

Walāyah and Islamic ontology

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Abstract:

The present paper aims at clarifying the role of the concept “*walāyah*” in the philosophy of the unity of being in Islamic philosophy (*waʿdat al-wujūd*). The concept “*walāyah*” is deeply built into the philosophic system of the Islamic theory of being, and moreover the dynamic aspect of this concept has always activated Islamic philosophy of existence and stimulated the thought of Islamic philosophers throughout history. The concept “*walāyah*” is a concept intrinsic to the philosophic tradition of Islam which is not found in other philosophic traditions. For this reason, philosophic inquiry into the concept “*walāyah*” will help us to have true insight into the essence of Islamic thought

Key Terms: *walāyah*, Ibn Arabi, the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ʿaqiqah al-Muḥammadiyah*), *Wāʿidiyyah*, *Aʿadiyyah*, the lucid reality (*al-ʿaqiqah al-maʿlīmah*), vanishing phoenix (*ʿanqāʾ mughrib*)

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There are two ways of reading the Arabic word derived from the root “w”, “l”, “y”, that is, *walāyah* and *wilāyah*. The word at issue is mainly read *walāyah* in the Sufi tradition. However, some Sufis, such as 'Alā' al-Dawlah al-Simnānī, insist that *wilāyah* is owned by the friends of Allah (that is, *awliyā'*) while *walāyah* is owned by the prophets.¹ Yet, the history of Sufism has shown a brilliant development of Sufi philosophy on *walāyah*, rather than *wilāyah*. In the tradition of Sufi thought, this word is used mainly in the sense of *qurb* (nearness or closeness) while its relationship to the Sufi understanding of prophethood (*nubuwwah*), messengership (*risālah*) and deputyship (*khilāfah*) is always taken into consideration.

The reason why the concept *walāyah* was so enriched in the tradition of Sufi thought is that the concept *walāyah* originated in the religious thought of the Holy Qur'an which is proper to Islam. According to the Qur'anic teachings, Allah is very near to all things, including human beings. The idea that Allah exists near to human beings is expressed in the famous verse, "We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein" (*naʿnu aqrab ilayhi min ʿabl al-warid*).² Other than this verse, there are many verses which illustrate that Allah is nearest to human beings. As I pointed out before, the word *walāyah* means basically to be near to something or somebody. Therefore, the most appropriate translation of this word is closeness or nearness or vicinity to Allah.³

Now, the fact that Allah is near to human beings means that human beings are near to Allah. Yet, this nearness which exists between Allah and human beings is not perceived on the level of daily experience. This nearness is only perceived by those who have achieved human perfection, like prophets (*anbiyā'*) and people called 'the friends of Allah' (*awliyā'*). This human perfection is believed to be accomplished at the end of a journey of tracing the ascending course (*qaws suʿīdī*) to the Origin, the source of emanation, Allah. At the point of accomplishment of human perfection, the wayfarer of this ascending course obtains insight into the source of emanation.

Now, this insight into the source of emanation is explained by the Sufis in many ways according to the degrees of their so-called mystical experiences. The source of emanation, which is called Pure

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Being, in the school of the unity of being (*waʿdat al-wujūd*) is believed to be beyond human understanding. Here, the question is raised, “How far can mystical insight ascend toward the knowledge of the source of emanation, that is, Allah?”

The wayfarer who has accomplished the journey of human perfection in the ascending course to the source of emanation is believed to obtain nearness or vicinity (*walāyah*) to the source of emanation, Allah. And the wayfarer who has obtained this *walāyah* is called the 'friend of Allah' (*walī Allah*). Yet, as I mentioned before, Allah's being has two layers. Therefore, the question of how far wayfarers can step into the realm of the Divine Being continues always to be asked. So, consequently, the gradations of *walāyah* come to be introduced in accordance with degrees of mystical insight which the wayfarers have attained.

