

**Spiritual *Walayah* or Love in the *Mathnavi* Mawlavi:
A Shi'ite View**

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Abstract

In its true meaning, *walayah* means love, a believer is a lover and faith is love. The main topic of the *Mathnavi* is love. In this poem, Mawlavi speaks of the nature of love, the way to it, its master and perils. Among the three approaches to religion, that is, narrative, rational and heartfelt, he chooses the last because it is the way of faith and love, or *walayah*. He considers 'Ali to be the source or *wali* for this way after the Prophet. Thus the *Mathnavi* is also a book of *walayah*, and Mawlavi is a Shi'ite, not in the current sense of the jurists or dialectical theologians, but in its true meaning, that is, belief in the continuing spirituality and *walayah* of the Prophet in the person of 'Ali, and belief that after the Prophet there is always a living guide (*wali*) on the way of love.

Key Words: 1- Mawlavi 2- Love 3- *Walayah* 4- *Mathnavi*

1. Approaches to Islam

There are three main approaches to Islam found among classical Muslim authors: narration, reason and the heart. Among various Muslim scholars, it is only the Sufis who have followed the way of the heart. According to this way, God is not only the divine legislator, to Whom one prays with fear of hell and yearning to enter paradise, but He is the Beloved.¹ The way of the heart is the way of love, in which the wayfarer purifies his heart until he gains union with God. In addition to this, the Sufis believe that in every period of time there is a divine spiritual guide or *wali*, and that it is only through him that one can find the way to God. So, after the

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death of the Prophet, one cannot confine himself to the Qur'an and traditions, but should obey the spiritual successors of the Prophet, the *awliya*. The cycle of prophecy has been completed with the Prophet of Islam, but the cycle of *walayah* never ends, and the way to God is always thereby open. Consequently, the way of the heart is also the way of *walayah*, and *walayah* and love are two aspects of one truth.

2. The Meaning of *Walayah*

The word *walayah* stems from the root *wly* whose original meaning is to place something near to another so that there is no distance between them. So, *walayah* denotes physical or spiritual nearness, such as the nearness of the lover to his beloved. The words *wali*, *mawla* and *mawlawi* (the famous title used for Rumi), are all from this root. It is one of the most frequently used roots found in the Qur'an and Shi'ite narrations, and it is also a key concept in Sufism, although it became more widespread through the influence of Ibn 'Arabi and his followers.² As we shall see later, *walayah* is the reality of Sufism and the inner aspect of Islam.

As a term in Sufism and in Shi'ism, *walayah* means the immediacy of God to the *wali*, by virtue of which revelation or inspiration takes place. Regarding the spiritual quality of this nearness, *Mawlawi* says:

Thou dost not see this, that the nearness of the *awliya* (to God) hath a hundred miracles and pomps and powers.³

Walayah is an eternal truth present in all the divinely revealed religions. Each of the prophets from Adam to Muhammad was first a *wali* before becoming a prophet, and *walayah* continues even though the cycle of prophecy has ended. As *Mawlawi* describes it, although the rose garden of prophecy has fallen into ruin, we should smell its quintessence in the perfume of *walayah*(3,I:671-2).

3. Different Aspects of *Walayah* in the *Mathnavi*

Since *walayah* is something heartfelt and refers to the divine aspect of the *wali*, it is hidden and a mystery. Not all people have an eye to recognize the *wali*, so, not all can see him. *Mawlawi* says:

Even now there exists a Solomon,
but we are blinded by exulting in our far-sightedness (hyperopia)
(3, II: 3731, and next line).

The *wali* is the shadow of God on earth. Mawlawi says that the shadow mentioned in the verse of the Qur'an, "*How God extended the shadow*" is the form of the *awliya*, which guides to the light of the divine sun (3,I:423-5).

The *wali* is the perfect man of the age and the intermediary of grace from God to man. His acceptance is the acceptance of God. Mawlawi says:

If he (the *wali*) rejects anyone, he does it for His sake;
and if he (the *wali*) accepts anyone, he is the authority.
Without him, God does not bestow bounty on anyone...
(3,V:876-7)⁴

The *wali* is the prophet of his age. Mawlawi says:

Do not break with the prophet of your days:
do not rely on your own skill and preference (3,IV:242).

The *awliya* revive men through the life-giving breath of *walayah*:

Heark! For the *awliya* are the reviving angels (Israfil) of the (present) time: from them to the dead comes life and freshness (3,I:1930).

