

***Wilāya* in Medieval Khurāsānī Sufism, with Particular Reference to Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021)**

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Abstract

This article uses the insights of modern discourse on virtue ethics to explore *wilāya*/*walāya* in key Sufi texts in Khurāsān in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries. Scholars of Sufism agree that the “friends of God” (*awliyā’ Allāh*) wield spiritual authority over the world, and the article probes the relationship between this general claim about spiritual authority and its manifestation in the bestowal of divine marvels (*karāmāt*). The article begins with a general discussion of virtue theory, focusing on key concepts in the thought of Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), then examines *wilāya* in the thought of al-Sulamī and some of his near contemporaries. An examination of marvels (*karāmāt*) provides a final feature of *wilāya* that illustrates more precisely the concept of virtue and the type of virtue ethics in question, thus contributing to the increasing interdisciplinary study of *wilāya*.

Keywords

Spiritual authority (*wilāya*) – al-Sulamī – Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) – virtue ethics – marvels (*karāmāt*) – miracles

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الولاية في التصوف الخراساني في العصور الوسطى، مع إشارة خاصة إلى أبي عبد الرحمن السلمي (ت. 1021/412)

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الخلاصة

تستعين هذه المقالة بأدبيات الخطاب المعاصر حول أخلاق الفضيلة لاستكشاف مفهوم «الولاية» في نصوص صوفية محورية ظهرت في خراسان خلال القرنين الرابع/العاشر والخامس/الحادي عشر. يتفق علماء الصوفية على أن «أولياء الله» لهم سلطة روحية على العالم، وتعني هذه المقالة بتحليل العلاقة بين التنظيم لوجود سلطة روحية وتجلياتها الملموسة في منح الكرامات الإلهية. تبدأ الدراسة بمناقشة عامة لنظرية الفضيلة، مع التركيز على المفاهيم الرئيسة في فكر أبي عبد الرحمن السلمي (ت. 1021/412)، ثم تنتقل إلى تحليل تصور الولاية في أعماله وفي كتابات عدد من معاصريه. تُختتم المقالة بتحليل للكرامات، بوصفها أحد أبرز تجليات الولاية، بما يوضح على نحو أدق تصور لمفهوم الفضيلة ونمط أخلاقيات الفضيلة المقصود، ومن ثم تسهم في تعزيز الاتجاه المتنامي نحو دراسة الولاية ضمن مقاربات بحثية متعددة التخصصات.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الولاية - السلمي - التصوف - أخلاق الفضيلة - الكرامات - المعجزات

1 Introduction

This article uses the insights of modern discourse on virtue ethics to explore *wilāya/walāya* in key Sufi texts in Khurāsān in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries (Chodkiewicz 1986, 34–36; Cornell 1989, xvii–xliv).¹ Scholars of Sufism agree that the “friends of God” (*awliyā’ Allāh*) wield spiritual authority over the world, and the article probes the relationship between this general

1 Several modern scholars have discussed at length the distinction between *wilāya* and *walāya*. Because Sufi texts from the formative period were often not vocalized, scholars remain uncertain about different masters’ use of these two terms, although it seems that the distinction was not crucial for them and they generally preferred the vocalization *wilāya*. I will favor *wilāya* in this essay and I do not intend to posit a significant difference between the two.

claim about spiritual authority and its manifestation in the bestowal of divine marvels (*karāmāt*). The article begins with a general discussion of virtue theory vis-à-vis the formative period of Sufism, focusing in particular on key concepts in the thought of Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021). Discussion then shifts to *wilāya* in the thought of al-Sulamī and some of his near contemporaries. An examination of marvels (*karāmāt*) provides a final feature of *wilāya* that illustrates more precisely the concept of virtue and the type of virtue ethics in question, thus contributing to the increasing interdisciplinary study of *wilāya*.

2 Virtue Ethics and Sufism

In recent years, several scholars of classical Islam, whether based in North America, in Europe, or in the Arab world, have shown increased interest in what philosophers today commonly call “virtue ethics.”² If a prior generation of scholars focused more on “analytical” modes of ethical reflection – that is, ethics closely tied to *kalām* (Vasalou 2022) – an interest in the transformation of character traits has increasingly come into vogue. Still, the shape of this interest in virtue has been less that of metaethics and more that of applied ethics; scholars have concentrated more on particular virtues and their cultivation than a general virtue theory. Sophia Vasalou moves toward metaethics when she attempts to chart the presence of Aristotle’s (d. 322 BCE) *megalopsychia* in Arabic texts, wondering whether *‘izām al-himma*, “greatness of spirit,” is an ordinary virtue like courage or prudence or instead a meta-virtue that governs and informs all the others (Vasalou 2019). Cyrus Ali Zargar likewise gestures in this direction, noting the disjuncture between medieval humoral theories of the virtues and a psycho-biology that could credibly demonstrate the utility and relevance of a virtue framework today (Zargar 2017; 2025). But Ida Zilio-Grandi’s *Le virtù del buon musulmano* (“The Virtues of a Good Muslim,” 2020) illustrates the prevailing tendency to focus on particular character traits and their transformation: while each chapter of her monograph provides a finely-researched sketch of a particular virtue, most of which emerge from the divine names, the author never deals with the question of what a virtue *is*. If patience, gratitude, and modesty are species of a genus that one calls “virtue,” how does one define and discuss that genus? Scholars focused on the Sufi tradition have followed a similar pattern, like Atif Khalil’s articles on

2 A conference on virtue sponsored by the Research Center for Islamic Ethics and Legislation (CILE) at Hamid Bin Khalifa University in Doha is but one example (Zargar 2020).

humility (*tawāḍuʿ/khushūʿ*) (Khalil 2020), on patience (*ṣabr*) (Khalil 2022), or on gratitude (*shukr*) (Khalil 2015; 2016). Zargar argues that classical Sufi writings about virtue carry more immediate relevance and credibility for modern people, by comparison with ancient philosophical texts about virtue, but the second half of his monograph *The Polished Mirror* (2017) likewise follows the pattern of choosing discrete virtues as illustrative examples rather than elaborating a metaethical scheme.³ Even later Sufi figures who show a thoroughgoing influence from the Greek philosophical tradition – thinking here of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) above all – seem to carry a virtue theory that does not map conveniently onto some other core concepts of *taṣawwuf* (Vasalou 2025; cf. Kukkonen 2016; Sherif 1975). The fact that many open questions remain even for a figure studied as carefully as al-Ghazālī foregrounds the lack of development regarding earlier Sufi masters; Zargar is one of the few who has even begun to discuss what a virtue is *per se* for them.