Now, an unknown commentator of Ibn Arabi's *Tajalliyat* has left us a very illuminative remark on *walāyah*, which is found in the supplement of Hakim Tirmidhi's *Khatm al-awliyā*, edited by Uthman Yahya.⁴ According to this commentator, *walāyah* is divided into two kinds; first is the special *walāyah*, and second is the general *walāyah*. This distinction of the special *walāyah* and the general *walāyah* originates from the grades of nearness of human essence to Allah.⁵ After the separation of the human essence from worldly attachments and his or her self-annihilation in the essential light of Allah, the human essence returns from the bottom of the descent of emanation to the Truth by which it exists. If this return is caused by the internal principles of the level of *Aʿādiyyah* ('pure oneness'), which includes the essential and primordial keys (*al-mafātīḥ al-awwal al-dhātīyyah*), it means the 'utmost nearness or vicinity' (*al-qurb al-aqrab*). This utmost nearness basically belongs only to the Muhammadan authoritative reality (*al-ʿāqīqah al-sayyidiyyah al-muʿammadiyyah*). This utmost nearness which human essence obtains is the Muhammadan special *walāyah* (*al-walāyah al-khaḡḡah al-muʿammadiyyah*).

If the return of the human essence to the Truth is caused by the level of the Divine Being of the *Wāʿidiyyah* ('comprehending oneness') which includes the united elements for the divine names (*al-ummahāt*

al-wağliyyah), it means the 'close nearness' (*al-qurb al-qarib*). This is, the general *walāyah* which is owned by the elements of human perfection.

Now, these two *walāyahs* are regarded to be two aspects of the comprehensive authoritative *walāyah* which Allah has toward Himself and His creatures because Allah is most near to everything. Therefore, the *walāyah* comprehends everything in the universe. This is the reason why the *walāyah* is called the 'uttermost heavenly sphere' ("*al-walāyah hiya al-falak al-aqsā*"). This *walāyah* is interpreted by the commentator to manifest its elements in various forms in accordance with the requirements of the immanent principles of being. If the inherent elements of *walāyah* appear with all knowledge about the universal phenomena and divine revelations, it is called the absolute prophethood (*al-nubuwwah al-muḥlaqah*), which does not bring laws into this world. If the inherent elements of the *walāyah* appear with the permission of propagation, they take the level of prophethood (and materialize in the historical prophets). If the inherent elements of the *walāyah* appear with the mission of propagation, they take the messengership (*risālah*). If they are fortified with power and scriptures, they materialize in authority or kingship (*mulk*). If they are fortified with swords, they materialize in the deputyship (*khilāfah*) of Allah.

Even in summarized form, the commentator's discussion described above is very complicated. Yet, it is clear from his ideas that the basic meaning of *walāyah* is nearness or vicinity to Allah's essence, and there are two kinds of nearness, one of which is the 'utmost nearness' which originates in the *Aēdiyyah* (pure oneness) level of Pure Being and the second is the 'close nearness' which originated in the *Wāēdiyyah* (comprehending oneness) level of Pure Being. The point to notice in his discussion is that both the utmost nearness and the close nearness are not realized through the wayfarer's own efforts but through the immanent principles of Pure Being. This could be regarded as a kind of determinist view because the matter of whether human perfection obtains the utmost nearness to Allah or the close nearness to Him is determined by the immanent principles of Pure Being, not by the achievements of human efforts for self-perfection.

Yet, this idea is deduced from deep insight into the immanent principles of Pure Being. Since according to the world view of the school of the unity of being, all the phenomena of the universe are the product of self-manifestation of Pure Being, the Pure Land (*skhavati*) Buddhist question of whether human salvation is obtained through one's efforts or through the benevolence of the transcendental Being does not matter anymore, because individual efforts are manifestations of Pure Being too. In this theory, the utmost nearness as well as the close nearness are programmed in Pure Being and caused by It.

