his description of these centres in

A NAQSHBANDIYYA-MUJADDIDIYYA MODEL OF THE LATA'IF AND THE SPIRITUAL PATH*



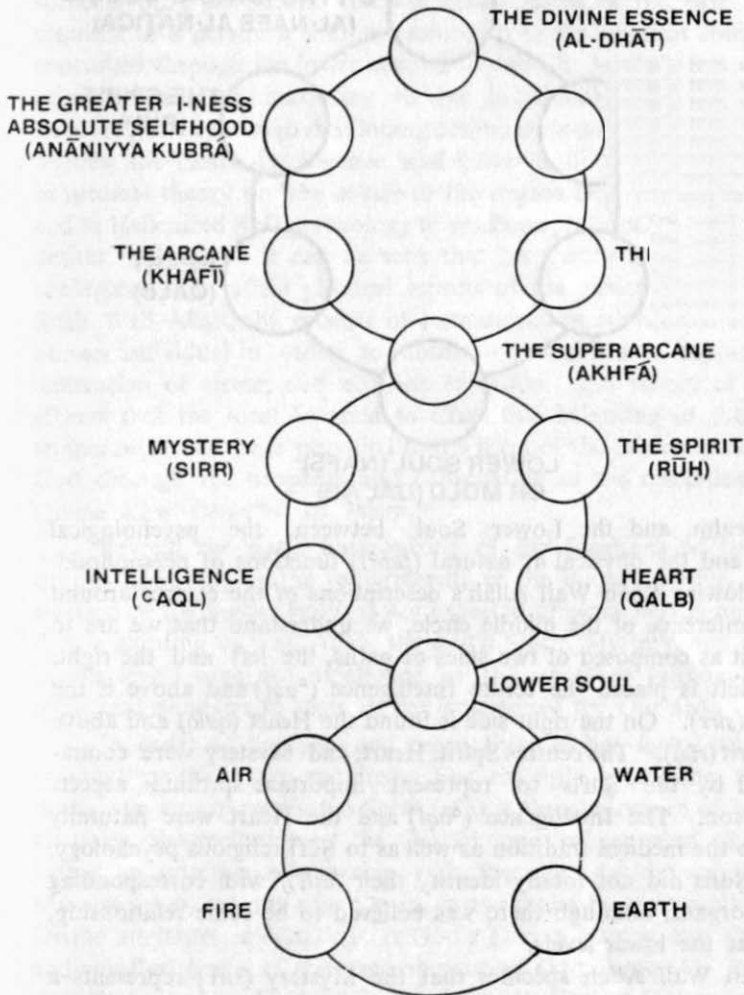
*Adapted from chart in MUḤAMMAD DHAUQĪ, SIRR-I-DILBARĀN and Ahmad Sirhindī's MAKTŪBĀT-i- Imām Rabbānī.

the work *al-Taḥḥīmāt al-Ilāhiyya*. The names which he gave to some of these centres initially appear to be new to the tradition but have some precedent in certain works of Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240), whose thought was a great influence on Shāh Walī Allāh.⁶ A major purpose of Walī Allāh in elaborating this highest level is to explain in more detail the paths of Prophetic Inheritance (*wirāṭha al-nubuwwa*) and that of saintship (*wilāyāt*) which could be followed by individual spiritual aspirants. Since I have discussed his descriptions of these higher centres and the level of the Concealed *Laṭāʿif* at length in another paper,⁷ I will rather focus on aspects of the development of Shāh Walī Allāh's model related to its structure, and to his understanding of the relationship between the intermediate level of centres associated with individual "psychological" aspects of the person and the physical or material level of being, at the level below this.

Comparing the additions of Shāh Walī Allāh with the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya model (see diagrams 1 and 2), one observes that Shāh Walī Allāh has expanded the two levels of *laṭāʿif* to three by adding to the second level the *laṭīfa* Intelligence (ʿaql) as well as by adding the new centres in the topmost circle. The new arrangement of centres in the middle circle is certainly not random. This middle circle represents for Shāh Walī Allāh the arena of voluntary self-transformation, the place where the divine and the earthly components of the person are mediated through the development and ultimate transcendence of individuality.⁸ Another way of expressing this is that the middle circle for Shāh Walī Allāh is understood as the dimension of the human person which is in tension between the higher angelic forces inherent in his nature pulling from above and the material or animalistic component of his being attracting him from below. This tension between the angelic and animalistic forces figures prominently in Shāh Walī Allāh's theory of virtue and the attainment of happiness as expounded in his master work, *Hujjat Allāh al-Bāliḡha*⁹ (diag. at p. 142).