I shall address this question primarily with reference to Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī. This issue of the *Journal of Islamic Ethics* focuses on the question of *wilāya*, and prior studies of that theme have not explored al-Sulamī in depth. Arguably the most significant monograph on the theme effectively hurdles al-Sulamī's generation, treating early mystics like al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 320/932) and al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899) but then jumping ahead to the Sufi manuals of al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) and al-Hujwīrī (d. between 465/1072 and 469/1077) (Mojaddedi 2012); the present article thus takes an under-studied figure with regard to *wilāya* – integrating also his near contemporaries in Greater Khurāsān when necessary – and uses him as a test case for the value of a virtue ethics approach in studying Sufi texts from the period. Al-Sulamī synthesized several different spiritual currents into his vision of *taṣawwuf*, including Baghdad Sufism, the Path of Blame (*malāmatiyya*), and spiritual chivalry (*futuwwa*). He stands as an apt representative for the Sufi tradition in the formative period because on one hand, he compiles and preserves a precious treasury of materials from the first generations, but on the other hand, he does not offer the systematization and synthesis of speculative theology, philosophy, and jurisprudence that would mark the work of his student al-Qushayrī, and al-Ghazālī a generation after that (Palmer 2020).⁴ Al-Sulamī's corpus is

3 Chapter eight, on *futuwwa* as a “compound virtue,” cuts against this trend (Zargar 2017, 163–296).

4 I do not contest Aiyub Palmer's characterization of the activity of al-Sulamī and al-Qushayrī as the “great mystical synthesis” of the fifth/eleventh century, but one should not wrongly infer from this characterization that al-Sulamī was a highly systematic and organized thinker.

saturated with virtue thinking despite the fact that he nowhere sketches a virtue theory.

“Ethical growth” is not an important category for al-Sulamī in and of itself. One searches his corpus in vain for any distinction between ethical growth and obedience to the Sunna of the Messenger of God as properly understood and transmitted (al-Sulamī 1976, 17).⁵ Likewise, in his writings focused on *taṣawwuf*, al-Sulamī does not distinguish between ethical growth and progress in Sufism (cf. Heck 2016). While he could doubtlessly acknowledge that Muslims who do not follow the Sufi path can grow ethically, his general commitment to the increased diffusion of Sufi wisdom in his society informs his decision to frame many ethical questions in light of that wisdom. Kenneth L. Honerkamp rightly resists the stereotype that ethics were primarily the domain of jurists and theologians and insists instead that ethical discourse lies at the core of the Sufi project (Honerkamp 2012). Honerkamp does not address, however, the question of the relevance or irrelevance of virtue ethics; positing ethical conduct as the guiding principle behind Sufi pedagogic methodology in Nīshāpūr and locating its transmission particularly in the master-disciple relationship is enough for him.

Several key terms recur again and again in al-Sulamī’s treatment of ethical cultivation (Welle 2024, 17–20, 45–70). These terms demonstrate their significance for the author not through a consistent systematic framework, but through the weight of their frequency in his discourse. First among these is *adab* (pl. *ādāb*), a pregnant word translated as “comportment,” “correct behavior,” “etiquette,” “ways,” “practices,” or the like. A famous maxim al-Sulamī attributes to Abū Ḥafṣ al-Naysābūrī (d. ca. 270/883) sums up best this centrality: “The whole of Ṣūfism is proper ways” (*al-taṣawwuf kulluhu ādāb*) (al-Sulamī 1969, 119 [#19]). The term *adab* never carried the weight for Baghdad Sufis that it would later enjoy in Khurāsān (Thibon 2016, 102–103), and the gravitas it holds for al-Sulamī exceeds that of his contemporaries in the region. Even more so than other Sufi thinkers, one may characterize al-Sulamī’s writings as an “*adab* theology” (Huda 2004). The importance of proper alignment between one’s outer comportment and one’s inner orientation cannot be underestimated as an element of al-Sulamī’s ethical project. Two other key terms are *akhlāq* – virtues or character traits – and *aḥwāl* – spiritual states. *Ādāb*, *akhlāq*, and *aḥwāl* exist in an ascending hierarchy, based on the agent involved

5 Etan Kohlberg’s comment that the treatise *‘Uyūb al-Nafs wa-Mudāwātuhā* (“Maladies of the Soul and Their Remedies”) occupies a “middle ground between the worlds of *ḥadīth*, *adab*, and ethics” may have some validity as regards literary genres but has no basis in al-Sulamī’s conception of what these terms meant.

(Kohlberg 1979, 38 [§16]; cf. al-Sulamī 1981, 368; 2009–2010c, 3:137 [§8]). A Sufi's progress begins with disciplined attention to the Sufi ways, then advances to virtues, and finally might reach mystical states that are a pure gift of mercy, that descend upon a Sufi and that open the Sufi's heart (al-Sulamī 2009, 31 [§113]; cf. Avery 2004). *Ādāb*, *akhlāq*, and *aḥwāl* interpenetrate each other to some degree, but progress through this hierarchy involves a gradual shift in agency from the believer to God. The spiritual labor that a believer performs generally falls into the categories of *ādāb* and *akhlāq*, while God alone grants *aḥwāl* (Honerkamp 2012).⁶ As the believer takes the initial steps along the path by voluntarily learning these ways and striving to actualize them, the believer acquires virtues (*akhlāq*) that enable perseverance in proper practice. For al-Sulamī, *akhlāq* are traits that result from both human volition and divine volition. God responds to the good actions of God's servant by adorning the servant with noble *akhlāq* (cf. al-Sulamī 1976, 2 [§4]; 2009–2010c, 3:138 [§8]), and these stable dispositions themselves serve the servant because they keep the servant directed toward that for which a true servant should always strive.

Tentatively translating *akhlāq* as “virtues” does not tacitly suggest the influence of Greek ethical thought on al-Sulamī. Philosophers like Yahyā Ibn ‘Adī (d. 363/974) and Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) normally used *faḍā’il* as their preferred term to designate virtue in the sense inherited from the Greek tradition, in keeping with patterns in Arabic translations of those ancient texts. Al-Sulamī only uses this term – as well as its antonym, *radhā’il* (vices) – rarely. Al-Sulamī never defines *akhlāq* (sg. *khuluq*), seeming to consider it part of a common Muslim lexicon, not a Sufi technical term.⁷ Occasionally, al-Sulamī provides a limited list of what he means by *akhlāq*, some of which are found in the classical Greek lists of virtues and others which are not (cf. al-Sulamī 1981, 368). In general, al-Sulamī conceives *akhlāq* as stable dispositions of the soul to perceive things, believe things, and most especially, to behave actively in a proper way as a matter of habit. These are stable traits that necessarily carry with them a moral evaluation – *akhlāq* are not morally neutral elements of an individual's personality, but the kinds of traits that make an individual praiseworthy or reprehensible (Miller 2014, 33).⁸ He also generally presumes

6 One may add here that al-Sulamī does not seem overly concerned with Ash‘arī debates about the origins of human actions. While his emphasis on the solely divine origin of *aḥwāl* is consistent, the human element of *ādāb* and *akhlāq* might be characterized as more rhetorical than theological. This question awaits further examination.

