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Rationalising ritual: worship in South Asian Islam between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries

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Abstract

This article examines the discussion of core Islamic rituals in the writings of the influential eighteenth-century Sufi, hadith scholar, and jurist Shah Wali Allah of Delhi (d. 1762). It brings out the implications of Wali Allah's sustained concern with demonstrating how divinely mandated rituals serve human interests, not just at the individual but also at the societal and political levels. This aspect of Wali Allah's thought has parallels with how many modernists and Islamists in colonial and post-colonial South Asia have sought to explain Islamic rituals in terms of their social ramifications. But there are some significant differences between them, too, and these help shed further light on Wali Allah's distinctive theory of ritual.

Keywords: Shah Wali Allah; ritual; *maslaha*; power

Among the many transformations in modern Islam that Francis Robinson has explored in his work, with great learning and sensitivity, is the 'shift towards a this-worldly piety, and the new responsibilities for Muslims that came with it…'.[1] This attitude stands in marked contrast to an emphasis on maintaining a clear distance from those in power and on cultivating paths to spiritual development rather than to material gain. But if many Sufis represented this approach, there were others, as Robinson shows too, who were critical of what they saw as an excessive otherworldliness. And even the otherworldly kind could not have failed to notice that that attitude itself could, paradoxically, bring some worldly success, even if they did not approve of it, for members of the ruling elite were often keen to be seen seeking the favour precisely of those who wished to shun their company. A self-conscious, unapologetic embrace of the here and now has nonetheless come to characterise the attitude of many more people in modern times than was ever the case earlier, with this being seen as the surest way to promote the interests of Islam and to serve God.

In their critique of pre-modern forms of piety, modern Muslim reformers have often derived some of their inspiration from those they deem to have held similar views in earlier times. This is the case not only with the traditionally educated scholars—the ulema—who have sought to rethink particular facets of their tradition, but also with Muslim modernists, who aim to reshape Islamic norms in accord with the imperatives of colonial and

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[1] Francis Robinson, 'Other-worldly and this-worldly Islam and the Islamic revival', in *idem*, *Islam, South Asia, and the West* (Delhi, 2007), pp. 171–188, at p. 171. Cf. *idem*, 'Secularization, Weber and Islam', in *idem*, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 122–137, esp. pp. 133–134.

post-colonial modernity, and with Islamists, who have anchored their political pro-
grammes within a new reading of the foundational texts. In South Asia, the Sufi, hadith
scholar, and jurist Shah Wali Allah of Delhi (d. 1762) has been among the most influential
of those earlier critics. Against the Sufis and fellow jurists who had tended to make of
Islam something very different from what God and the Prophet Muhammad had puta-
tively intended, Wali Allah sought to demonstrate that revealed religion had been
meant to cater to the needs, and to accord with the capacities, of ordinary believers;
that it promoted people's interests (*masālih*; singular: *maslaha*); and that many of those
interests related to matters of this world. In his *Conclusive Argument from God* (*Hujjat
Allāh al-bāligha*) as well as other writings, he argued that even core Islamic rituals, usually
deemed to be inscrutable expressions of God's will, could be explained in terms of the
interests they served, the 'secrets' (*asrār*; singular: *sirr*) that are to be discerned behind
their practice, their motivating spirit (*rūh*), and so forth.[2] Prior to the late nineteenth cen-
tury, when Muslim modernists in India, the Arab Middle East, and elsewhere took to pre-
senting Islam in ways that explained core beliefs and practices in what they considered to
be rational and this-worldly terms, few appear to have put more effort into doing so than
Wali Allah.[3] This article examines Wali Allah's work in that regard. It seeks also to show
that, despite the affinity of Muslim modernists and others with aspects of Wali Allah's
thought, his understanding of ritual was in fact quite different from that of those who
have appealed to his legacy.

Wali Allah was not the first to concern himself with demonstrating the 'secrets' behind
the core rituals. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) famously did so in his *Revival of the
Religious Sciences* (*Ihyā `ulūm al-dīn*).[4] Wali Allah was influenced by Ghazali's work,[5] though
his understanding of ritual is often markedly different from Ghazali's. He never acknowl-
edges this explicitly, yet Ghazali's widely read work was arguably the foil, one among
others, against which Wali Allah made some of his arguments. In part, this is a matter
of rather different questions that each can be seen to be answering with reference to
the secrets behind ritual: Ghazali's concern is primarily with the spiritual fruits that a
deeper understanding of those rituals made available the practitioner; Wali Allah, on
the other hand, is interested principally in the rationale behind the rituals, why they
are performed the way they are, and what purpose they serve in terms of human well-
being. But some other, deeper, disagreements are also at issue, as will be seen. And

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[2] Shah Wali Allah, *Hujjat Allāh al-bāligha*, (ed.) Sa`īd Ahmad Pālanpūrī, two vols (Karachi, 2010) [hereafter *HA*],
vol. i, pp. 28–32, 211–227; vol. ii, pp. 184–185, etc.; Marcia Hermansen (trans), *The Conclusive Argument from God:
Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi's Hujjat Allāh al-bāligha* (Islamabad, 2003) [hereafter Hermansen], pp. 3–7, 214–231.
Hermansen's translation covers only the first of the two volumes of this work.

[3] Robinson has written incisively about processes of 'rationalisation' in modern Islam, too, which have
involved a critique, in light of the foundational texts, of many customary and Sufi-inflected practices. See, for
instance, Francis Robinson, 'Islamic reform and modernities in South Asia', in *idem*, *The Muslim World in South
Asia* (Albany, 2020), pp. 204–232, at pp. 220–222. Even as they have sought to rationalise Islam in this
Weberian sense, many Muslim modernists have also invoked a more familiar sense of the 'rational' in asserting
that reason and modern science do not contradict the properly understood teachings of Islam.