Sufis compare *walayah* to the grafting of the bitter existence of man to the divine tree in order for it to produce sweet fruit. Mawlawi says:

Either take up the axe and strike like a man—like 'Ali,
destroy this gate of Khaybar—
Or unite these thorns with the rosebush:
unite the light of the friend (of God) with the fire (your soul),
In order that this light may extinguish your fire,
(and that) union with Him may make your thorns roses (3,II:1244-46).

This grafting is the swearing of allegiance (*bay'at*) to 'Ali, by which the divine trust enters the heart of man:

The Mary of the heart will not conceive the breath of the Messiah
Until the divine trust comes from one hidden place (i.e., the heart of the *wali*) to another (the heart of the novice) (2).

Companionship with God is companionship with the *awliya*:

Whoever wishes to sit with God, let him sit in the presence of the *awliya*.
If you are broken off (divided) from the presence of the *awliya*, you have perished (3,II:2163-4).

Of course, since there are false claimants to guidance who invite people on their own without permission, Mawlawi says:

Since there is many a devil who hath the face of Adam,
it is not well to give your hand to every hand (to perform *bay'at*)
(3, I:316)

It is this spiritual permission that is called *khirqah* (the patched cloak) in the language of the Sufis. When they say that a shaykh has been dressed in the *khirqah* by another shaykh, it means that he has been given this spiritual permission.

In the *Mathnawi*, obedience to the *wali*, also called the *pir* or guiding shaykh, is considered obligatory. The Prophet teaches this point to 'Ali before anyone else, in the same manner as Khidr taught it to Moses. This is why in the *Mathnawi*, the Prophet advises 'Ali that obedience to the guide is the nearest way to God (3,I: 2959-81).

O 'Ali! Above all devotional acts in the Way (of God), do thou choose
the shadow (protection) of the servant of God (3, I:2965).

When the Pir has accepted thee, take heed, surrender theyself (to him):
go, like Moses, under the authority of Khidr (3, I: 2969).

According to Mawlawi, nothing kills the carnal soul but the shadow of the *wali* (3, II: 2528).

Mawlawi even considers the *wali* to be the way itself, (3, I: 2938) because he believes that the way to gain perfection is through connection with the *wali*:

If thou gain access to that king, thou wilt become a king (3,I:2686).

4. *Walayah* and Love

Walayah brings about love. In a famous *hadith* God says, "My servant comes near to Me continually through supererogatory worship until I love him. When I love him, I become his ear through which he hears, his eyes through which he sees, his tongue by which he speaks, his hands by which he moves, and his feet by which he walks."⁵ Thus, the *wali* who has achieved the ultimate proximity to God and has been annihilated in Him becomes a lover. Love is the goal of every wayfarer. Mawlawi says that he is unable to explain it:

Whatsoever I say in exposition and explanation of love, when I come to
love (itself) I am ashamed of that (explanation) (3,I:113).

It is only love that purifies man:

He (alone) whose garment is rent by a (mighty) love is purged of
covetousness and all defect (3, I: 22).

According to the root meaning of the word *walayah*, there is no
distance that remains between the lover and his beloved.

But my (whole) being is full of Layla (the Beloved): this shell is filled
with the qualities of that Pearl (3,V: 2017-8).

The love of God is through the love for the *wali* because he is
one with God or is annihilated in God. If Mawlawi fell in love with
Shams Tabrizi, it was because Shams was one of the *awliya* who
attracted Mawlawi:

Who is the beloved? Know well, it is the people of the heart, who like
day and night, are recoiling from the world (3,II: 3476).

5. Who Understands the Secret of *Walayah*

Mawlawi has learned love from the *awliya*. He does not find it
among the great Sunni jurists:

In that quarter where love was increasing (my) pain, Bu Hanifa and
Shafi'i gave no instruction (3,III: 3832).

He is not seeking love in the books of narrations.

Without the two *Sahih*s and narrations and narrators; nay, (they behold
him) in the place where they drink the Water of Life (3, I:3464).

He knows that they know nothing about love:

Love is nothing but a divine fortune and grace
It is nothing but openness of heart and guidance
Bu Hanifa did not teach love
Shafi'i has narrated nothing about it
Malik knows nothing about the secret of love
Hanbal does not comprehend it (1, 100).

Mawlawi considers judicial discretion (*ijtihad*) and juridical
analogy (*qiyàs*) as practiced by the scholars of Islamic law to be
contrary to the explicit statement (*nass*) of the Prophet:

In a case where he does not find an explicit statement, there he will
produce an example from analogy.

Know for sure that the explicit statement is the revelation
of the Holy Spirit and that the analogy made by personal

reasoning is subordinate to this (3,III: 3582-3).