7 Likewise, al-Sulamī's *Tafsīr Alfāz al-Ṣūfiyya* (“Explanation of Sufi Expressions”) does not include a definition for *adab*.

8 Christian B. Miller assists philosophers and psychologists in their attempts to speak about “traits” with precision, fleshing out a schema in which traits can be personality traits or

that the *akhlāq* are visible – an external observer is capable of verifying their existence – and this provides a contrast with his treatment of *ādāb*. Of course, each believer has an inner life that can never be fully manifest in external comportment, but whereas al-Sulamī often insists that a believer's inner *ādāb* should line up with the believer's outer *ādāb* and thus implicitly acknowledges the reality that for some travelers on the path, the exterior and interior are dis-integrated, he nowhere shows the same preoccupation regarding *akhlāq*. The possibility that a person might seem to have admirable *akhlāq* but in reality be a deceptive hypocrite does not figure into his thinking; he uses *akhlāq* to denote visible behaviors that manifest a person's deeply ingrained thoughts and motivations. One might say that *akhlāq* are more transparent than *ādāb*, and this comports with a core element of the way philosophers today often speak about virtue: virtues “go all the way down” (Hursthouse 1999). Though al-Sulamī's writings do not manifest the author's direct exposure to the Greek concept of virtue, al-Sulamī's understanding of *akhlāq* nonetheless seems strikingly consistent with the philosophical tradition here.

One final category in Sufi thought should enter a discussion of the relationship between virtue theory and Sufism: the mystical stations, or *maqāmāt*. Classical Sufi texts generally identify Dhū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/859 or 248/862) as the first to distinguish between the stations and the states, and most early Sufis assumed that the difference lay in the duration and constancy of the experience. The *aḥwāl* are transitory and might be only momentary; the *maqāmāt* involve longer duration, and a believer generally remains in one station until passing on to another. In Sufi manuals from the formative period, one author may qualify an experience as a *ḥāl* and another qualify it as a *maqām*.⁹ Al-Sulamī concurs with reigning assumptions about the fleeting nature of the states, assumptions he inherited from al-Junayd (d. 298/910) and his followers, but by comparison with some other Sufis in the formative period, his use of the term *maqāmāt* is less central and less consistent (Kohlberg 1979, [§1, §6, §16]; al-Sulamī 2009–2010b, 3:81 [§4]; 2009, 31 [§114]; Berger 1998, 80; Thibon 2009, 211–212, 436–440). He remains committed to the Sufi vision of religio-moral growth as a journey along a path, but the *maqāmāt* do not provide his default

non-personality traits, personality traits can be character traits or non-character traits, and character traits can be moral or non-moral. I mention this as one reason I resist translating *akhlāq* as “character traits,” because al-Sulamī's use of *akhlāq* always carries a moral element of praiseworthiness or blameworthiness.

9 A discussion of whether love, fear, or hope are states or stations would take the present discussion far afield; suffice it to say that as one surveys the literature, one sees increasing recognition that what some authors cast as a passing experience could become rooted and stable.

mode or his preferred image to express progress on the path.¹⁰ This bears mention to highlight Khalil's discussion of the *maqāmāt* in the context of virtue theory. One novel element of Khalil's monograph on *tawba* is his consistent description of the *maqāmāt* as "virtues." Khalil writes: "The *maqām* is supposed to be a virtue that becomes embedded within the soul, typically following a rigorous process of spiritual and ethical training. It is a virtue acquired through the effort and exertion of the *sālik*, the traveler" (Khalil 2018, 78–79). The most significant *prima facie* difference between the *maqāmāt* and the *akhlāq* is the notion of progression from one station to another. Entering into a new *maqām* involves movement from one stable experience into a new stable experience and this challenges the identification of the *maqāmāt* with virtues insofar as virtue ethicists generally do not speak about transcending a virtue, surpassing a virtue, or leaving a virtue behind. One could partially salvage Khalil's intuition here by noting that passage to a new *maqām* does not necessarily involve the complete abandonment of one's former *maqām*. One could interpret many Sufi texts from the period to indicate that the traveler integrates the knowledge and experience acquired previously into newly acquired and more profound knowledge and experience, thus moving beyond a *maqām* while yet retaining it. But I find it preferable to conceive a *maqām* more as a "spiritual lens" or an "emotional filter," in the sense that for a certain stable period, a believer experiences his or her religio-ethical life – including whatever virtues or character traits that believer possesses – as refracted through that *maqām*. In the station of love (*mahabba*), love washes over and colors the same habitual patterns of thought and behavior the believer possessed before, but these are now experienced – felt – differently. Love predominates. Whether or not this metaphor of a filter hits the mark, classical texts testify that progress from one station to another involves the acquisition of novel experiences and Sufi authors did not tend to chart such a progression within the *akhlāq*. Growth in the *akhlāq* happens gradually – texts that speak about *al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq al-mashāyikh* or *al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh* quietly suggest a long process of growth, but happens in a way that could be called more holistic, rather than through the acquisition of new, discrete virtues or experiences one by one.

10 Al-Sulamī was not unique in his failure to embrace *maqām* as a central term for spiritual advancement. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī distinguished between states (*aḥwāl*) and steps (*darajāt*) but preferred the term "states" precisely because he did not believe that good works could be perpetually cumulative; the mystic path "consists of a succession of ineffable states in constant evolution ... quickly transformed, one into another" (Gobillot 2018).

3 Mystical Reflections on Sainthood and Spiritual Authority

Sara Sviri locates *wilāya/walāya* at the heart of Islamic mysticism, designating “a spiritual hierarchy of human beings who have attained an intimate relationship with God and as such have a special role in the maintenance, preservation and well-being of the world” (Sviri 2020, 217). That intimacy guides the common convention to call the *awliyāʾ*, the members of this spiritual hierarchy, the “friends of God.”¹¹ The preceding discussion of virtue theory vis-à-vis key terms in al-Sulamī’s spiritual lexicon frames this more detailed investigation of spiritual authority, a topic that is especially pertinent due to the interdisciplinary interest in Islamic *wilāya/walāya* at the present moment (Harmakaputra 2022; Oaks Takács 2022). A brief summary of early mystical thinking about *wilāya/walāya* contextualizes later responses by al-Sulamī and his near contemporaries.