[4] Ghazali's discussion of the core rituals in his magnum opus is organised in terms of 'the secrets of prayer and
its key facets', 'the secrets of zakat', 'the secrets of fasting', and the 'secrets of hajj'. al-Ghazali, *Ihyā `ulūm al-dīn*,
five vols (Aleppo, 1998), vol. i, pp. 255–463. These 'books' are preceded by one on 'the secrets of purification': *ibid.*,
pp. 221–254. Another instance is represented by the work of the tenth-century Shāfi`ī jurist Abu Bakr al-Shashi
al-Qaffal al-Kabir (d. 975), *Mahāsin al-sharī`a fi furū` al-Shāfi`iyya*, (ed.) Abu `Abdallah Muhammad b. `Ali al-Samak
(Beirut, 2007), pp. 27–29, 82–84, etc., though it is significantly less developed than what Wali Allah would
attempt. For some observations on this work, see A. Kevin Reinhart, 'Ritual action and practical action: the
incomprehensibility of Muslim devotional action', in *Islamic Law in Theory: Studies in Jurisprudence in Honor of
Bernard Weiss*, (eds) A. Kevin Reinhart and Robert Gleave (Leiden, 2014), pp. 74–76.

[5] Cf. *HA*, vol. i, pp. 41, 48; Hermansen, pp. 15–16, 21.

Wali Allah's interest in the public and the political function of ritual is highly unusual, for both his own and earlier times.

Religious and ritual universals

Although there is no indication that Wali Allah expected non-Muslims to be among the readers of his books, he often writes with the premise that Islam shares key aspects of its teachings and practices with other religions. Quoting the famous hadith according to which the foundations of Islam rest on five things—testifying to God and His Prophet, prayer, zakat, hajj, and fasting—Wali Allah asserts that Islam shares these key matters with members of other religious communities. He mentions here the Jews, the Christians, the Magians, and 'the remnants of the Arabs' (*baqīyyat al-ʿArab*), by which he presumably means those among the pre-Islamic Arabs who are supposed to have adhered to some sort of non-Jewish and non-Christian monotheism.[6] Though the particular ways in which the rituals are performed vary from one religious community to another, some of their core features—the things that make them what they are—are broadly shared. Prayer, for instance, involves a submissive heart, a tongue that commemorates God, and a body that venerates Him. For all the differences in particulars, these three features are common to prayer everywhere.[7] So far as fasting is concerned, all those, irrespective of their faith, who wish to see the angelic dominate over the bestial agree that a curtailing of food, drink, and carnal desire is the way to proceed in that direction.[8]

These matters relate, in turn, to what Wali Allah identifies as the four cardinal virtues that are a constitutive part of human nature, namely, purity, humility, magnanimity, and justice.[9] He goes on to explain the principal impediments—'veils'—to the realisation of these virtues. There is the veil of one's lower self, with the need to satisfy physical needs potentially consuming one's night and day: practices like fasting serve as an antidote to it. There is the veil of custom, which enables people to live by necessary social and cultural norms but this, too, is a distraction—one represented by nothing less than the world itself—from the perfection of the core virtues. The third great veil, that of bad understanding, obstructs the progress of those who are otherwise able to devote themselves to God and yet come to hold false beliefs in relation to Him.[10] Like the cardinal virtues, such impediments, too, are shared by all, irrespective of their faith.[11] To successfully remove them in pursuit of the virtues in question is to be joined with the angels.[12] Wali Allah explains how to do so and observes that to have an understanding of these matters—of the virtues, the impediments to them, how the divinely ordained legal dispensations are anchored in them in accordance with changing times, etc.—is to have genuine understanding of religion.[13]

If the cardinal virtues and the key rituals are shared across communities of faith, they need, *a fortiori*, to be shared *within* any given community as well. Rituals of purity provide an illustration of what Wali Allah has in mind here. It is not just that members of different

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[6] *HA*, vol. i, pp. 455–458.

[7] *HA*, vol. ii, pp. 30–31.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 142.

[9] On the four cardinal virtues, see *HA*, vol. i, pp. 160–164; Hermansen, pp. 156–160. On human nature (*fitra*) as the composite of these virtues, see *HA*, vol. i, p. 164; Hermansen, p. 159.

[10] *HA*, vol. i, pp. 167–169; Hermansen, pp. 165–167.

[11] *HA*, vol. i, p. 169; Hermansen, p. 166.

[12] *HA*, vol. i, p. 164; Hermansen, p. 159.

[13] *HA*, vol. i, p. 164; Hermansen, p. 159. On the removal of the impediments, see *HA*, vol. i, pp. 169–172; Hermansen, pp. 168–170.

communities agree on the need for cleansing,[14] it is also that the sacred law works with the lowest common denominator, so to speak. What is required of people in matters of ritual cleansing, Wali Allah says, is not what accords with the tastes of sophisticated people, but rather what is obvious and observable, the sort of things members of various communities have been following or practising all along.[15] In this juxtaposition of the 'is' and the 'ought', the sacred law is seen as tailoring itself to common practice, for it would not be practicable otherwise; to make it more demanding would be to violate the spirit behind it.

'God's waymarks'

Wali Allah's understanding of ritual is anchored in his discussion of *sha`ā'ir Allāh*, the signs, emblems, or waymarks of God or of religion (*sha`ā'ir al-dīn*). This is a Quranic phrase, as in Q 22.32: '… whosoever venerates God's waymarks, that is of the godliness of the hearts'. 'I mean by the *sha`ā'ir*,' Wali Allah says, 'those external, tangible things that have been established for the worship of God and dedicated to God exclusively so that people's venerating them stands for their venerating God and their neglecting them amounts to their neglecting God.'[16] He goes on to offer what might be seen as a sociological explanation for how the *sha`ā'ir* come about:

> They become *sha`ā'ir* through a natural process (*bi-nahj tabī`ī*). This happens when people become accustomed to a particular habit or trait, which thereby becomes so widespread as to join the ranks of the primary axioms, which admit of no doubt. It is then that God's mercy makes its appearance in the form of the thing that their own selves and their widely disseminated knowledge have already obligated upon themselves. Consequently, they accept those things, the covering is removed as to their true nature, and the call goes out to the near and the far uniformly. It is then that its veneration is made binding upon them.[17]