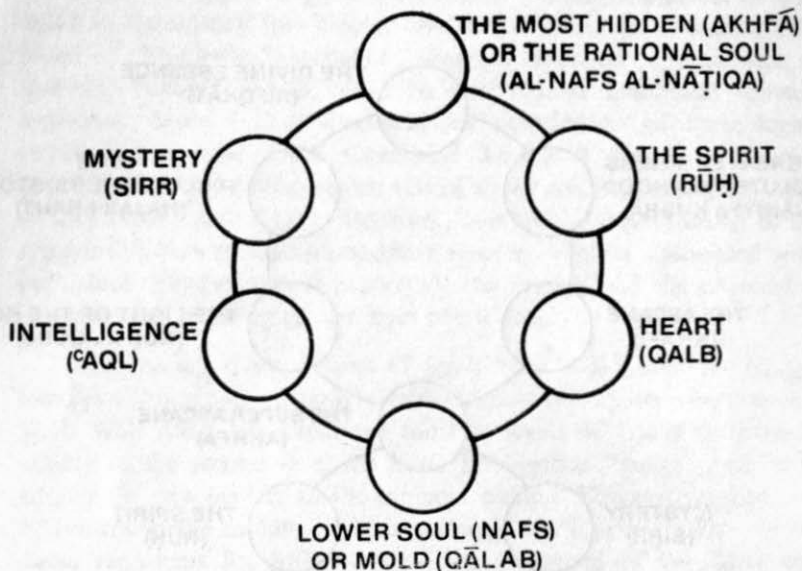
Examining the diagram of this middle circle, we find that at the top Shāh Walī Allāh has placed the Rational Soul (*al-naḥs al-nāṭiqā*) which according to his thought is the source of the individuality of the person while it transmits the characteristics of the form of the human species (*ṣūra nauʿiyya*). At the bottom of the circle is the Lower Soul (*naḥs*) or Mould (*qālab*). Each of these two centres thus marks a transition point—the Rational Soul between the human and the higher or

**THE SUBTLE SPIRITUAL CENTERS (LAṬĀ'IF)
SHĀH WALĪ ALLĀH'S MODEL**



*1. Based on diagram in al-Tahīmāt al-Ilāhiyya, 1. p. 244

THE INTERMEDIATE LEVEL OF THE MANIFEST (BĀRIZA) LAṬĀ'IF



angelic realm, and the Lower Soul between the psychological (*nafsāni*) and the physical or natural (*ṭabʿi*) functions of personhood.

Following *Shāh Walī Allāh's* descriptions of the centres around the circumference of the middle circle, we understand that we are to perceive it as composed of two sides or paths, the left and the right. On our left is placed the centre Intelligence (*ʿaql*) and above it the Mystery (*sirr*). On the right side is found the Heart (*qalb*) and above it the Spirit (*rūḥ*). The centres Spirit, Heart, and Mystery were commonly held by the *Ṣūfīs* to represent important spiritual aspects of a person. The Intelligence (*ʿaql*) and the Heart were naturally known to the medical tradition as well as to *Ṣūfī* religious psychology, but the *Ṣūfīs* did not totally identify their *laṭā'if* with corresponding physical organs, although there was believed to be some relationship, at least at the lower levels.

Shāh Walī Allāh specifies that the Mystery (*sirr*) represents a higher aspect or refinement of the Intelligence, just as the Spirit (*rūḥ*) represents a further refinement of the qualities of the Heart (*qalb*) *laṭīfa*. Therefore his arrangement of the *laṭā'if* around the circle

symbolizes both this affinity and hierarchy among the centres while at the same time it indicates the paths which an aspirant might follow in order to progress upward towards the Divine Essence.