While some *dicta* on the subject have been attributed to earlier [proto-]Sufi masters and the contribution of al-Kharrāz was significant, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī’s deep exploration of sainthood and spiritual authority did more than any other to set the parameters for subsequent Sufi discussion, particularly in Khurāsān and Transoxania (Radtke 1980; 1999, 483; al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 1996; 1992; Gobillot 1996; Sviri 2020; Palmer 2020; McGregor 2013; Karamustafa 2005, 64–70). The friends of God can receive immediate divine communication, can be directed by God rather than the religious law, and can perform marvels (Mojaddedi 2012, 53). Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī’s most important text on the topic is *Sīrat al-Awliyāʾ* (“The Life of the Friends of God”),¹² which consistently uses the word *walī* (pl. *awliyāʾ*) – never Sufi – for a mystic (Radtke 1999, 488). The concept of being a “friend of God” is Qur’ānic, but al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī introduces the novel phrases *walī ḥaqq Allāh* and *walī ḥuqūq Allāh*, though retaining the Qur’ānic *walī Allāh* as superior to these (Radtke 1999, 488). The *awliyāʾ ḥaqq Allāh* strive to resemble the *awliyāʾ* but are not the bona fide *awliyāʾ*, who receive this status by God’s special choosing and not through their own discrete efforts. To draw near to God the *awliyāʾ ḥaqq Allāh* must strive to observe the obligations of the divine law, and thus their spiritual rank will always be below that of the *walī Allāh*; for this reason, Jawad

11 Rather than vacillate between “friend” (and its derivatives) and “saint” (and its derivatives), I have chosen to consistently translate *walī/awliyāʾ* as “friend(s),” though I have favored “authority” or “spiritual authority,” not “friendship” (or a derivative), for *wilāya*.

12 Bernd Radtke uses this title for *Sīrat al-awliyāʾ*, which constitutes the second part of the work Radtke translated as *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism* (al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 1996).

Mojaddedi characterizes the two groups as the “lesser” friends of God and the “full” friends of God (2012, 50, 79, 115–118). The intense commitment to truthfulness (*ṣidq*) of *walī ḥaqq Allāh*, truthfulness that is the fruit of repentance (*tawba*), never suffices to draw near to God because it always remains a product of the self and thus connected to the lower soul (*nafs*); the *awliyāʾ Allāh*, however, ascend to God’s throne through divine grace and, by comparison with the hardships of the *awliyāʾ ḥaqq Allāh*, are divinely granted an ascent without toil (Radtke 1999, 489–490). These last become the true leaders of the *umma* in the absence of the Prophet Muḥammad; by contrast to the typical Sunnī and Shīʿī responses to the question of authority, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī argues that neither knowledge of the law nor blood kinship to the Prophet suffice to qualify a believer for leadership (Radtke 1999, 492).

Aiyub Palmer argues that for al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *wilāya/walāya* “does not simply denote a closeness to God, but rather it indicates a type of authority mediated by Arabo-Islamic social constructs” (Palmer 2020, 85). These constructs include the social institutions of slavery and clientage in Arab society: the Transoxanian mystic restructures the basic elements of clientage, framing the *awliyāʾ* as the truly free members of society (Palmer 2020, 80). They receive this liberty as a pure gift from God, not on the merits of their own actions, and express their authority within a hierarchy of sanctity headed by the seal (*khātim*) of God’s friends. That *walī*, like the Prophet Muḥammad, “was the completion and confirmation of all that went before him” (McGregor 2013).

Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī’s writings about the lofty stature of God’s friends clearly aroused a concern present in other early Sufi texts: some who read about the exalted role of the *awliyāʾ* might wrongly presume that a *walī* could surpass a prophet (Mojaddedi 2012, 28–62). Al-Kharrāz insists on the superiority of prophecy but does so in a way that suggests the circulation of doubts regarding this claim and it seems that al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī was attacked for supposedly believing in the superiority of the *awliyāʾ* (Thibon 2009, 437; Radtke 1999, 485; al-Kharrāz 1967, 31ff.; Mojaddedi 2012, 47; cf. al-Qushayrī, 271; al-Ṭabarī 2013, 294–295 [§482]). Even though no treatises survive arguing that a *walī* could be superior, Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) still considers it necessary to rebut the charge almost a century later (al-Sarrāj 1914, 422–424). The Qurʾānic antecedent for this debate lies in *sūrat* al-Kahf and the encounter between Moses and the enigmatic figure the exegetical tradition names Khidr (Q 18:60–82); both al-Kharrāz and al-Sarrāj reject the idea that this story suggests the superiority of a *walī* over a prophet. For al-Sarrāj, many persons have marks of sanctity, but these marks do not imply a higher state than that of prophets and/or

messengers. Spiritual authority (*wilāya*) and veracity (*ṣiddīqiyya*) are enlightened by the lights of prophecy but never “catch up to prophecy” (*lā talḥaq al-nubuwwa*) (al-Sarrāj 1914, 424; Mojaddedi 2012, 54).

One century after the death of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, al-Kharkūshī (d. 407/1016?) made a significant contribution to Sufi discussion of *wilāya*, particularly with regard to the marvels (*karāmāt*) God grants to God’s friends (Melchert 2010). The present article will return to that theme later, but al-Kharkūshī bears mention here due to his influence on a lesser-known anonymous fourth/tenth century text known as *Kitāb ‘Ilm al-Taṣawwuf* (“Book on the Science of Sufism”). Few scholars of Sufism have thus far attended to this tract, edited and published by Nasrollah Pourjavady and Mohammed Soori just over a decade ago. The text contains a unique section on *ṣifat al-awliyā’* (Anonymous 2011, 82–84). This three-page *bāb* bears a completely different structure than do the other sections of the larger work, which generally consist of a sequence of short sayings about the topic in question. Elsewhere, the author of *Kitāb ‘Ilm al-Taṣawwuf* depends heavily on al-Kharkūshī’s *Tahdhīb al-Asrār* (“Refinement of Secrets”), but the anomalous style of the section on *ṣifat al-awliyā’* leads the editors to conclude that the author composed it himself (Anonymous 2011, 9–10 [English]). The section unfortunately sheds little light on *wilāya* at the conceptual level, due in no small part to the fact that the entire text has been placed in rhymed prose and many formulations clearly reflect a greater desire to maintain rhyme and rhythm than to render ideas with precision. None of the distinctive formulations in this *bāb* seem to depend directly on a prior text, nor were they integrated into later works, likely because *Kitāb ‘Ilm al-Taṣawwuf* did not enjoy widespread diffusion. The first few lines of the section convey the flavor of this text.

