

# Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi

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SHĀH WALĪ ALLĀH OF DELHI (1703–1762), was a reformist scholar and mystic philosopher of the Indian subcontinent. Praised by Muhammad Iqbal as the first Muslim scholar to “*rethink the whole system of Islam without completely breaking with the past*”, Walī Allāh’s intellectual project evinces a deep concern to re-enchant every minutiae of life with glitters of the transcendent. His mission to reform the intellectual and socio-political conditions of his time led him to embark upon an ambitious agenda of illuminating the inner meanings of Islam, through a new discipline of *‘ilm asrār al-dīn* /the ‘science of the subtle meanings of religion’. Underlying the versatility and eclecticism of his writings is a coherent vision affirming diversity within Unity in a civilisational context.

SHĀH WALĪ ALLĀH OF DELHI (1703–1762), born Quṭb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Shāh °Abd al-Raḥīm in India, was a reformist scholar and philosopher-mystic of the Indian subcontinent. He initiated an ambitious agenda of illuminating the inner meanings of religion, for which he proposed a new science called *‘ilm asrār al-dīn* /the ‘science of the subtle meanings of religion’, which some have understood to actually be a new form of *kalām* /scholastic theology.

While learning much from leading scholars of his time, the most influential personality in his education was his own father Shāh °Abd al-Raḥīm, who initiated Wali Allah into the Naqshbandi Sufi order when his son was merely fifteen. °Abd al-Raḥīm was among the scholars who were summoned to prepare the famous *Fatāwā °Alamgīrī* (or *Fatāwā Hindīyya*) under the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (d. 1707); and founded the religious school Madrasa Rahimiyya where the SHAH would later succeed his father as its head. Much of Wali Allah’s philosophy bore his father’s imprint: °Abd al-Raḥīm’s chief concern was *ḥikmat-e °amalī* /practical philosophy, where theoretical formulations are saturated with pragmatic considerations. SHAH Wali

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Allah inherited his father's concern, which helped propell him along his mission to reform the intellectual and socio-political conditions of his time when the Mughal Empire was in its twilight.

His fourteen-month sojourn in the Holy Sanctuaries as a youth impressed him profoundly, for it was here that he experienced mystical visions chronicled in his *Fuyūd al-Ḥaramayn /Over-Flowings of the Two Sanctuaries*, in one of which he saw the Prophet Muḥammad (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) embracing him and dressing him in a special robe – perhaps symbolizing the “robe” of demonstrative proof. This left him to pursue his intellectual career with the ‘divine’ assurance of his destiny as the “seal of the sages” (a phrase from his work *al-Khayr al-Kathīr /The Abundant Virtue*).

**Writings.** The SHAH's major works include his magnum opus • *Hujjat Allāh al-Bāligha /The Conclusive Argument of God* treating his new *‘ilm asrār al-dīn* or science of the subtle meanings of religion – a kind of ‘philosophy of Religion’ that brings into synthesis diverse fields of learning from metaphysics and cosmology to jurisprudence and political theory; • *al-Budūr al-Bazīgha /Full Moon on the Horizon*, a condensed version of his *Hujjat*; • *al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr /The Great Triumph in the Principles of Exegesis*, on the principles of Qur’anic commentary; his • *Alṭāf al-Quds* on Sufi psychology and epistemology; as well as treatises on jurisprudence, like • *‘Iqd al-Jīd fī Aḥkām al-Ijtihād wa al-Taqlīd /Chaplet On Rules for Ijtihad and Taqlid*, and • *al-Inṣāf fī Bayān Sabab al-Ikhtilāf /Just Clarification On Causes of Juristic Disagreement*. Underlying the versatility and eclecticism of his writings is a coherent vision affirming Unity and unicity grounded in metaphysics and theory of Religion, and eliminating divisive tendencies. His unified worldview is displayed even in peripheral inquiries such as his juristic theory – e.g. against the conventional argument for *ijmā‘*<sup>c</sup> requiring total consensus of the *mujtahids*, Wali Allah advocated a ‘relative’ consensus consistent with his support for diversity.

Wali Allah establishes his philosophy firmly on a teleological footing: all things are made towards the service of the cosmic *telos*: the ‘universal comprehensive benefit’ */al-maṣlaḥa al-kulliyya*. The process of change and flux is dialectically interpreted so that tensions between the different elements in the universe, whether between the different faculties of the soul, the various elements in society, or different states in a

global political order, are seen as part of the Divine project whereby their resolution elevates them to a higher level, ultimately ending in the fulfillment of their destined role in the total scheme of creation. This provides the cosmological basis of understanding change and diversity in the created world and the role of religion in this grand design. To accomplish this project, the SHAH expanded his inquiries beyond a strictly ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ discourse to embrace a civilisational context wherein these values find expression.