A further indication of the interrelationships among the *laṭā'if* may be derived from Walī Allāh's explanation of the way in which spiritual progress occurs. At the initial stages of the path what is required of a person is the harmonization of the physical components controlled through the lower centres so that the person's temperament becomes balanced according to his individual constitution. This state is effected through developing cooperation among the three major centres; the Heart, Intelligence, and Lower Soul (*nafs*), corresponding in medical theory or *ʿilm al-ṭibb* to the organs heart, brain, and liver, and in Hellenized Ṣūfī psychology to emotions, rationality, and physical desires. Therefore it can be seen that his theory assumes that psychological states affect physical aspects of the person. According to Shāh Walī Allāh, the process of harmonization is required for every human individual in order to ensure physical health, happiness, the cultivation of virtue, and ultimate salvation. His theory of religion affirms that the ideal formula to effect this balancing of the human temperament has been provided in the form of the Divine laws sent by God through the prophets and culminating in the revelation of the Divine Law (*sharīʿa*) of Islam.¹⁰

Beyond the basic harmonizing of the functions of the lower centres according to the requirements of the human species, the cultivation of the higher *laṭā'if* is not expected of every person and therefore, according to Walī Allāh, the *laṭā'if* Spirit, Mystery, and those at higher levels were not mentioned in the *sharīʿa*¹¹ (although many Ṣūfīs find allusions to them in the language of the Qurʾān).

In order to cultivate and refine these higher *laṭā'if* additional spiritual practices are required. For example, according to Walī Allāh the way to purify the Spirit (*rūḥ*) is the observance of purity at all times, the recitation of the Qurʾān, mystical exercises, and cultivating an intuitive relationship with the souls of the saints. The Mystery (*sirr*), on the other hand, is awakened by contemplating the Divine attributes, meditating on God's Divine Names, and the silent and wordless forms of the remembrance of God (*dhikr*).¹² It is thus possible to see how Walī Allāh associates practices of a more "mental" or "intellectual" nature with the Mystery, a fact consistent with his depicting it as the higher level of the Intelligence (*ʿaql*) *laṭifa*.

Once having understood how Shāh Walī Allāh arranged his spiritual centres at the middle level, I was curious to determine whether his conceptualizing of the position of the centres at the physical or lowest level would correspond in some way to this order. The diagram in the most recent edition of *al-Taḥḥīmāt al-Ilāhiyya*¹³ did not provide any assistance here, for the lowest centres were not included there, although other texts made it clear that the lowest circle contained the Lower Soul (*nafs*) or Mould (*qālab*) and the four elements.¹⁴ The four elements in traditional Islamic medical science and cosmology are of course fire, air, earth and water, and anyone versed in *ʿilm al-ḥibb* or the Islamic version of Astrology as Shāh Walī Allāh certainly was,¹⁵ would likely have the traditional associations concerning the inter-relationships and symbolic correspondences of these elements. With this as a starting assumption, I felt fairly confident in assuming that the centre representing the element "air" in the lowest circle would correspond to the position of the *laṭīfa* "Intelligence" above, since this element is traditionally associated with mental activity, the planet Mercury, and so on. In fact, the need to incorporate a centre which would both correspond to the element air and make his model symmetrical may have influenced Shāh Walī Allāh to insert this new *laṭīfa*, in the model. In identifying the centres associated with the other three elements I was less certain at first, but I speculated that the element "fire" would be positioned in some correspondence with the element "air" as it is generally considered to be compatible in its nature to "air". That "fire" should be associated by Walī Allāh with the Mystery, indicating that it was perceived as higher or more subtle than "air", also seemed likely following the traditional arrangement of the elements. This correspondence left the elements "earth" and "water" to the side of the diagram associated with the Heart and Spirit *laṭāʾif* and here I guessed that "earth," since it is lower in the ranking of the elements, would correspond to the Heart and "water" to the Spirit.