The friend: his lamp is gnosis (*ma‘rifa*) and his vizier is the mind (*‘aql*). His commander is knowledge (*‘ilm*) and his manager is fate (*qaḍā’*). His joy (*surūr*) lies in contentment (*riḍā*) and his strength in trust (*tawakkul*). His solace (*‘azā*) lies in certainty (*yaqīn*) and his repose in sincerity (*ikhlas*). Fear demolishes him, hope delights him, and recollection (*dhikr*) gladdens him. His craving is gratitude, and his silence is contemplation (*tafakkur*). His vision is consideration (*‘ibra*), and his provision is piety (*taqwā*). His mount is truthfulness (*ṣidq*), his property is reliance (*thiqa*), and his riches are contentment (*qanā’a*). His counselor is commitment (*tafwīd*), and his preference (*ikhtiyār*) is protection (*taslīm*).

ANONYMOUS 2011, 82

The remainder of the section is often more creative in its imagery and poetic in its rhyme, with key Sufi terms – especially from the states and stations – strewn throughout the text for their evocative effect and not on the basis of their technical usage. The text therefore illustrates which terms, images, and concepts held the most cachet for Sufis in the period, even though it unfortunately does not offer precision about how these terms, images, and concepts relate to each other.

Al-Sulamī does not dedicate an extended discussion to the theme of *wilāya*. The depth of al-Sulamī's understanding of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī has been a point of discussion in the scholarly literature, but the lack of a focused treatment of this central theme for his predecessor mitigates a strong Tirmidhian influence (Palmer 2020, 187ff.; Thibon 2009, 444–446 et passim; Chowdhury 2019, 39–40, 67–72; Sviri 2020, 220). One finds no treatise uniquely devoted to the topic, no definition in his glossary of Sufi technical terms,¹³ no chapter in his *al-Muqaddima fī l-Taṣawwuf* (“Introduction to Sufism”), no paragraph in *Darajāt al-Mu‘āmalāt* (“Ranks in Transactions”), and no paragraph in *Kitāb Fuṣūl fī l-Taṣawwuf* (“Book of Chapters on Sufism”), the last two of these being the likely places where one would expect to find a summary treatment of a core idea for the mystical path.¹⁴ A lack of concern for terminological precision adheres to al-Sulamī's corpus generally (Berger 1998, 143; Thibon 2009, 219), but his thought on *wilāya* is particularly amorphous and diffuse and he tends to group the *walī* and the *Sufi* together in one undifferentiated category (Berger 1998, 145). Most references to *wilāya* occur in *dicta* that al-Sulamī attributes to others, so even though he presumably affirms this material insofar as he chooses to retain and transmit it, one must hesitate before assuming that he himself would formulate things the same way.¹⁵ Three brief statements collected in the first biographical dictionary of Sufi masters, *Ṭabaqāt al-Šūfiyya* (“Generations of Sufis”), suffice to illustrate the nature of the data, the first attributed to Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī (d. 200/815), the second to Abū ‘Abd Allāh

13 Al-Sulamī's *Tafsīr Alfāz al-Šūfiyya* is an abridgment of a section from al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-Luma'* (“Book of Flashes”). Neither text defines *wilāya*, but al-Sarrāj deals with the topic directly elsewhere in the book, whereas al-Sulamī's comments are more diffused throughout his corpus.

14 This absence also accounts for the relatively scant treatment of the theme in the three major monographs on al-Sulamī, although Thibon and Chowdhury have both more recently attempted to reflect on the topic in conference papers and forthcoming essays.

15 I credit Safaruk Chowdhury for sharing with me an impressive list of al-Sulamī's references to *wilāya* in a yet-unpublished conference paper; I refer to some of these texts here, but a comprehensive exposition would take far too much space (Chowdhury 2021).

al-Sijzī (fl. late third/ninth century), and the third to Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh al-Balkhī (d. 240/854–855).

Maʿrūf was asked about the distinctive signs (*ʿalāma*) of the friends (*awliyāʾ*). “There are three,” he responded. “All their concerns (*humūm*) are for God; their activity is devoted to God; and their recourse is to God.”

AL-SULAMĪ 1969, 90 [#17]; 2001, 1306 [Q 10:62]

[Abū ʿAbd Allāh said,] “The distinctive signs (*ʿalāma*) of the friends are three: humility when he attains a high rank, asceticism when he possesses material goods, and equity (*inṣāf*) when he has power.”

AL-SULAMĪ 1969, 254 [#4]

[Aḥmad said,] “The friend of God is not marked by any distinctive sign (*sīmāʾ*) and has no name by which he is called.”

AL-SULAMĪ 1969, 103 [#1]

A maxim recorded in al-Sulamī’s Qur’ān commentary may also be added here, a comment attributed to Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d. 320/932) on Q 10:62, the *locus classicus* for any mystic concerned with *wilāya*.

Al-Wāsiṭī said, “The distinctive signs (*ʿalāma*) of the friend are four. The first is that he keeps custody of the inner mysteries that lie between him and his Lord, guarding them from whatever calamities could assault his heart, and he does not complain. The second is that he safeguards the marvel (*karāma*) [he has been given]; he does not accept this out of ostentation (*riyāʾ*) or to earn a reputation, and he does not consider it an abasement. The third is that he suffers the insults of the people and does not return an insult. The fourth is that he flatters God’s servants despite the flaws (*tafāwut*) in their character (*akhlāq*), because he sees the people as God’s and he looks into the most hidden part of their potency. Thus, he keeps fellowship with them according to what he sees from God in them.”

AL-SULAMĪ 2001, 1306 [Q 10:62]

Some key dynamics in al-Sulamī’s spiritual method suffice to alleviate the tensions between these different statements about the *awliyāʾ*. First, al-Sulamī carries the marked influence of the Path of Blame (*malāmatiyya*), particularly concerning their scorn for ostentation and the public display of one’s piety. Second, al-Sulamī’s approach to proper *adab* presumes that one’s interior alignment and one’s exterior comportment function in tandem; a believer who

has properly cultivated the inner life would never display distasteful morals. One recent study has highlighted conflict within the Sufi community in its early period, framing the persistent state of conflict as a stimulus for al-Sulamī's frequent counsels to avoid backbiting, to rise above jealousy, and to forgive faults (Salamah-Qudsi 2018, 187–214). Here, a *walī*'s tendency to speak well of others manifests the *walī*'s perception of the presence and action of God in others. Particularly in the case of believers who have achieved great spiritual advancement, al-Sulamī gives rhetorical priority to the cultivation of one's inner *adab* as the matter on which they should concentrate their attention and aspiration. This creates, however, a dilemma regarding his notion of holiness: al-Sulamī assumes that a *walī*'s holiness will become known, and that people will recognize the marks of *wilāya*, yet the *walī* should play no active role in this holiness becoming known.