As long as the utmost nearness, which is named the special *walāyah*, is programmed in the *Aḥadiyyah* and the close nearness, which is named the general *walāyah*, is programmed in the *Wāḥidiyyah*, it is possible to regard the former as another name of the *Aḥadiyyah* and the latter as another name of the *Wāḥidiyyah*. So, it is possible for a relation of the special *walāyah* to the general *walāyah* to be likened to the relation of the *Aḥadiyyah* to the *Wāḥidiyyah*. In this case, the general *walāyah* could be regarded as the surface of the special *walāyah*.

Now, according to this unknown commentator, the special *walāyah* is believed to be monopolized by the Muhammadan authoritative reality. The Muhammadan authoritative reality could be regarded as the Muhammadan reality (*al-ḥaqīqah al-Muḥammadiyyah*) in Ibn Arabi's theosophical cosmology.

In his *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyyah*, Ibn Arabi explains the cosmogonic process of realities. According to his understanding, in the beginning there was the ontological dust called *al-habā'*, and in this *habā'*, the merciful Muhammadan reality (*al-ḥaqīqah al-Muḥammadiyyah al-rahmāniyyah*) was created. Yet, this does not own a place nor accept any definition. And this merciful Muhammadan reality was created from the lucid reality (*al-ḥaqīqah al-ma'līmah*) which is beyond the characteristics of being and non-being. Furthermore, this merciful Muhammadan reality was created according to Ibn Arabi's ideas on the basis of the lucid form of Allah, the Truth, for the sake of showing the divine realities.⁶

Al-habā' is, in other words, the universal material (*al-haylā al-kull*) in which the universe exists in potentiality. Allah is believed to have

illuminated this ontological dust with the flash of His Light. Things which existed in the state of potentiality in this dust are actualized owing to the flash of the divine light. Yet, the degrees or grades of their actualization are dependent on the degree of the luminous intensity of the divine flush. That which was illumined with the brightest flash of the divine light is the Muhammadan reality.

Now, in the Sufi vocabularies, the lucid reality (*al-ĕaqiqah al-ma'lîmah*) from which the Muhammadan reality was created is often called the reality of the realities (*ĕaqiqat al-ĕaqâ'iq*), which is equated with the level of *Aĕadiyyah* as well as the rank of astringency or concentration (*jam'*) in Jurjani's *Ta'rifat*.⁷ On the other hand, the ontological dust (*al-habâ'*) is often equated with the "vanishing phoenix" (*'anqâ' mughrib*) which means a state in which Allah has not yet manifested Himself as Allah.

Previously I mentioned that the "vanishing phoenix" is one of the various names of the *Aĕadiyyah*. Yet, the ontological dust (*al-habâ'*) preceeds the *Aĕadiyyah* is also equated with the "vanishing phoenix". The *al-habâ'* preceeds the *Aĕadiyyah* from the cosmological viewpoint. Yet, both are called the "vanishing phoenix". The "vanishing phoenix" should be understood as a metaphor for that which transcends man's understanding.

Now, the phrase "*ĕaqiqat al-ĕaqâ'iq*" could be divided into two concepts, that is, "*ĕaqiqah*" and "*ĕaqâ'iq*". Grammatically, the word "*ĕaqiqah*" (reality) is possessed by the word "*ĕaqâ'iq*" (realities). Yet, this construct state is used to show that the "*ĕaqiqah*" is a source of the "*ĕaqâ'iq*". In other words, the word *ĕaqiqah*, in the so-called "*muqâf*" position, is the originator of the *ĕaqâ'iq* in the "*muqâf ilayhi*" position. Since it is said that the "*al-ĕaqiqah al-ma'lîmah*" from which *al-ĕaqiqah al-Muĕammadiyyah* is created is called *ĕaqiqat al-ĕaqâ'iq*, the *ĕaqiqah* in the *muqâf* position must be the *al-ĕaqiqah al-ma'lîmah* and the *ĕaqâ'iq* in the *muqâf ilayhi* position must be the *ĕaqiqah Muĕammadiyyah* as a matter of course.