I was interested to find this supposed arrangement of the elements confirmed in some of the unpublished letters of Shāh Walī Allāh, *Maktūbāt-i-Dīnī va ʿIlmī*, in the collection being prepared for publication by the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies, Tughlaqabad, New Delhi (India). For example, in the letter no. 51 addressed to his disciple Muḥammad ʿĀshiq, Shāh Walī Allāh mentions that he associates the Heart *laṭīfa* with the element "earth". A further indication is that in letter no. 88, written to Bābā ʿUṭmān, Shāh Walī Allāh describes qualities

which Šūfīs develop through the cultivation of the *laṭīfa* "Spirit" (*rūh*) and says that they can be symbolized by the "water of life" (*āb-i-ḥayāt*). He then explains that the cultivation of the Mystery (*sirr*) leads to a state best compared to the "Fire of Sinai" (*ātiṣḥ-i Ṭūr*), referring to the fire of Sinai which appeared to Moses (*Qurʾān* 28:29). These allusions confirm that the arrangement of the four elements in the lowest circle was carefully worked out to be in correspondence to the attributes of the centres of the middle circle which were associated with aspects of individual psychology.

It was also interesting to observe that Shāh Walī Allāh had deliberately departed here from the traditional Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya arrangement of the elements as he noted in the same letter to his chief disciple Muḥammad ʿĀshiq:

The secret of the Shāikh̄s of Sirhind (i.e., the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya shāikh̄s) saying that after traversing the *laṭāʿif* the matter falls in with the origins of the subtle spiritual centres, is that they interpreted [this] by associating the Spirit (*rūh*) with "air", the Mystery (*sirr*) with "water", the Arcane (*khāfi*) with "fire", and the Super-Arcane (*akhfa*) with "earth".

Walī Allāh then explains in this letter that there is a parallelism of all things in the universe, which is reflected in the arrangement of the inner and outer *laṭāʿif* as well as the order of the bodily humours and the elements. He refers to the fact that in his system the Heart (*qalb*) is to be associated with the element "earth". This could be an allusion to the fact that in Sirhindī's system there is no element left for the Heart to be associated with, a problem resolved in Walī Allāh's arrangement which maintains the parallel structure at all of the levels.¹⁶

Although this discovery concerns a relatively minor detail of Shāh Walī Allāh's thought, it confirms the consistent efforts of our author to maintain a pattern of symbolic interrelationships among the components of both the spiritual and the physical worlds.

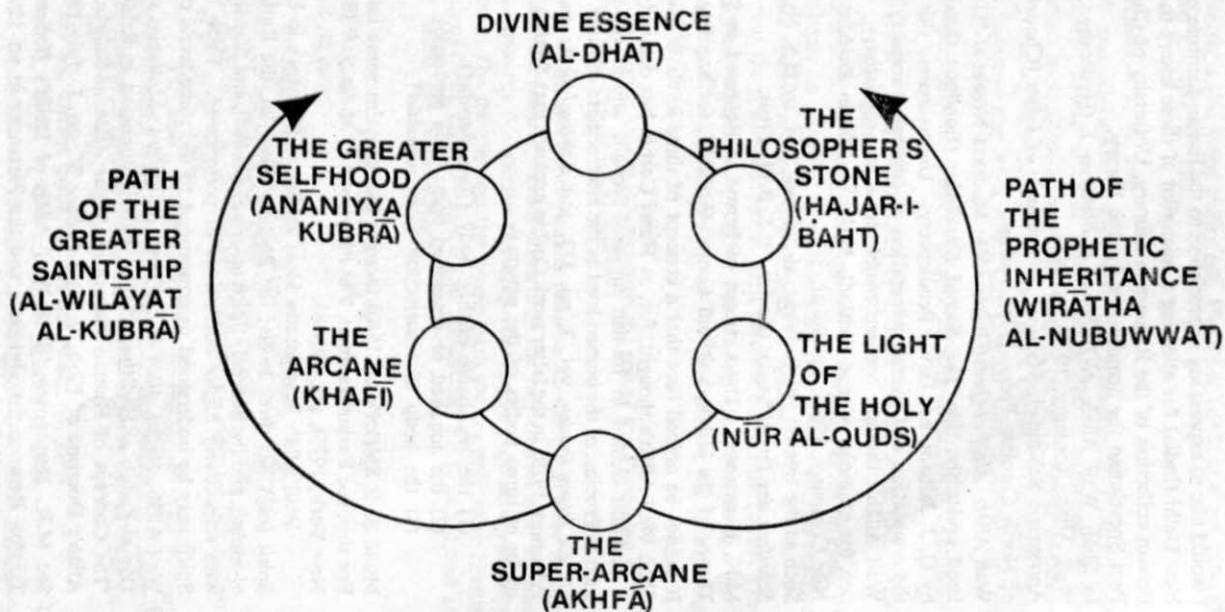
This consistent patterning is seen in other dimensions of Shāh Walī Allāh's works; for example, his theory of religious revelation,¹⁷ and his idea that societies develop through progressive stages of refinement and complexity (*irtifāqāt*). Ultimately he sees the entire universe unfolding and even evolving according to this pattern, that at the lowest level the parts of systems need to resolve their internal conflicts so that