In *Kitāb Fuṣūl fī l-Taṣawwuf*, one finds al-Sulamī's brief attempt to address the connection between *ṣidq* and *wilāya* already mentioned in the discussion of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī. Al-Sulamī writes:

If the station of truthfulness (*ṣidq*) is soundly established in a person, he enters into the realm (*ḥudūd*) of the stations of sound authority (*maqāmāt siḥḥat al-wilāya*). The rank of authority (*wilāya*) demands truthfulness, and every deed and state, and occurrence that is devoid of truthfulness is far from reality (*ḥaqīqa*). Truthfulness is the entrance into prophecy and authority (*wilāya*) and the states and the [divine] words.

AL-SULAMĪ 2009–2010d, 3:203–204 [§36]

In both *Kitāb Fuṣūl fī l-Taṣawwuf* and al-Sulamī's writings elsewhere, *ṣidq* emerges as a more prominent concept than *wilāya*, as *ṣidq* is a criterion of truth and a test of sincerity (Chowdhury 2019, 171). Novel here is al-Sulamī's phrase *maqāmāt siḥḥat al-wilāya*. Elsewhere, to my knowledge, al-Sulamī never frames *wilāya* as one of the spiritual stations, and here, it seems not to be one station but a characteristic of several stations. The station of *ṣidq* is clearly a *conditio sine qua non* to progress to any stations associated with *wilāya*. One could hypothesize that these stations of *wilāya* refer to a hierarchy of sanctity, because, as had al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, al-Sulamī occasionally does posit the existence of ranks among the *awlīyā'* (Chowdhury 2021). Al-Sulamī's explanation of the meaning of the Qur'ānic letters contains the following comment:

The *ḥā'* alludes to God's friends because they are the proof of God for His servants. The proof among God's friends is the leader of the people of divine friendship (*imām ahl al-wilāya*), and he is the learned man who

knows God and His commandments (*‘ālim bi-Llāh wa-bi-awāmīrih*) and embodies the ethical conduct of His Messenger (*mutakhalliḡ bi-akhlāḡ rasūlih*).¹⁶

AL-SULAMĪ 2009, 9 [§37]; BÖWERING 2011, 380

Here it seems that one's rank of *wilāya* is determined by knowledge; epistemic access distinguishes the leader of the *awliyā'*, who embodies this knowledge practically.¹⁷ The cohort that possesses this spiritual authority (*ahl al-wilāya*) obeys the leader of the cohort (*imām ahl al-wilāya*), who embodies the ethics of the Messenger of God.

In the generation following al-Sulamī, some key ideas about *wilāya* crystallized in the manuals of major Sufi scholars who sought to guarantee – through some back-projection of ideas and homogenization of diversity when necessary – the conformity of *taṣawwuf* to Sunnī orthodoxy. In the generation following al-Sulamī, some key ideas about *wilāya* crystallized and won wide acceptance among adherents of *taṣawwuf*. The chapter on *wilāya* in al-Qushayrī's *Risāla* ("Epistle") provides a well-known synthesis of these ideas (Mojaddedi 2012, 57–60, 125–128), but one sees fundamentally the same approach in *Salwat al-Ārifīn* ("Comfort of the Mystics"), composed by Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d. ca. 470/1077). Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī makes no attempt to distance himself from the content of the *Risāla*.

Know that "friend" (*walī*) has two meanings. One of them is the person whose affairs are managed by God and God does not entrust this to him in any circumstance. Here, the grammatical form of *walī* implies passivity (*fa'īl bi-ma'nā maf'ūl*). God said, *He [God] manages the affairs of the righteous* (Q 7:196). The second meaning is that of the friend who is thoroughly engaged in worshipping and obeying God. Here, the grammatical form of *walī* implies an intensity of action on the part of the actor (*fa'īl mubālagha min al-fā'īl*). His worship is to such an extent that it [alternatively: he] is never stained by any disobedience. There is no doubt that both of the two meanings must apply in order for the friend of God to be a [genuine] friend. He must fulfill his obligations toward God meticulously and exhaustively, while God, in turn, protects him constantly in good or bad times. One of the conditions of being a friend of God is to enjoy His protection (*maḥfūz*), in the same way as one of the conditions

16 I have slightly modified Böwering's translation.

17 Scholars rightly distinguish between *‘ilm*, *ma'rifa*, and *ḥikma*, for authors in the period; these knowledge-words are not synonymous, but their usage varies (Palmer 2020, 96–110).

of being a messenger is to be infallible (*maʿṣūm*). Anyone who violates the Divine Law is deluded and deceived and God is hidden from him.

AL-ṬABARĪ 2013, 293 [§478]; AL-QUSHAYRĪ 2007, 269

This paragraph reworks al-Qushayrī's text without any alteration of the key ideas. Later in the same section, *Salwat al-ʿArifin* contains a discussion of whether or not a *walī* can know that he is a *walī*, and here too, Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī follows al-Qushayrī's formulation almost to the letter (al-Ṭabarī 2013, 297 [§487]; al-Qushayrī 2007, 270). The inclusion of many maxims that are not found in the *Risāla* indicates that Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī had additional sources, but his agreement with al-Qushayrī is thoroughgoing. Both scholars demonstrate their desire to provide a concise definition of who or what a *walī* is and to synthesize some key debates about the *walī*. Unlike al-Sulamī, who allows the diffuse material to stand without furnishing a synthesis, these scholars a generation later retain many of the same sources, citing maxim after maxim about the nature of *wilāya*, but formulating a synthetic summary about the two meanings of spiritual authority.