Put another way, given that the waymarks of religion arise among a people out of a natural process, people are already habituated to them before they become religiously obligatory. This, for Wali Allah, is an expression of God's mercy and an illustration of the fact that religious obligations are not meant to be onerous for people: 'the foundation of God's management rests on the easy and the easier still'.[18] And though the *sha`ā'ir* are ultimately imposed on people by God, it is people rather than God who benefit from them; God, of course, is beyond benefit or harm. A key part of the benefit is that the *sha`ā'ir*, and associated rituals, enable people to progress on the path to perfection, which then helps them draw closer to God.[19]

That the waymarks of religion are social institutions explains, as Wali Allah sees it, the Prophet's severe unhappiness with those who failed to appear for one of those key institutions, the ritual prayer.[20] He had instructed even those who had prayed at home to pray again with the congregation, were they to come by it; since they had already fulfilled the obligation to pray the first time, the second prayer was to count as an act of

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[14] *HA*, vol. i, p. 484.

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 485–486.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 208; Hermansen, p. 210. For passages from the Quran, I follow A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York, 1996), with occasional modification.

[17] *HA*, vol. i, pp. 208–209; Hermansen, p. 210 (with several modifications).

[18] *HA*, vol. i, p. 209; Hermansen, p. 211.

[19] Cf. *HA*, vol. i, p. 209; Hermansen, p. 211.

[20] *HA*, vol. ii, p. 87.

supererogation (*nāfila*) for them. This was meant to ensure, Wali Allah suggests, that someone shirking his ritual obligation would not be able to excuse himself by claiming that he had already prayed at home, a claim on which he could not otherwise be challenged. And it would prevent even the mere appearance of disagreement within the community, by which he seems to mean disagreement both in the sense that some might be praying separately from others and in the sense that there could be needless argument over whether everyone had in fact prayed.[21]

Commenting on the efficacy of public prayer, Wali Allah observes:

> The community (*al-milla*) comprises religious scholars, who are to be followed; those who require a quick reminder for them to realize their goodness (*tahsīl ihsānihim*); and those with weak intention, who would slacken unless required to discharge their obligation in public view. Nothing is more beneficial, or more in accord with everyone's general well-being (*maslaha*), than that they be obligated to submit to God in public. In this way, the one performing the act can be distinguished from the one forsaking it, the one keen on it from the one avoiding it. The knowledgeable one can thereby be followed and the ignorant one instructed.[22]

The publicness of worship provides the recalcitrant with the opportunity, if only by being pressured into it, to be counted as members of the community, which potentially opens the doors to rectitude for them. I will return to this point later. Further, in the last years of the Prophet, institutionalised rituals, and not just those of public prayer, were a way of distinguishing between the friend and the enemy (*al-muwāfiq wa'l-mukhālif*). At a time when large numbers of people had begun to enter the fold of Islam, the rituals provided a clear criterion to quickly determine who came under the jurisdiction of Islam (*hukm al-Islām*) and who did not. Mere belief was not enough; it had to be affirmed if the nascent Islamic order was to function properly. And public ritual was an effective expression of that affirmation.[23] The assumption is that those lacking the necessary will to go along with the community of believers would soon slacken in their practice and be recognised; conversely, if they were able to persevere in giving public expression to their faith, even as a show, then that sufficed for the purpose of their inclusion in the community. Indeed, and though Wali Allah does not say this explicitly, putting up a show long enough, or being made to, could have some impact on the quality of their faith itself.[24] There is a recognition here, now common among many scholars, that one's religious sensibilities often follow practice, and not the other way round.[25]

The institution of the ritual prayers performed during the course of day and of the Friday prayers are not just the markers of religion but also, as Wali Allah sees it, examples of good practices that become part of the social fabric. His discussion of the eid prayers highlights how the institution of some of those rituals was meant also to eliminate bad practices from the community. The eid prayers, performed in what are typically large

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[21] *HA*, vol. ii, p. 93.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

[23] *HA*, vol. i, p. 459. Cf. *ibid.*, vol. i, p. 223 (Hermansen, p. 228), where he uses the word *munāfiq* ('hypocrite') rather than *mukhalif*. Wali Allah's point about ritual as distinguishing between friend and enemy bears an interesting resemblance to Carl Schmitt's well-known thesis that the friend-enemy distinction is central to the very idea of the political. See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, (trans.) George Schwab (Chicago, 2007), especially, pp. 25–45. I discuss Wali Allah's view of the political dimensions of ritual later in this article.

[24] This evokes the idea, which he adduces elsewhere, of the favour that had been done to people by their being brought into Islam in chains. Shah Wali Allah, *Izālat al-khafā `an khilāfat al-khulafā*, (ed.) Muhammad Ahsan Siddiqi, two vols (Bareilly, reprinted Lahore, 1976), vol. i, p. 47 (quoting Abū Hurayra, a companion of Muhammad).

[25] See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, 2005), pp. 118–152.

congregations, mark, of course, the end of fasting during the month of Ramadan in one case and, in the other, the feast of sacrifice in the last month of the Islamic calendar (coinciding, for those performing it, with the completion of the ritual of the hajj). When he emigrated to Medina with his Meccan followers, the Prophet was told about two days on which people there had engaged in pre-Islamic times in play and recreation. Thereupon, he informed them that God had substituted those days with the two eids. Wali Allah comments:

> The two days were replaced [with something else] because the purpose of a people's festival is only to celebrate the waymarks of a religion, to conform to the way of the leaders [who had instituted that tradition], or something to that effect. The Prophet was apprehensive that if he left people unchanged in their customary practice, they would continue to celebrate the waymarks of the Age of Ignorance and to celebrate the ways of their ancestors. Therefore, he substituted those days with two others that entailed a celebration of the monotheistic community; and to the adornments of those days, he added a remembrance of God and facets of submission to Him...[26]