**Diversity & Civilisations.** These considerations may explain his fairly tolerant views on diversity and pluralism. In what resembles a proto-cosmopolitan philosophy, Wali Allah affirms the centrality of custom in social life, the elimination of which would drag man down to his lowest common denominator. Even in his elucidation on religion, ‘Religion’ is not conflated with ‘Islam’—in terms of the ‘ideal’ religion viewed as prescribing different sacred laws, etc. to cater for different individuals in tandem with different spiritual needs, and which cannot be realized in this defective world. Rather, he explains ‘Religion’ as an archetypal reality inscribed into the Imaginal World *ʿalam al-mithāl* (reminiscent of, but different from, the Platonic World of Forms) which instantiates by phases gradually throughout history until its cycle of Revelation and manifestation in the phenomenal world is finalized with the religion sent to Muhammad<sup>(S)</sup>. Notwithstanding the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets marking completion of Revelation, the ‘message’ of the earlier prophets did not fade into oblivion. In fact, they were not just given the ‘message’ as is commonly understood – i.e. inviting people to God in the ‘religious’ sense – but also setting up the spiritual, moral, psychological, cultural, social and related infrastructures so the human soul is prepared and receptive to the call towards God. These may assume many forms, including a social institution, a branch of knowledge, or even a particular craftsmanship.

In the SHAH’s interpretation of ‘religion’, man is by default encoded with theomorphic sensibilities designated as *fiṭrah* ‘innate-disposition’. If he does not turn to God, or denies Him, or refuses to acknowledge Him, it is because his soul is blemished by ‘veils to *fiṭrah*’ operating on several fronts: – that of physio-biological nature, – that of custom, – that of false conceptions of God. These veils have to be

confronted on their own battlefields. The Prophet Idris, for example, was “raised...to a lofty station” (*Qur’an* 19:57), which Wali Allah interpreted as his ascent to higher levels of reality, endowing him with superior knowledge of metaphysics, from which sprang forth such individual sciences as medicine, astronomy, anatomy, or psychology—all applications of immutable metaphysical principles to specific domains of contingent reality. His metaphysical insights serve as the foundation for knowledge of his time. All prophets were likewise revealed more than the message of Religion but also knowledge of such socio-spiritual infrastructures. These infrastructures Wali Allah called the *irtifāqāt* (singular: *irtifāq* ‘support/s of civilization’), the means by which the spiritual or mystical and the civilisational intersect. Therefore: Noah’s Ark, David’s metallurgical gifts and Solomon’s unique political kingdom (spanning cross-dimensional territories) are all particular manifestations of *irtifāqāt*, adequate to respond to the needs of the time. The SHAH even included the advancement of *irtifāqāt* as part of the Objectives of the Lawgiver (*maqāṣid al-shāri‘*).

**Rationality & the Supra-Natural Cosmos.** Among the SHAH’s major concerns include the need to rationalize religious truths, for he believes that “the divine law of Muhammad would shine forth in this age by being presented in long and loose-fitting robes of demonstrative proof” (recall his vision at the Ḥaramayn & the special robe), as well as the integration of mundane human affairs within spiritual life. To this end, he incorporated into his philosophy elements that would normally feature as ‘supra-natural realities’. In fact he “*naturalises the so-called supra-natural and supra-naturalises the so-called natural*” (Fazlur Rahman’s words), which are together unified into his emanationist cosmology by means of his concept of the ‘great theophany’ (*al-tajallī al-a‘zam*) indicating the divine ‘self-disclosure’, so that the many worlds are seen as one harmonious continuum. The Highest Council (*al-mala’ al-a‘lā* – see *Qur’an* 37:8, 38:69), being the apex of the angelic realms and an elite caste among the angels, always participate in the ordinary life of man, from praying for the righteous servants of God to the transmission of knowledge from its divine origin to the human world. The abode of the highest angels and souls of exceptionally pious individuals is the Holy Enclave /*ḥaḍīrat al-quḍs* — based partly on the SHAH’s interpretation of the *ḥadīth* according to which the Prophet<sup>(S)</sup> saw Ja‘far ibn Abī Ṭālib flying with wings

among the angels. The SHAH's cosmological scheme thus envisages a broader view of 'cosmos' which does not stop at the level of the physical world.

From these premises, it follows naturally that man is capable of knowing things beyond the immediacy of his sense-perception. Wali Allah then classified knowledge and the sciences in various ways to accommodate this broader understanding of knowledge. For example, the sciences in his scheme are divided into the *'ilm al-manqūlāt* /transmitted sciences, *'ilm al-ma'qūlāt* /intellectual sciences, and *'ilm al-mukāshafāt* /revelatory sciences. Elsewhere he classified it into *'ilm al-ḥuṣūlī* /"knowledge by ratiocination" – i.e. knowledge mediated through the process of thought and reasoning, and *'ilm al-ḥudūrī* /"knowledge by presence" – direct immediate knowledge. Corresponding to these different types of knowledge is the plurality of the faculties of cognition, adequate to grasp such knowledge appropriate to its level. In this, man is not left alone given his intrinsic susceptibility to be distanced from his own *fiṭrah*, but rather is guided by Religion /*dīn* through the prophets, which over the course of time has to be institutionalised /*millah*, in order that the human be constantly reminded to return to his own *fiṭrī* primordially.