4 The Marvels of God's Friends

Nearly all Sufi texts from the period that discuss the *awliyā'* discuss in some way the marvels that God grants to God's friends (Gramlich 1987; cf. Aigle 1995), a phenomenon that raises interesting questions vis-à-vis virtue ethics due to the friends' frequent distrust of these marvels and their attempts to conceal these marvels (Melchert 2020, 62). Many believers took marvels as signs of God's favor for the *walī* and as a confirmation of the person's holiness and authority. The appreciation for such abnormal occurrences is obviously not restricted to Islam; fine comparative studies have been performed on miraculous events of saints in different religious traditions (Aigle and Mayeur-Jaouen 2000). Likewise, one finds internal diversity within the Islamic tradition, as many Mu'tazilīs openly denied the existence of marvels. Stories of charlatanry abound, and debates about figures like al-Ḥusayn b. Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 310/922) show that famous mystics were accused of fabricating marvels (Massignon 1980, 1:150–156). The more their supporters insisted on the authenticity of these marvels, the more detractors responded that one never could believe a single word they said. Despite their awareness of the number of fake miracle-workers, Muslims often saw *karāmāt* as intimately linked to the elaboration and accomplishment of sanctity (Aigle and Mayeur-Jaouen 2000, 21). Sufis themselves – although very conscious of the prevalence of charlatanry – generally affirmed that God does

occasionally grant marvels to the *awliyā'* and generally used the terms of the Ash'arī theological school to do so (Gardet 1975).

Stories of *karāmāt* abound in Sufi literature. "These marvels most usually consist of miraculous happenings in the corporeal world, or else of predictions of the future, or else of interpretation of the secrets of hearts, etc" (Gardet 1975). Tales of these special manifestations of God's power forced Sufi writers to explain the difference between the extraordinary deeds of the prophets and the extraordinary deeds of the friends. Prophetic wonders were normally called "miracles" (*mu'jizāt*) or sometimes "signs" (*āyāt*), whereas "marvels" (*karāmāt*) were attributed to *awliyā'*. Each of these acts involves a breaking of the natural order (*khāriq/nāqiḍ lil-'āda*), but the tradition generally conceives miracles as public displays to demonstrate the truth of the accompanying message, whereas marvels are solitary personal favors granted to a holy person by God. Many classical texts insist on the distinction between miracles and marvels even if as a point of fact, literature in Arabic written by Muslims does not maintain a clear-cut difference between the two. For their part, Arabic-speaking Christians often used *mu'jizāt* to describe the wonders of their saints, perhaps in a deliberate attempt to avoid any Sufi-inflected language (Aigle and Mayeur-Jaouen 2000, 20–21). The distinction between miracles and marvels was theological, not lexical, and demonstrates the concern about hierarchy in salvation history: whether the friends of God could (or do) hold a higher rank than prophets. Classical texts like al-Kharkūshī's *Tahdhīb al-Asrār* show a consensus that wondrous events testify to the truthfulness (*ṣidq*) of both a *walī* and a prophet (al-Kharkūshī 1999, 374). Al-Kharkūshī reasons that an untruthful person would never be granted such wondrous deeds. Marvels and miracles can only take place through God's power and God grants these as an indication (*dalāla*) of truthfulness. This does not mean, of course, that the absence of marvels indicates a lack of truthfulness in a person, but that their presence provides secure testimony of that believer's *ṣidq*.

Al-Sarrāj's basic position on *karāmāt al-awliyā'* set the pattern by which subsequent leaders of *taṣawwuf* would respond to the question, as the problem came up in nearly all the Sufi manuals (cf. Ohlander 2009; Mojaddedi 2012, 136–158). The crux of the distinction between miracles and marvels relates to the public, evidentiary nature of the former and the private nature of the latter. God gave prophets and messengers miracles to aid them and establish the veracity of their message, often in the face of a challenge by the prophets' opponents, while the marvels God grants to God's friends come to reinforce them but not as an instrument for public proclamation. A statement by Abū 'Amr al-Dimashqī (d. 320/932) illustrates the widespread notion that bearers of *karāmāt* can, and generally should, keep their marvels secret (Gardet 1975).

Just as God required the prophets to show signs (*āyāt*) and miracles (*muʿjizāt*) [so that others might believe by means of them], God required the friends (*awliyāʾ*) to hide their marvels (*karāmāt*) so that they would not put the people to the test.

AL-SULAMĪ 1969, 277 [#1], cf. 250 [#4]; 1976, 57 [§147]; 1945, 117 [§39]

By comparison with the preoccupation that al-Sarrāj and others show for the question of marvels, al-Sulamī remains strangely silent on the matter (Thibon 2009, 196–200). He occasionally uses *karāmāt* to refer to divine graces or favors that do not demand a rupture of the natural order of things (Chowdhury 2019, 189), although he does affirm the existence of extraordinary marvels. Still, if other Sufis might consider such wondrous graces to be visible marks of sanctity, al-Sulamī suggests they be treated with discretion and reserve. This likely reflects his proclivity toward the Path of Blame, which scorns any kind of outward ostentation. Occasional comments, whether in al-Sulamī's own voice or in his choice to transmit certain *dicta* of others, manifest his inclination to keep marvels hidden. He transmits a maxim in which a Sufi master blasts those who allow these wonders to be seen: "He who makes his marvels visible is an impostor (*muddaṭ*), but he upon whom marvels are evident, that one is a friend (*walī*)" (al-Sulamī 1969, 418 [#5]). Al-Sulamī criticizes those who are deluded and bedazzled by the appearance of marvels, citing an unnamed pious ancestor who recognizes the capacity of marvels to deceive even the *awliyāʾ* themselves (al-Sulamī 1976, 105 [§71]). Al-Sulamī's reticence here mirrors that of other prior Sufi masters, who suspected that these wonders could manifest a ruse (*makr*) of Satan (Gramlich 1987, 438–443). This reluctance to disclose was often internally rather than externally generated; while Sufi *adab* discouraged such disclosure, narratives often report that the bearers of marvels found their marvels a trial and thus inclined to hide them due to their humility (al-Qushayrī 2007, 270; al-Ṭabarī 2013, 297 [§487]). Texts from the period idealize holy persons who consider these marvels in no way to be their own work (Aigle and Mayeur-Jaouen 2000, 13), for attachment to marvels could become a serious obstacle on the road to union with God (Gardet 1975).

This general inclination to keep marvels secret creates a dilemma – albeit not an irresolvable one – with regard to virtue ethics. Most traditional schemas of virtue presume that virtues can be seen and observed in their possessor. Under the appropriate circumstances for the exercise of a virtue, a person possessing that virtue will exercise that virtue. In this sense most virtue frameworks carry an element of verifiability or falsifiability with regard to particular persons: by observing a person in the relevant sets of circumstances, one may ascertain whether he or she possesses a certain virtue or vice. Beyond

the question of verifiability, most virtue theories assume that virtue has a social function. Virtues are not lived in a vacuum. Marvels are not virtues in themselves, but insofar as one sees marvels as God's confirmation of a person's holiness, what does the discouragement or prohibition of the display of extraordinary marks of holiness (*karāmāt*) indicate about a holy person's exercise of spiritual authority (*wilāya*)?