The lesson here is, of course, that instituting some marker of obedience to God, that is, of worship, is the most effective way in which to combat bad customs. Everyone—the elite and the commoner—is to participate in it, even take pride in how well they are able to discharge this obligation, it being understood that pride is not a vice in this instance. Such worship eventually becomes part of the 'essential social norms' (*al-irtifāqāt al-darūriyya*), Wali Allah says, which no one could subsequently afford to neglect.[27]

The form and the essence

The seemingly commonplace idea that the core Islamic rituals were binding upon all Muslims was not self-evident to everyone. A long-standing suspicion of mere externals tended to translate in the case of not a few Sufis into a neglect of the formal prescriptions of the sacred law. They agreed that such externals were essential to keep the ordinary believers on the straight path, but that the 'friends of God' had moved beyond such formalistic requirements. Wali Allah had no patience for that view, but he also understood why one could be led to it. He recognised, as did his associates, that sharia stipulations were only a particular, concretised, expression of reality, that that reality could be apprehended in other ways, too. It was in the Realm of Images (`Ālam al-mithāl) which, in Wali Allah's thought mediated between the spiritual and the physical worlds, that the true reality of things was given a concrete form, as when the core imperative of the glorification (ta`zīm) of God received the form of particular acts of worship. The mystic was able to see, as a disciple of Wali Allah had, what the glorification of God looked like *outside* the World of Images. In light of such an experience, a mystic could conclude that he was not obligated to worship God in the particular forms prescribed for everyone else.[28] That is precisely the conclusion that Wali Allah rejected. The waymarks of God and the prescribed forms of worship remained binding even if, and when, one became endowed with the ability to 'prostrate with one's heart—the very essence of worship'.[29]

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[26] *HA*, vol. ii, p. 99.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 85.

[28] Muhammad `Ashiq Phulati, *al-Qawl al-jalī fī zikr āthār al-Walī* (Delhi, 1989), p. 449. The point is made with reference to a mystical experience of Wali Allah's disciple Shah Nur Allah. On the Realm of Images, see Fazlur Rahman, 'Dream, imagination and `Ālam al-mithāl', *Islamic Studies* 3 (1964), pp. 167–180; on Wali Allah's conception of it, see *ibid.*, pp. 178–179.

[29] Phulatī, *al-Qawl al-jalī*, p. 308.

So much for those in the know of things. As for ordinary people, who were not privy to the hidden reality and who would be harmed rather than benefit from a knowledge of such matters, it was enough to know things by their effects, just as it was sufficient for them to know amulets by their effects rather than by way of understanding what might lie behind such effectiveness. This is why, Wali Allah says, the Prophet had avoided explaining the 'secrets' behind particular commands and prohibitions (though that, ironically, is what Wali Allah had done in his *Conclusive Argument*). This is also why the first successors of the Prophet and other leaders of the community had concerned themselves with the 'implementation of the religion's outward forms rather than with its spirit, so much so that Umar [the second of the Rashidun caliphs, r. 634–44] ... is reported to have said: "I calculate the *jizya* [the tax due from non-Muslims] of Bahrain while I am performing the ritual prayer", and "I equip the troops [for battle] while I am in prayer."'[30] Wali Allah could have said here that, for `Umar, thinking about administrative and military matters was a matter of worship, too. For instance, in his biography of Umar, Shibli Nu`mani (d. 1914), the noted modernist scholar of colonial India, cites these reports via Wali Allah and interprets them as indicative of `Umar's engrossment in matters of jihad.[31] Wali Allah does not take that tack. Instead, he is content simply to say that good governance (*al-siyāsa*) requires that one adhere to outward forms even when one can see through them.[32]

This, incidentally, is also a point at which Ghazali's shadow looms large, albeit without acknowledgement on Wali Allah's part. In his discussion of ritual prayer in the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Ghazali goes to some lengths to assert that a prayer performed without the requisite focus and concentration does not amount to anything. As one hadith report has it, 'the first thing that would be looked into on the Day of Judgment is prayer; if it is deemed complete, it is accepted and so are all of a person's acts; if deemed defective, it is turned back to him, and so are all the person's other acts'.[33] According to another hadith report, 'God does not look at a prayer in which the person performing it does not bring the heart to the body'.[34] 'The unmistakable object of bowing and prostrating', Ghazali says, in speaking of the need for 'submissiveness and the presence of the heart (*al-khushū` wa hudūr al-qalb*)' during prayer,

> is veneration. Were it admissible for one to venerate God the exalted through one's action while being unmindful (*ghāfil*) of Him, it would be admissible to venerate an idol placed in front while being oblivious of it or to venerate a wall facing the person while being oblivious of it. Once the act is no longer one of veneration, it is nothing but mere movement of the back and the head.[35]

Though Ghazali notes several times in the *Revival* that that book is not concerned with the sort of things the jurists speak of—matters on which he had written extensively elsewhere—he acknowledges the objection that this maximalist view of ritual prayer is not what the juristic tradition stipulates for the validity of prayer. The jurists are concerned with outward actions, not with inner states; and given that few people can meet the criteria of full concentration—of 'making the heart present'—in prayer, the jurists' minimalist criterion

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[30] *HA*, vol. i, pp. 294–295, quotation on p. 295; Hermansen, p. 298. For this report, see Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Kitāb al-musannaf*, (ed.) Muhammad `Abd al-Salām Shāhīn, nine vols (Beirut, 1995), vol. ii, p. 188 (#7950-1). Wali Allah quotes these reports elsewhere, too. See *Izāla*, vol. ii, p. 93.

[31] Muhammad Shiblī Nu`mānī, *al-Fārūq*, two vols (Delhi, 1915), vol. ii, pp. 187–188.

[32] For the reference to *siyāsa* in this context, see *HA*, vol. i, p. 294; Hermansen, p. 299.