Now, the theoretical relationship between the *walâyah* theory and the ontological cosmogony is clear. In the *walâyah* theory, the utmost closeness, which is the special *walâyah*, is monopolized by the Muhammadan authoritative reality, that is, the Muhammadan reality

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in Ibn Arabi's philosophy. In his philosophy, the Muhammadan reality is created from the lucid reality in order to show the divine realities. This means that the Muhammadan reality includes the divine realities which could be regarded as one with the intellectual forms of the divine names and attributes (*al-ḡuwar al-'ilmiyyah fī asmā' wa siḡātihi*). Therefore, the Muhammadan reality is on the level of the divine names, which means the level of the *Wā'idiyyah*, not the level of the *A'adiyyah*.

From the above-mentioned analysis of the *walāyah* theory, the special *walāyah* (the utmost closeness) which is monopolized by the Muhammadan reality is the closeness which the level of the *Wā'idiyyah* has in relation to the level of the *A'adiyyah*. On the other hand, the general *walāyah* which is caused by the immanent principles of the level of the *Wā'idiyyah* is regarded as the closeness which the intellectual forms of the empirical beings have in relation to the level of the *Wā'idiyyah*, that is, the level of the divine names and attributes. This closeness could be regarded as the closeness which the Prophet of Islam experienced in his night journey and which in the Qur'an is described as "two bows' length or nearer" (*qāba qawsayn aw adnā*).⁸ Yet, on the other hand, the Muhammadan reality is called the Perfect Human who is a transcendental personality. Therefore, it is possible to say that the special *walāyah* belongs to the Perfect Human. In Sufi vocabularies, the Perfect Human has manifold meanings. It means sometimes the metaphysically posited personality called the Great Human (*al-insān al-kabīr*) and sometimes means the Prophet Muhammad as the ethic paragon of the Muslims. Although the meanings of the Perfect Human differ from each other on the level of usage, there is no difference between the metaphysically posited Perfect Human and Muhammad the Prophet of Islam, who had experienced the utmost closeness of the *qāba qawsayn aw adnā* to Allah in his night journey, because in his experience of *qāba qawsayn aw adnā*, he experienced the utmost closeness which the *Wā'idiyyah* (that is, the Muhammadan reality) has in relation to the *A'adiyyah* and which means the closeness of the Perfect Human to the Divine Essence, that is, the *A'adiyyah*. Therefore, Muhammad the Prophet of Islam could be regarded to have held the utmost closeness of the

Muhammadan reality, which is caused by the immanent principles of the level of *Aĕadiyyah*.

References:

1. Tirmidhi, *Kitāb Khatm al-Awliyā'*, ed., Uthman Yahya, Beirut, Mulhaq Ta'rikhi 1965, p.488.
2. Qur'an 50:16, trans. Yusuf Ali.
3. Dr. Toshihiko Izutsu, in his *Key Philosophical Concepts in Taoism and Sufism*, The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1966, has used the word "sainthood" for the walāyah for the sake of convenience, but he himself says that whether this translation is appropriate or not is another question. Dr. Henri Corbin is also hesitant to translate this word into French "sainteté" "L'interiorisation du sens". *Eranos*, 1958.
4. op.cit., Tirmidhi, *Kitāb Khatm al-Awliyā'*, ed., Uthman Yahya, pp.499 -500. Brockelmann attributes it to Abd al-Karim al-Jili.
5. Abd al-Rahman Jami gives an etymological explanation on walāyah and wilāyah in the introductory chapter of his *Nafaĕāt al-uns min ĕaqrat al-quds*, ed., M. Towhidipur, Tehran, 1375. pp.5-6.
6. Ibn Arabi, *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyyah*, vol. 1, Beirut, Dar Sadir, undated, p. 118.
7. Jurjani, *Kitāb al-Ta'rifāt*, Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1357/1938, p. 80.
8. Qur'an 53:9

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