the system may fulfil its original potential as bestowed by the individual and specific forms. Once this harmony and fulfilment have been achieved, the system is able to expand to a higher and more complex order of being as determined by a new form. This expansion is, of course, not evolutionary in a materialistic sense, since it depends on Divine mercy and generosity as a source of the new form as well as on individual effort.

Shāh Walī Allāh, in his system of the subtle spiritual centres as in many other facets of his thought, maintains the understanding that conflict at the lowest levels of being must be overcome in order for progress to occur. Progress, whether spiritual or material, is inspired and guided by the one great purpose of the entire universe which he calls *al-maṣlaha al-kulliyya*. This understanding, which is in effect a reconciliation of a theory based on inherent conflict with a monistic one in which movement is directed by one great force, reflects Walī Allāh's intellectual mediation between Shaiḫ Sirhindī's doctrine of the Unity of Experience (*waḥdat al-ṣhuhūd*), a doctrine positing an ongoing struggle among conflicting forces, and the monistic ontology of the Unity of Existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) held by Ibn al-ʿArabi and his followers.¹⁸

It may be observed that Shāh Walī Allāh's depiction of the *laṭā'if* also offers a resolution of the dispute among certain advocates of Sirhindī's doctrine, which ranked the station of prophecy highest, and certain followers of the "wujūdī" school, who contended that saintship (*wilāyat*) was the highest station. His portrayal of the structure of the person and the mystical path toward the Divine Essence as having both a left and a right side is graphic evidence of this mediating position. According to the design of this model, no longer does prophecy have to be positioned at a rank above saintship, or vice versa. Instead, both the right and the left paths, respectively the path of prophetic inheritance (*wirāṭha al-nubuwwa*) and the path of the greater saintship (*al-wilāyat al-kubrā*), need to be traversed by the Ṣūfī who wishes to attain the ultimate goal in the most comprehensive way.¹⁹

SHĀH WALĪ ALLĀH'S DEPICTION OF SPIRITUAL PATHS IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF THE HIDDEN LATĀ'IF



NOTES

- 1 I would like to express my appreciation to the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies, New Delhi (India) for allowing a microfilm of these letters to be made for the Persian collection of the Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, and to Dr. Paul Sprachman for acquiring it for the library.
- 2 In *Shāh Walī Allāh, al-Taḥḥimat al-Ilāhiyya* 1 (Hyderabad, Pakistan: *Shāh Walī Allāh Academy*, 1973), p. 244.
- 3 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), *passim*.
- 4 Walī Allāh, *Alṭāf al-Quds* (Gujrānwālā: Madrasa Nuṣrat al-ʿUlūm, 1964), translated under the title *The Sacred Knowledge* (London: Octagon Press, 1982) by G. J. Jalbani, ed. David Pendleberry. Unfortunately this translation lacks the annotation and overall integration of concepts necessary for making *Shāh Walī Allāh's* thought comprehensible to a non-specialist.
- 5 See, for example, Aḥmad Sirhindī, *Maktūbāt-i Imām Rabbānī* 1, Pt. 1 (Lahore: Nūr Company, 1964), pp. 96-97.
- 6 Such as the treatise "al-Tadbīrāt al-Ilāhiyya," ed. by H.S. Nyberg in *Kleinere Schriften des Ibn al-ʿArabī* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1919).
- 7 M.K. Hermansen, 'The Concept of Person as Reflected in *Shāh Walī Allāh's* Theory of the Subtle Spiritual Centers (Laṭā'if)', forthcoming.
- 8 It cannot be argued here that a concept of three levels is wholly innovative in *Shāh Walī Allāh's* thought, for, as Henri Corbin has detailed in several works, a tradition existed in Iranian mystical thought and in certain Neo-Platonists such as Proclus, of the human level as the intermediate of three. See for example his *En Islam Iranien*, vol. 3, pp. 313, and *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, Princeton, 1978. In the latter work Corbin explains that *Shāikh Simnānī* (d. 1336) spoke of three bodies of the person:

- (1) the perishable earthly body (*jism dunyāwī*)
- (2) the acquired or developed body (*jism muktasib*)
- (3) the body of resurrection (*jism maḥshūrī*)

Mullā Ṣadr *Shīrāzī's* (d. 1640) thought also contains some interesting parallels. For this, see Fazlur Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mulla Ṣadr* (State University of New York, 1975), pp. 180-185.

Walī Allāh incorporates ideas similar to Simnānī's in his theory that the Spirit (*rūh*) has three levels: the Pneuma (*nasama*), the Rational Soul (*al-naḥs al-nāṭiqā*), and the heavenly Spirit (*al-rūh al-samawī*), and that these are associated with respectively higher dimensions of personhood. These three levels of the Spirit may be understood to correspond to the three levels of the laṭā'if.

- 9 Walī Allāh, *Hujjat Allāh al-Bāligha* 1 (al-Qāhira: Multazim al-Tab⁶ wa-l-Naṣīr Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīthā, 1952). This is discussed in Ṣabīḥ Aḥmad Kamālī, 'The Concept of Human Nature in *Hujjat Allāh al-Bālighah* and *Shāh Walī Allāh's* Doctrine of Fiqh,' *Islamic Culture* 36, no. 3. July 1962, pp. 207-224.
- 10 See M.K. Hermansen, '*Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi's Hujjat Allāh al-Bāligha: Tension Between the Universal and the Particular in an 18th Century Islamic Theory of Religion*,' forthcoming in *Studia Islamica*, for further discussion of

- this. The idea that the practices enjoined by the *shari'ah* balance the physical elements of the person is also found in Sirhindī, *Maktūbāt*, vol. 2, pt. 6, pp. 160-163.
- 11 Walī Allāh, *Alṭāf al-Quds*, p. 136.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.
 - 13 *Al-Taḥqīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* 1, p. 244.
 - 14 In *Alṭāf al-Quds* and *Al-Taḥqīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* this arrangement is mentioned.
 - 15 In his autobiography "al-Juz' al-Laṭīf," medicine or *ṭibb* is mentioned as one of the subjects which he studied; in particular he cites the work *Mūjaz al-Qanūn*, an abridgement by Ibn al-Nafīs (d. 1288) of Ibn Sīnā's *Qanūn*. There are many indications in *al-Taḥqīmāt* that Walī Allāh was familiar with astrology or *'ilm al-nujūm*.
 - 16 In letter no. 51 of the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies collection "Maktūbāt-i-Dīnī va-'Ilmī".
 - 17 See M.K. Hermansen, "Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi's *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Baligha*" for a discussion of this theory.
 - 18 He wrote his famous letter, "Maktūb-i-Madani", reprinted in *Al-Taḥqīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* 2, pp. 261-284, in an effort to demonstrate that there was no essential difference between *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-ṣhuhūd*.
 - 19 The assumption that the spiritual aspirant must traverse both paths to reach the Divine Essence explains Shāh Walī Allāh's positioning of the Arcane Centre (*khafī*) above the Super Arcane (*akhfā*), as he observes in his *Al-Taḥqīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* 1, p. 245:

If you say: "If the Super Arcane is lower than the rest of the Concealed *Laṭā'if* then why is it called the Super-Arcane?"

I reply that it is called the Super-Arcane because the comprehensive general knowledge which is obtained from [completing] the two courses [the left and the right paths towards the Divine Essence] together, is only achieved after the two courses. The traveller on the mystic path arrives only after having completed both of them, and therefore it [the *Akhfā*—since it is at the foot of each path] is called the Super-Arcane.

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