[33] al-Ghazali, *Ihyā*, vol. i, p. 258.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 264.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 280.

has been to require it only at the moment one commences the prayer.[36] Ghazali accepts this, but only grudgingly. 'There is many a living being who is motionless and close to the dead. The prayer of the person who is heedless of it except at the [opening] moment … is like a living being who is motionless.'[37]

In Wali Allah's adducing the tradition about `Umar calculating the jizya of Bahrain while in prayer, it is hard not to see a response to Ghazali's maximalism. Ghazali was notorious for invoking reports attributed to the Prophet and other early figures that did not pass muster with the specialists.[38] He seems not to have been aware of the reports that Wali Allah cites regarding `Umar. To Wali Allah's readers, the rhetorical question is clear, however: would Ghazali's strictures apply to the prayer of a foundational figure like `Umar? If not, why should they be deemed to impugn the worth of anyone else's prayer? Beyond such traditions, Wali Allah would have seen Ghazali's maximalism as imposing an intolerable burden on people, despite a reluctant allowance for the frailties of the ordinary believers. It was in the same spirit that Wali Allah explicitly rejected the view of unnamed contemporary Sufis that a prayer lacking 'perfect presence [of the heart] and submissiveness' was not of much use.[39]

Another disagreement had to do with the degree to which rituals were susceptible to rationalisation. Ghazali had argued that sharia obligations were of three kinds. The first comprised matters of pure worship, performed in a manner that seemed to serve no intelligible purpose except to demonstrate one's servitude. As examples, he mentioned two rites of hajj: the pacing (sa`y) between the hillocks of Safā and Marwa, which re-enacts Hajar's running back and forth in search of water for her infant son, Ishmael, after Abraham had left them in the valley of Mecca; and the casting of stones (ramy) at the three pebble heaps (jamarāt) of Mina, representing the three spots at which Satan had tried to dissuade Abraham from carrying out God's command to sacrifice his son. The performance of acts, whose meaning cannot be intellectually discerned, Ghazali had said, are harder than those that can be explained; by the same token, they are also a purer form of one's servitude.[40] The second category of sharia commands represent the other extreme, in that they are all about arriving at a clearly discernible objective: when one repays a loan or restores a usurped item to the rightful owner, the job has been done irrespective of the purity of the motives involved.[41] The third category is a combination of the two, and he adduces the payment of zakat as an example. The needy are helped through it, which accords with sharia obligations of the second category. However, it also had the aspect of worship that was not susceptible to rationalisations. According to al-Shāfi`ī (d. 820), the eponymous founder of the school of law to which Ghazali adhered, the person giving away the zakat was obligated to give it out of the same kind of wealth as that on which the zakat was due in the first place: if it was due on gold, then one ought to give away the required amount in gold and not in silver, even if, had it been silver, one would give away a greater amount in value.[42] Wali Allah, on the other hand, began his magnum opus, the *Conclusive Argument from God*, on a decidedly contrasting note:

> It may be thought that the rulings of the sharia do not encompass any aspect of human interests (*masālih*), that there is no correspondence between human acts

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[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 280–281.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 281–282.

[38] For a passing swipe at Ghazali's unreliability in hadith, see Shah Wali Allah, *Hama`āt*, (ed.) Ismā`īl Muhammadī (Qumm, 2017), p. 67 (#4).

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 117 (# 11).

[40] al-Ghazali, *Ihyā*, vol. i, pp. 366–367, 455–456.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 367.

[42] *Ibid.*

and God's recompense for them, and that sharia obligations are akin to a master's testing the obedience of his slave. So he orders the slave to lift a rock or touch a tree, with no benefit in this except as a test; the slave is requited according as he obeys or disobeys. This is a false presumption, and it is negated by the normative practice of the Prophet and by the consensus of the [first] generations...[43]

On the inscrutability of ritual, it was Ghazali, not Wali Allah, who represented the standard juristic view, though the fact that the former had given expression to it even in a Sufi work concerned with explicating the 'secrets' behind the core rituals is indicative of the deep roots that that idea had struck. It also helps put into perspective the pains that Wali Allah would take to counter it.[44] Yet, as noted, Wali Allah, too, acknowledged that the secrets behind the acts in question were not for everyone. That is why even the elect had concerned themselves with maintaining the outward forms rather than merely the spirit behind them.[45] And that is why `Umar was seen as praying even though he had really been thinking about the jizya of Bahrain.

Ritual, royalty, power

The tradition about the prayer of `Umar, a caliph overseeing the birth of an empire, calls attention to how power informs Wali Allah's discussion of ritual. This is not peculiar to Wali Allah. As Catherine Bell has argued, ritualisation, whereby particular practices are differentiated from others, is 'first and foremost a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations'.[46] What does distinguish Wali Allah from many others, however, is the degree to which power informs his thought,[47] and some of that is reflected in his discussion of ritual, too. Analogies between the *sha`ā'ir* and rituals of royalty are common in Wali Allah's writings. The Quran, itself a key waymark of Islam, is like the missives (*al-rasā'il*) of a king to his subjects, and just as the reverence for the king is translated into respect for his letters, so is the veneration of the Quran an expression of the submission to God. The Prophet is a messenger like those a king dispatches to his subjects with his commands and his prohibitions; their respect for the messenger is a facet of their submission to the king. The prayer, likewise, is to be understood on the analogy of a king's slaves standing before him, petitioning to him, and observing the etiquette expected of the occasion.[48]

Rituals are occasions for a *display* of power as well. The gathering of pilgrims for the hajj is akin, Wali Allah says, to a military muster (*al-`arda*): 'Every polity or religion has its gathering to which people come from far and near to get to know one another, to acquaint themselves with the rules of their faith, to exalt their waymarks. The hajj is the muster of the Muslims—the manifestation of their might (*shawka*), a congregation of their forces, an acclamation (*tanwīh*) of their faith.'[49] Wali Allah characterises the eid prayers in similar terms. They are occasions on which a community has the opportunity to display its might and its numbers: 'Consequently, it is recommended that everyone come out [for the occasion], including children and women, even women in seclusion

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[43] *HA*, vol. i, pp. 37–38. Translation based, in part, on Hermansen, p. 11.