The words of the *walí* are the criterion in religion and not the standards of human reasoning:

Know that beside the breath (words) of the *qutb* (i.e., *walí*) of the time transmitted knowledge is like performing the ritual ablution with sand when there is water (3, IV: 1418).

Likewise, according to the way of the heart that we find in Mawlawí, the secret of *walayah* is not to be found among the *mutakallimín* (rational theologians), not even the great ones like Fakhr-i Ràzì:

If reasoning could discern the way Fakhr-i Razí would be an adept in religious mysteries (3, V,4144).

Generally, since the *mutakallimín* seek to understand the mysteries of religion through the corporeal senses, and deny the inner senses of the spirit, they are not on the path described by Mawlawí. For example, regarding the debate between the Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites about the problem of the vision of God with the corporeal eye, he criticizes both groups and claims that God can only be seen with the eye of the spirit, or the eye of the heart:

The doctrine of the Mu‘tazilites is seeing by the eye of sense, whereas the Sunnite (orthodox) doctrine is seeing by the intellect (spirit) when unified with Him,

Those in thrall to sense-perception are Mu‘tazilites, (though) from misguidedness they represent themselves as Sunnites (orthodox)

(3,II:61-2).

There are three noteworthy points about these couplets. First, when Mawlawí speaks of *Sunnites*, he is not indicating the Sunní/Shí‘í dichotomy, as we shall see later. Here *Sunnite* means those who uphold the *sunnah* of the Prophet. Second, when he speaks of seeing by the intellect, he does not mean the discursive intellect (*aql juz‘í*), but the spirit or heart (*aql kullí*). Third, the point made is one that is also affirmed by a number of well-known Shi‘ite narrations. For example, it is reported that the sixth Imam related that in response to a Jewish scholar who asked, “Do you see your Lord when you worship Him?” Imam ‘Ali said, “Woe unto you! I do not worship a Lord I do not see.” The Jewish scholar asked, “How do you see Him?” Imam ‘Ali said, “Woe unto you! God is

not seen with the eyes, but the hearts see Him with the reality of faith.”⁶

Philosophers who rely on their own reasonings are also off the path of Mawlawí:

The philosopher killed (exhausted) himself with thinking:

Let him run on (in vain), for his back is turned towards the treasure.

Let him run on: the more he runs, the more remote does he become from the object of his heart’s desire (3,VI:2356-7).

Philosophers never gain certainty in religion (3,I:3298). They are always entangled in the intelligibles (*ma‘qulat*) (3. III: 2528). They do not pay attention to the kernel which is *walayah*:

The philosopher is in bondage to things perceived by the intellect; (but) the pure (*wali*) is he that rides as a prince on the Intellect of intellect.

The Intellect of intellect is your kernel, (while) your intellect is (only) the husk: the belly of animals is ever seeking husks (3,III:25-28-9).

In like manner, the philosopher is ignorant of the spiritual senses of the *awliya* (3,I:3293). He should know that it is only through servitude to God that one can know the truth:

The discovery (of the mystery) thereof is not (given) by the meddlesome intellect: do service (to God), in order that it may become clear to you (3,III: 2526).

All of the non-spiritual sciences, that Mawlawi calls *conjectural sciences*, are the subject of various opinions and tendencies; to the contrary, since the *awliya* see by the eye of the heart there is no difference in their views (3,VI:4134-5). Although the *awliya* are different in their corporeal bodies, they are the same since they are all a single light.

The souls of wolves and dogs are separate, every one; the souls of the Lions of God are united (3, IV:414ff).

In every age there is a single perfect *wali* of God who is commissioned by God to guide people. He is the guided one (*mahdi*) and the guide (*hadi*):

Therefore in every epoch a *wali* arises: the probation (of the people) lasts until the Resurrection (3, II:815).

He is the *Mahdi* (the guided one) and the *Hadi* (the guide), O seeker of the way: he is both hidden and seated before your face (3,II:818).

Since no one else but God and the prior *wali* knows the spiritual position of the succeeding *wali*, therefore, the former can appoint the latter. We cannot know him by our understanding.

‘Tis only the *wali* (himself) that makes the *wali* known and makes whoever he will its beneficiary.

No one can recognize him by reasoning; perhaps he pretends to be mad (3,II:2349-50).

He is the pious one of his time whose permission to guide has been given by God through the previous *wali*.

Amongst the righteous there is one (who is) the most righteous; on his decree (is inscribed) by the Sultan’s (God’s) hand a seal of approval (3,VI:2622).