In medieval Sufi texts, the significance of *karāmāt* in the exercise of *wilāya* could rightly be described as both all-important and entirely unimportant. Marvels occasionally seem all-important due to the fascination they held for onlookers, as well as for the chroniclers of these deeds. Insofar as one can speak about believers "granting" spiritual authority to a *walī* – authority in a more Weberian sense of the word – *karāmāt* have inestimable value in a believer's acquisition of and subsequent public exercise of authority. This type of authority, however, is not *wilāya* in the true and full sense; no quantity of adulation and admiration amounts to authentic *wilāya*, which necessarily comes from God and not from people. But the value of marvels extends further than this limited sense of the human recognition of the authority of the *awliyā*. For the friends of God themselves, the gift of a marvel reveals an avenue for the *walī* to wield spiritual sovereignty in ways invisible to the living. One chronologically later story, though consistent with the ideas of Khurāsānī literature, illustrates the matter well. Ismā'īl al-Ḥaḍramī (d. 676/1277) recounts the audible wailing and laughter that arose when he walked through a cemetery; he reported that he saw the dead being tortured and he implored God for permission to intercede on their behalf, then he did so (Ohlander 2009, 57). The first marvel lies in Ismā'īl hearing the speech of the dead, but this hearing shows him the way to use his power to benefit those in the graves. This is but one poignant example of a holy person learning from the gift of marvels what authority God gives the *walī* and how to exercise it.

At the same time, one may equally say that the marvels are entirely unimportant. Medieval Sufi texts presume that believers will somehow recognize the authority of the true *walī* without seeing any marvels, and in this regard, marvels function in parallel to the divine gift of spiritual states (*aḥwāl*). The question of the people's acknowledgment of a holy person's power – acknowledgement that should occur without seeing *karāmāt* or *aḥwāl* – operates independently from the question of true spiritual sovereignty because the *walī* has it and exercises it whether people grant it or not. Elaborate schemas of *wilāya* by masters like al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī root the authority of the *walī* not simply in discrete acts of power, whether visible or invisible, but in the *walī*'s ontological role in the cosmos. For the highest rank of the friends of God, the fact of their existence guarantees the continuing existence of the world (Radtko et al. 2000).

5 Conclusion: *Wilāya* and Virtue Ethics

This survey of several discussions of *wilāya* in the texts of al-Sulamī and some of his near contemporaries prompts one to ask whether *wilāya* is itself a virtue. If it is not, what sort of thing is it? Is there a genus of which *wilāya* is a species, or is it *sui generis*? Might it be some kind of meta-virtue (as Vasalou hypothesizes for *‘iṣām al-himma*)? Indeed, Palmer has described *taṣawwuf* in al-Sulamī’s generation as a “meta-identity” and a “meta-*madhhab*,” and thus insofar as a scholar like al-Sulamī tends to elide any distinction between the *walī* and the [true] *Sufi*, one might be right to see *wilāya* as the meta-virtue – or at least, the meta-*ṣifa* – that binds *taṣawwuf* together (Palmer 2020, 179–183).

The location of *wilāya* in different Sufi manuals provides a partial albeit insufficient response to the question. The authors under discussion here do not treat *wilāya* as one of the *maqāmāt*. Al-Qushayrī’s *bāb al-wilāya* does fall in the portion of the *Risāla* dedicated to the *maqāmāt*, but this portion also contains several other chapters that would never be called mystical stations. If *wilāya* is a stable station into which a believer passes, *wilāya* is surely not a station beyond which a believer ever passes and is therefore not equivalent in kind to any other *maqām*.

One key feature of *wilāya* for the authors under discussion is that *wilāya* both admits of degrees and has an irreducibly elite character; spiritual authority is not simply an extraordinarily rare trait that one either has or does not have (al-Sulamī, 2009–2010a, 488–89 [§23], 492 [§29]; Chowdhury 2019, 168). This hierarchy exists within a group of God’s friends who seem to differ from the remainder of the *umma* not only in degree, but in kind. The *awliyā’* have lofty states and spiritual conditions that set them apart from ordinary people (in their level of patience, love, contentment, etc.) (al-Sulamī 2001, 1:305–307 [Q 10:62]). The friends of God enjoy constant divine protection (al-Sulamī 2001, 2:228 [Q 42:28]). In this sense, calling *wilāya* a “virtue” would associate it with the “elitist” Aristotelian foundations that many critics of a virtue framework love to disparage (Hursthouse 1999, 8–9). One does not see in Sufi texts a significant attempt to “democratize” *wilāya*. The texts insist that *wilāya* survives on the earth and that God blesses God’s friends. The *awliyā’* receive their status due to special divine election that is not predicated on their prior spiritual progress – although it seems that in all cases the prior piety of persons identified as *awliyā’* was extraordinary. Still, no amount of preparation – cultivating *ādāb* or *akhlāq* – can qualify a person for selection as God’s intimate friend. The discrete gifts of *karāmāt* thus mirror the more general gift of *wilāya*: both have their origin entirely in God and mark the extraordinary character of the recipient.

This article has identified several ways in which Sufi texts of the formative period cohere with an approach to ethical growth focused on the virtues. *Wilāya* – spiritual authority or sainthood – is not in itself a virtue, but the treatment of this topic manifests the elitist vision of moral advancement that marked much classical thinking about the virtues. Persons of virtue are rare, and when one speaks about the *awlīyā*, neither birth into optimal formative circumstances nor diligent self-cultivation suffice; *wilāya* involves an irreducible element of divine election. The most significant loose end in the context of virtue theory is the visibility of the virtues and the certainty (or lack thereof) that an external observer would recognize the marks of *wilāya*. On this point, Sufi texts display extreme confidence that the marks of *wilāya* will reveal themselves despite the best voluntary efforts of the *walī* to humbly veil the extraordinary marks of it from the eyes of the people. In this sense, al-Sulamī's literary corpus presents an inverted vision of *wilāya* by comparison with some other theorists. From al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī onward, many Muslim mystics reflect the centrality of *wilāya* by dedicating extensive and explicit discussions to it. They banish any doubt about the importance of this concept. By contrast, al-Sulamī furnishes a subtle demonstration of the centrality of *wilāya* by means of its diffusion throughout his writings: this spiritual authority is sprinkled across page after page, hidden in plain sight. Al-Sulamī does not foreground the link between friendship with God and dramatic supernatural events, allowing instead this spiritual power that God grants God's friends to more subtly bless and benefit the cosmos. Instead of "hidden in plain sight," one might therefore say instead that spiritual authority is "visible in plain sight," with the efforts of its bearers to evade its disclosure doing nothing to impede the pervasive operation of *wilāya*.

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