[44] On the 'incomprehensibility of Muslim devotional action', see Reinhart, 'Ritual action', especially pp. 69–92 and 76 (on Ghazali's *Ihyā*).

[45] *HA*, vol. i, p. 295; Hermansen, p. 299.

[46] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 197–223; quotation at p. 197. On ritualisation, see *ibid.*, pp. 7–8, 74, 90. Bell's analysis of power relations is indebted primarily to the work of Michel Foucault.

[47] See Muhammad Qasim Zaman, 'Political power, religious authority, and the caliphate in eighteenth century Indian Islamic thought', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd series, 30.2 (2020), pp. 313–340.

[48] *HA*, vol. i, p. 210; Hermansen, pp. 212–213.

[49] *HA*, vol. ii, p. 160. Cf. *ibid.*, vol. i, p. 223, vol. ii, p. 167; Hermansen, p. 228.

and those menstruating—standing aloof from the place of prayer, yet witnessing the call of the Muslims.'[50] Indeed, as Wali Allah notes, it is precisely to make an impression on onlookers, presumably the non-Muslims but also those of uncertain loyalties within the community (the Quranic 'hypocrites'), that the Prophet used to take one route while going to the eid congregation and a different route for his return.[51] Ghazali, too, had noted that the Prophet had taken different routes to and from the site of the eid prayers, but I have not come across the idea of the hajj and the eid as a military muster in his work.[52] Nor is that idea to be found in an extensive treatment of the core Islamic rituals by `Abd al-`Ali Bahr al-`Ulum (d. 1810), a distinguished member of the Farangi Mahall family of scholars on whom Robinson has written extensively.[53]

The 'muster' at rituals did more, however, than put non-Muslim observers on notice about the power of the Muslim community; it served also to order power relations *within* the community. Since the late nineteenth century, many Muslims have tended to highlight the significance of core Islamic rituals as great levellers of social distinction—the rich and the poor, the mighty and the lowly, are all meant to stand together in prayer, men and women perform the hajj together, and so forth. As Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) put it in a philosophical meditation on prayer, 'what a tremendous spiritual revolution will take place, practically in no time, if the proud Brahmin of South India is daily made to stand shoulder to shoulder with the untouchable!'.[54] Wali Allah refers on occasion to the egalitarian aspects of particular rituals. He notes, for instance, that the Prophet instructed people to walk to the location of Friday prayers rather than riding to it, not only because walking showed humility vis-à-vis God but also because the congregation included the poor, and those who did not have a ride were not to be made to feel small.[55] Yet his egalitarian impulses only go so far. Explaining a hadith according to which the Prophet wanted people of understanding and intelligence to be closer to him when he was praying in congregation, Wali Allah says that this was necessary to entrench norms of respect for the 'big one[s]' (*al-kabīr*), by which he clearly means those of social and political standing and not just the pious and the learned. This would encourage the others to emulate the ways of the powerful (*ahl al-su'dad*) even as the elite would not find it unbearable to see ordinary people given precedence over them.[56]

The muster brings everyone together, but there, too, it is not the egalitarian aspects of those rituals that Wali Allah highlights. It is the relationships of power. Distinctions of status and degrees of commitment remain among those gathered together: the gathering has scholars and ordinary believers in need of their guidance, as well as those others who are there only because they must be.[57] Women, too, are part of the gathering and, as noted, in the case of eid, even those who are menstruating; so are little children. Far from levelling the differences among people, however, their presence in one congregation would serve

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[50] *HA*, vol. ii, p. 100. Wali Allah characterises this show of strength to be among the 'purposes of the sharia' (*maqāsid al-sharī`a*). Ibid., vol. ii, p. 100.

[51] *HA*, vol. ii, p. 100.

[52] al-Ghazali, *Ihyā*, vol. i, p. 347. I am grateful to Zain Shirazi for his reflections on Wali Allah's use of the term `arda and its distinctiveness in comparison with Ghazali.

[53] `Abd al-`Alī Bahr al-`Ulūm, *Rasā'il al-arkān* (Lucknow, 1910), p. 122, noting the Prophet's varying his route, but without comment on its political significance. On the family of scholars to which he belonged, see Francis Robinson, *The `Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (London, 2001).

[54] Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Stanford, 2012), p. 75. This work was first published in 1930.

[55] *HA*, vol. ii, p. 96.

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 100.

to heighten them. There would be no mistaking who belonged to the ranks of the big men and of the scholars and who did not. Incidentally, actual musters could feature scholars and other respected figures, too. The Central Asian theologian and philosopher Jalal al-din Dawani (d. 1502), whose *Jalalian Ethics* (*Akhlāq-i Jalālī*) was among the most widely read works in Mughal India, has provided an eyewitness account of one such muster: 'As the Sultan was ever striving to elevate the sayyids and `ulama, he gave orders that, being privileged in honour, they should occupy a privileged position on the parade ground and that no one should mix with them.'[58] In any case, two things are worth noting in regard to Wali Allah's ritual as muster. First, for all the power differential within the community, it allows even the lowly to share in the display of power vis-à-vis the outsiders. They add to the numbers, but they can also partake of some of the empowerment, however ephemeral, that comes from the display. Second, as Catherine Bell has argued, ritual serves not only to shape relations of power, it can also allow the space for resistance.[59] Wali Allah's people 'of feeble constitution who would be indifferent [to their practice] were they not obligated to perform it in public view' bring such resistance to mind. Even as the publicness of ritual reinforced the authority, and the power, of those who *did* wish to be there, it could empower the recalcitrant in its own way, so long as their resistance did not go so far as to trigger reprimand or sanction.