**Knowledge & Self-Transformation.** In terms of knowledge, Religion supplies the possibility of traversing the higher cognitive-mystical highlands, thereby yielding insights into otherwise occluded dimensions of reality and existence by prescribing means of purifying the soul and its cognitive faculties through the Sacred Law. The Sacred Law works at once as the regulation of social life and as therapeutic exercises enabling one to maintain an optimum spiritual state. Such knowledge is not discursively formulated but, among other means, encrypted in the form of rites, rituals and worship whose interior dimensions await discovery through learning wedded to spiritual discipline and mystic realization. This reality justifies, in the SHAH'S eyes, the human need for prophecy. These yield an understanding into such matters as the secrets of fasting, the timing of the prayer-rite /*ṣalāh*, number of genuflections and prostrations, and other practices. Wali Allah recognizes that the *Sharī'ah*, the Sacred Law of Islam, only addresses humanity in general, and therefore does not take into account the distinctive spiritual needs of different individuals (as we saw above: such an 'ideal' religion is impossible). This is why knowledge of the inner dimensions of religion – which also subsumes penetrative insight into the

nature of reality – is indispensable if the true message of religion is to be realized within a civilisational framework.

The purpose of soaring into the higher echelons of knowledge is precisely so one becomes able to tap from its reservoir and effectuate transformation in this all-too-human world,—reminiscent of the role of the prophets themselves. The SHAH’s socio-political theory, colored no doubt by Naqshbandi teachings which enjoin social activism as part of spiritual training, envisions a civilisational context where the vagaries of life present the individual with the formidable task of co-operation and collaboration with others towards the establishment of the necessary *irtifāqāt* – indeed, knowledge of the ‘supporting–infrastructures’ */irtifāqāt* is one of the three characteristics distinguishing human from animal, the other two being his aesthetic sensibility */zarāfah* and universalist vision */al-ra’y al-kullī*.

Employing creative psycho-spiritual typologies derived partly from scripture, Wali Allah devised a social order in which individuals may play their destined role conforming to their distinctive personal traits. For example, the highest state of individual psycho-spiritual equilibrium produces the Foremost */sābiqūn*; less than this results in the Companions of the Right Hand */aṣḥāb al-yamīn*, while the lowest are the Companions of the Left Hand */aṣḥāb al-shamāl*. Even the prophets were classified by the SHAH in this manner: seeing them as ‘the instructed ones’ */mufahhamūn*), some were caliphs */khalīfah* like David and Solomon, others were warners */mundhir* like Ṣāliḥ, yet others were sages */ḥakīm*. The role one is to play is influenced partly by physical temperament */mīzāj*, which in turn shapes the constitution of the Soul’s faculties that determines one’s particular strengths and shortcomings. In the post-prophetic era of humanity the ‘supporting–infrastructures’ have to be worked out with the guidance of Revelation and the Sacred Law of Islam or *Sharī‘ah*. Seen in this light, the *Sharī‘ah* should not be seen in an exclusively deontological sense, but also teleologically, that is, ultimately meant to secure the benefit of humanity and all of creation. He clearly refutes this argument in the very Introduction of the *Hujjat*:

*It may be thought that the rulings of the divine laws do not encompass any aspect of the beneficial purposes (maṣāliḥ) and that there is no relationship between human actions and that which Allāh makes requital*

*for them, and that being obligated by the divine laws is like the case of a master who wants to test the obedience of his servant, so he orders him to lift a stone or to touch a tree—something which has no use to it besides being a test, so that when he obeys or disobeys, he is requited for his action. This is a false idea which is refuted by the practice of the Prophet, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, and the consensus of the generations whose goodness has been attested.*

Shāh Walī Allāh's legacy in the Subcontinent is so widespread that various groups that differ widely from each other claim him as their ideological mascot. His children partly helped to spread this legacy, particularly his grandson Shāh Ismā'īl Shāhid and his son, the Ḥadīth scholar Shāh °Abd al-°Azīz who authored the famous *Bustān al-Muḥaddithīn /Garden of the Ḥadīth Scholars*. The Shah's voice, echoed almost three centuries ago, reverberates with equal resonance today – for its message responds to the perennial quest within the human being to always seek to realize the divine will and presence, guided, at all times, by the spirit of Unity.



*Further reading:*

In addition to the works of Shāh Walī Allāh referred to above, useful introductions to this luminary are found in G.N. Jalbani's *Life of Shah Waliyullah* and *Philosophy of Shah Waliyullah*; entries in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* and *Encyclopedia Iranica*; Muhammad al-Ghazali's *The Socio-Political Thought of Shah Wali Allah*; Ebrahim Moosa's 'Foreword' to Marcia Hermansen's *Shah Wali Allah's Treatises on Islamic Law* (being an English translation of his *al-Insaf fi Bayan Sabab al-Ikhtilaf* and *'Iqd al-Jid fi Ahkam al-Ijtihad wa al-Taqlid*) (Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2010), as well as Hermansen's own Introduction to this work, and the introduction to her English translation of the *Hujjat (The Conclusive Argument from God)*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995).