6. *Walayah* and Caliphate

Walayah differs from caliphate. It is possible for people to engage in choosing the caliph by giving him their vote, but only God appoints the *wali*. God appointed ‘Ali to be the spiritual successor and *wali* after the Prophet. The issue of whether ‘Ali succeeded the Prophet as caliph is an historical matter, not a doctrinal one. What is important is believing that after the Prophet, *walayah* continued in ‘Ali. After acknowledging the historical reality of the designation of ‘Ali by the Prophet at Ghadir Khumm, Mawlawi says:

For this reason the Prophet, who laboured with the utmost zeal, applied the name *mawla* to himself and to ‘Ali.

He said, my cousin ‘Ali is the *mawla* and friend of every one of whom I am the *mawla* and friend (3,VI:4538-9).

In order to remove any doubt that a theologian might have about whether *mawla* merely signifies friendship, Mawlawi emphasizes that the *mawla* is the guide and divine beloved through whose *walayah* one may be freed from the bonds of the world:

Who is *mawla*? He who sets you free and removes the fetters of slavery from your feet.

Since prophethood is the guide to freedom, freedom is bestowed on true believers by the prophets (3, VI:4540-1).

Since he considers the appointment of the *wali* to be a great divine grace, he continues:

Rejoice, O community of true believers; show yourselves to be free as the cypress and the lily (3,VI: 4542).

In order to show that for ‘Ali, as he himself has said, (5, Khutbah 33) the caliphate has less value than his old worn out shoes, Mawlawi says:

He who mortifies his body in this fashion, how should he covet the
Princedom and the Caliphate? (3,I:3945)

If he speaks of the caliphate it is only to show the true way of governing.

He strives after power and authority outwardly to show to rulers the right way of ruling,

To give another spirit to the rule, to give fruit to the palm-tree of the caliphate (3,I:3946-7).

To those who find fault with ‘Ali for killing people in *jihad*, Mawlawi responds that his work was like a gardener who cuts diseased branches from trees so that they may be preserved and give fruit:

That heart-ravisher (‘Ali) cut off hundreds of thousands of heads, in order that the heads of the world’s people might win security (3,I: 3867 and I: 3868-70).

Mawlawi says that ‘Ali and the other *awliya* are the ones who guide people in this world and the next.

For God’s sake—you, O noble ones (*awliya*), are those who give succor in this world and the next (3, IV:2662).

7. ‘Ali as the First Wali

Since he considers the reality of religion to be *walayah*, which belongs to the heart and to mystery, and since ‘Ali is the vessel of this mystery after the Prophet, Mawlawi says:

Reveal the mystery, O ‘Ali, thou who art approved (by God),

O thou who art goodly ease after evil fate! (3,I: 3757)

In his Sufi way, Mawlawi is the disciple of the *walayah* of ‘Ali, and as a disciple understands the grace of the presence of ‘Ali in his heart. Thus, immediately following the previous couplet he says:

Either do thou declare that which thy intellect hath found,

Or I will tell that which hath shown forth on me.
From thee it shone forth on me: how shouldst thou hide it?
You sprinkle light like the moon, without language.
Without speaking, the moon guides,
When it speaks, it is light on light (3,I: 3758-9, 3762).

Mawlavi says that ‘Ali is his ancestry and origin:

Thou hast been my ancestry and origin,
Thou hast been the radiance of the candle of my religion (3,I:3983).

After ‘Ali, *walayah* continued through the other Shi‘ite Imams. They appointed shaykhs for the guidance of the people. These shaykhs were the first Sufi shaykhs, and they became the initiators of the Sufi orders. This is why almost all of them trace the chain of permission for guidance directly to Imam ‘Ali, or to the other Imams, especially Ja‘far Sadiq and Imam Rida and from them to ‘Ali.⁷ In this way, all of these orders establish ‘Ali as the gate to the city of divine knowledge, that is, *walayah*, in accordance with the famous hadith attributed to the Prophet, “I am the city of knowledge and ‘Ali is its gate.” With regard to this hadith, Mawlavi says:

Since thou (‘Ali) art the gate to the city of Knowledge,
Since thou art the beams of the sun of clemency,
Be open, O Gate, to him that seeks the gate,
So that by means of thee, the husks may reach the core.
Be open unto everlasting, O Gate of Mercy,
O Entrance hall to *None is like unto Him* (3,I:3763-5).

Mawlavi considers ‘Ali to be the measure of the words and deeds of one who is on the way to God:

You have been the balance, having the character of the One,
You have been the needle of every balance (3,I:3982).