Of course, that recalcitrance could go far, too, and visibly challenge existing structures of power and authority. In a study of late Mughal Delhi, Abhishek Kaicker has drawn attention to a new form of politics, one centred on crowds and mobs, that had begun to emerge in the imperial capital in the early eighteenth century. Crowds of people challenged representatives of royal authority to live up to their religious commitments and tested the limits of that authority. In a symbolically resonant illustration of their newfound power, such crowds sometimes even disrupted the Friday prayers in the urban centres. Friday prayers were not only among the most visible of the markers of Islam; as occasions for the name of the ruler to be mentioned in the accompanying sermon, they were also a public affirmation of constituted political authority. From the perspective of the crowds involved, such disruptions were not an affront to God, of course; rather, they were a pained cry that things had come to such a pass that hapless believers were forced to interrupt the normal course of events in order for particular inequities to be redressed.[60] Wali Allah does not comment on this form of political protest, though he could not have been unaware of it. His instincts were no more populist than those of most other members of the cultural and political elite, however, and he would not have approved of crowds taking charge of things. It is tempting nonetheless to speculate that the keenness of his interest in the throngs of people attending major religious rituals was informed by the crowds he would have heard about or seen on particular occasions.

Mere ritual?

Although Wali Allah was unusual in his interest in exploring the rationale behind ritual obligations and in highlighting the social and political dimensions of ritual, his discourses

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[58] Vladimir Minorsky, 'A civil and military review in Fars in 881/1476', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 10.1 (1939), pp. 141–178; on the scholars and Sufis in it, see pp. 152–154, 170; quotation at p. 153.

[59] Bell follows Foucault here, who predicated the space for resistance on a clear distinction between power and coercion. As he put it, 'without the possibility of recalcitrance power would be equivalent to a physical determination'. Michel Foucault, 'The subject and power', in *idem*, *Power*, (ed.) James D. Faubion (New York, 2000), p. 342; quoted, from a different edition, in Bell, *Ritual Theory*, pp. 200–201. One need not, however, agree with Foucault's view of power as necessarily distinct from coercion to take his point about resistance.

[60] Abhishek Kaicker, *The King and the People: Sovereignty and Popular Politics in Mughal Delhi* (New York, 2020), pp. 227–255.

on both matters are in good company among Muslim modernists of the late nineteenth century onwards as well as among twentieth-century Islamists. For all the differences within their ranks, modernists have often sought to discern the 'spirit' behind the teachings of the foundational Islamic texts, the core rituals, the laws, the institutions—indeed, Islam itself. One of the most influential modernist works on Islam, first published in the late nineteenth century, is *The Spirit of Islam* by Syed Ameer Ali (d. 1928), a judge in the British colonial legal system. Like generations of other modernists, Ameer Ali draws a sharp contrast between his idealised Islam—in this instance, its matters of worship—and the religious practices of other faiths. Unlike the 'mechanical worship of droning [Christian] monks' or Brahmanic cultic practices, the Islamic prayer foregrounds the moral element.[61] The ritual prayer, performed at fixed times, does inculcate a discipline, which is especially important for people 'in certain stages of society', but that does not constrict 'the amplest scope for the most heartfelt outpouring of devotion and humility before the Almighty Presence'.[62] The contrast is equally stark between the true spirit of the faith and how Muslims, led by their scholars, have understood and practised it in their lives. And over the course of time, Islam, too, has come to look no better than the other religions: 'Practice has given way to the mockery of profession, ceremonialism has taken the place of earnest and faithful work.... Enthusiasm has died out, and devotion to God and His Prophet are meaningless words.'[63]

Other modernists have expressed similar views. To Khalifa Abdul Hakim (d. 1958), a professor of philosophy at Osmania University in Hyderabad who was influential in governing circles in the first years of Pakistan, 'the Islamic mode of worship indicates that Islam is preeminently a social creed'.[64] It provides opportunities to people to discuss all manner of pressing social, economic and political matters: 'a nation having this conception of prayer needs no other clubs or assemblies'.[65] Iqbal would have concurred.[66] At the hands of some modernists, the social construction of ritual could go so far as to divest it of meaning in its own right. Fazlur Rahman's (d. 1988) *Islam*, first published in 1966, offers a wide-ranging introduction to the faith, but with the striking omission of ritual.[67] Even his *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, an incisive meditation on Islam's foundational text, offers hardly any discussion of worship, arguably a major theme of the Quran. When he does touch upon prayer—'undoubtedly among the cardinal duties of a Muslim'—it is to make the point that it is 'mere farce without a holistic view of Islam', by which he means 'creating an egalitarian and just social and moral order'.[68]

Islamists, too, have evinced considerable interest in the social dimensions of ritual. Sayyid Abul-A`la Mawdudi (d. 1979), one of the most influential Islamist ideologues of the twentieth century and one who has figured often in Robinson's work, saw ritual prayer as 'high-level training' for making one a proper Muslim, and the Friday prayer as forging unity and brotherhood among believers. Fasting was a training in patience and in dealing with adversity; zakat helped counteract the vices of selfishness and attachment to wealth; the hajj was a veritable global Muslim conference, and so

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[61] Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam* (London, 1922), p. 162.

[62] *Ibid.*, pp. 172, 162, respectively, for the two quotations.

[63] *Ibid.*, p. 182.

[64] Khalifa Abdul Hakim, *Islamic Ideology*, 2nd edn (Lahore, 1953), p. 122. On Abdul Hakim, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History* (Princeton, 2018), pp. 58–59, 208–209.

[65] Abdul Hakim, *Islamic Ideology*, p. 123.

[66] See Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, pp. 71–75; and the quotation above, n. 54.

[67] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd edn (Chicago, 2002).