8. Conclusion

The conclusion we would like to draw from this is that the most important principle shared by both Shi‘ism and Sufism is the question of Imamate or *walayah*, and that the *wali* is the divine mediator and guide through whom God saves humanity. The point that should be taken into consideration here is that, contrary to what is commonly asserted, Shi‘ism originally is not a political movement against the caliphs or a jurisprudential school, alongside the Sunnite schools of jurisprudence, or a school of *kalam* with an

affinity to the Mu'tazilites. Shi'ism is a heartfelt way based on the concept of *walayah*, and the differences in jurisprudence, politics and theology are secondary issues aside from this main core.⁸ Thus, in true Shi'ism, one believes that God is known not by one's own reasoning and speculations, nor by narrations handed down through others, but by submission to the *wali* and wayfaring on the path of love.

Thus we see that in his *Mathnawi*, Mawlawi speaks favorably about all the first four caliphs, but his tone of speaking differs completely when he comes to 'Ali,⁹ because he recognizes him as being the *wali* after the Prophet. Sometimes he praises 'Ali by the tongue of others, even his enemies, such as his assassin, Ibn Muljam, and sometimes Mawlawi himself praises 'Ali in the language in which the novice speaks with his master. He speaks with 'Ali as if he were speaking with Shams-e Tabrizi, the enraptured conversation of the lover with his beloved. He speaks of the face of 'Ali as a lover would, he says that it is a face "to which the face of the moon bows low in the place of worship" (3,I: 3724). Sometimes he asks 'Ali for grace as one who is weak and needy before him. He gives the best titles to 'Ali, such as, 'the pride and honor of every prophet and *wali*' and 'the lion of God.' He seems to consider 'Ali to have a spiritual stature that none of the previous three caliphs had. The places in which he mentions 'Ali are generally places where he discusses *walayah*.

Mawlawi, like almost all the Sufi shaykhs, is Shi'i in that he believes in *walayah* and recognizes 'Ali to be the *wali* after the Prophet. However, he is not *Rafidi*, in that he does not curse the first three caliphs. He is also Sunni in the literal sense of the word. Mawlawi defines a Sunni as one who is a true follower of Islamic tradition, *sunnah*, who is a man of vision, not one bound to sensual perceptions and his own opinions:

Anyone who remains in bondage to sense perception is a Mu'tazilite,
Though he may say he is a Sunnite, 'tis from ignorance.
Anyone who has escaped from (the bondage of) sense perception is a
Sunnite,
The man endowed with (spiritual) vision is following the eye of intellect
(3,II: 63-4)¹⁰.

Mawlawi's *Mathnawi*, which begins and ends with an explanation of love, is a book of love. It is also a book of *walayah*: Mawlawi ended the first book of the *Mathnawi*, with which he had

intended to finish the work, with the remembrance of 'Ali, and he ends the completed work with his mention as well.

Notes

- 1- It is narrated from Imam 'Ali, "A group of people worship God out of desire. This is the worship of merchants. A group of people worship God out of fear. This is the worship of slaves. And there is a group of those who worship Him in thanks, and they are the free." *Nahj al-Balagha*, ed. Subhi Saleh, (Beirut: 1980), 510.
- 2- Although the topic of *walayah* appears as a Sufi term in the works of Tirmidhi (See Bernd Radtke and John O'Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism* (Surry: Curzon, 1996)), the best discussion of *walayah* are found in the works of Ibn 'Arabi and the commentators of his *Fusus al-Hikam*, especially Sayyid Haydar Amuli. Among recent Sufi books in Persian, the *Walayah Nameh* of Hajj Sultan Muhammad Gunabadi Sultan 'Ali Shah, second ed. (Tehran: 1365/1986) is the best.
- 3- *Mathnawi* III:702. Cf. III:701-710 for more on this topic. All translations from *Mawlawi* are from Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi* (London: Luzac, 1972) with considerable editing.
- 4- Note that Nicholson mixes up the pronouns here.
- 5- This *hadith* is accepted by both Shi'ites and Sunnis. For a Shi'ite source see *Usul al-Kafi, the Book of Faith and Infidelity*, narrations 7 and 8.
- 6- *Usul al-Kafi*, the Book of *Tawhid*, Chapter on the denial of vision, hadith no. 6.
- 7- The Naqshbani is the most famous order that traces its permission to Abu Bakr, although they also claim another chain of permissions that goes back to 'Ali, and the former chain was not mentioned in their earliest sources.
- 8- The most important writers to have made this point in Western languages are Henry Corbin and recently Amir Moezzi.
- 9- In the *Divan-e Shams* there are some poems in which 'Ali is described explicitly as the *wali* who spiritually has been with all the prophets. For example, there is a poem that begins, "As long as world has had form, there was 'Ali." Some have disputed the authenticity of these poems, and so, in this essay I have not referred to them.
- 10- Remember that by 'intellect' is meant the heart, contrary to 'reason'.

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