[68] Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago, 2009), p. 62; first published in 1980. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 29, on worship as 'service to God', discussed in the context of the Quranic idea of *taqwa*, which he understands as conscience.

forth.[69] To Mawdudi, the central imperative of the teachings of Islam was the establishment of a government that upheld the sovereignty of God, by which he meant that God alone was the lawgiver and any entity that professed to legislate or to rule in competition with God's law was idolatrous. The very idea of divinity, of divine lordship, connoted sovereignty to Mawdudi. The relevant implication for our purposes here is that the glorification of God and His worship amounted to very little if it did not translate into the pursuit of the social and political goals that Mawdudi discerned in the teachings of Islam:

> What would you say about the servant who, rather than perform the duty [*sic*, using the English word in this Urdu passage] assigned to him by his master, just stands in front of him and merely repeats his name hundreds of thousands of times? His master tells him to go and attend to the claims of particular people. He does not leave. Instead, he performs obeisance by bowing ten times to his master and then stands there with folded arms. The master commands him to go and remedy particular ills. He does not budge an inch. Instead, he goes on prostrating [to the master]. The master commands him to cut off the hand of the thief. Having heard this command, he stands where he is and melodiously recites, 'Cut off the hands of thieves...' [Q 5.38], 'Cut off the hands of thieves.' Not once does he make the effort to establish the system of government in which the hand of the thief could be cut off. Could you say that this person is really obeying his master?[70]

Mawdudi's language here, even more than that of many modernists writing about ritual, seems intended to shock traditionalist ulema and it did not fail to have that effect. In a searing critique, Sayyid Abu'l-Hasan `Alī Nadwī (d. 1999), an eminent Indian religious scholar, responded that the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet repeatedly enjoin believers to engage in acts of worship and that such acts are not reducible to their social and political efficacy. Generations of earlier scholars, too, had recognised the need for acts of worship to shape people's lives in all their dimensions but, he said, they had not mocked worship itself.[71]

  There is, of course, a long tradition of Sufi suspicion of the externals of religion and of the hypocrisy that could accompany their ostentatious observance. In this view, the true believer is more likely to be found in the tavern than in the mosque or even the Sufi hospice; and the sincerity of a putative unbeliever is superior to the sanctimony of the self-righteous Muslim. When applied to ritual matters, the implication is that it is the spirit behind the act that counts, not the mere form of it. Ghazali had been more restrained in his metaphors and self-consciously concerned with the realignment of Sufi and juridical norms; yet he, too, had tended to dismiss as empty motion prayers lacking the presence of the heart. Muslim modernists have arguably continued in that vein. As Ameer Ali had put it, 'the formalism that does not appeal to the heart of the worshipper must be abandoned; externals must be subordinated to the inner feelings...'.[72] Ameer Ali had also found parallels between Theism, Unitarianism, and Islam,[73] and some of the disdain for the ceremonialism of latter-day Muslims was no doubt indebted to the influence of particular Western currents. In turn, the modernists are likely to have influenced Islamist constructions of the social function of ritual, though Mawdudi was well-read in

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[69] Sayyid Abul-A`la Mawdudi, *Risāla-i dīniyyāt*, 4th printing (Pathankot, 1943; first published in 1939), pp. 108 (on the daily prayers); 109 (on the Friday prayer); 110–111 (on fasting); 113 (on zakat); 117 (on hajj).

[70] Sayyid Abul-A`la Mawdudi, *Khutbāt* (Lahore, 2012), pp. 105–106.

[71] Sayyid Abul-Hasan Ali Nadwi, `Asr-i hāzir main dīn kī tafhīm wa tashrīh (Karachi, n.d.), pp. 85–91.

[72] Ali, *Spirit*, p. 186. Ghazali's *Ihyā* is among the works Ameer Ali had used in his *Spirit of Islam*.

[73] See Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam or the Life and Teachings of Mohammed* (Calcutta, 1902), pp. xii–xiii; W. C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis* (London, 1946), p. 49.

the works of select Western thinkers as well, arguably more so than he was in the ethical tradition of Persian Sufism.

Wali Allah, too, influenced modernist thought, as the following example illustrates. Speaking of the obligation to pay zakat on one's wealth, he writes:

> Know that the foundation of what underlies zakat are two considerations relating to people's wellbeing. The first relates to the refinement of the self (*tahdhīb al-nafs*). Avarice ... is the worst of character traits and the most deleterious of them in the afterlife: the heart of the avaricious person remains attached to wealth even at his death and he is tormented [in the hereafter] for that attachment. On the other hand, the person who habituates himself to [giving away wealth as] zakat removes avarice from himself, and that proves beneficial to him [in the hereafter].... The second consideration [relating to people's wellbeing] concerns the city [that is, the polity]. Every city has people who are weak and needy, and unexpected needs constantly afflict someone or the other. If there is no tradition of providing for the poor and the needy in the city, they would ... starve to death. Further, the proper organization of the city requires resources to provide for those who are responsible for its defense and for its administration ... making it necessary to institute taxation.[74]

Khalifa Abdul Hakim is clearly referring to this passage, updated in style and combined with his understanding of certain other parts of Wali Allah's discussion of zakat, when he quotes him as follows:

> There must be no mistake about the fact that Zakat has been ordained to serve two purposes: self-discipline and provision against social destitution. Riches breed stinginess, selfishness, mutual hatred and aversion and even moral degeneration. The best remedy against these evils is the charitable disposal of one's money.... It also heals social cleavage and replaces it with a spirit of comradeship.... Zakat is the most effective insurance measure against communal and social misery because a civic structure cannot be sound unless it rests on a sound economic basis.[75]

Despite the liberties he takes in translation, Abdul Hakim does capture Wali Allah's keen interest in highlighting the social rationale of zakat, a point that conforms well with modernist sensibilities. Wali Allah, however, was as interested in the hereafter as he was in the worldly and the social. In the case of zakat, his concern with the refinement of the self was clearly geared to the hereafter. That does not preclude the benefits of refining the self here and now, of course, but there is nothing to suggest that the warnings about the state of affairs in the hereafter were merely a way of reinforcing worldly concerns.

As has been seen, Wali Allah viewed ritual as emerging, in part at least, from a community habituating itself to particular practices, whereupon God made those practices obligatory for them. In a related insight, he went so far as to posit that the efficacy of supplicatory prayers and incantations (*ad`iya wa `azā'im*)—to be distinguished from the obligatory ritual prayers—came from people's perseverance in uttering them. Over the ages, such persistence came to invest the supplications in question—uttered with the exact same words—with the power to activate divine munificence. Were one to use different words to give expression to the same supplication, they would not have the desired

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[74] *HA*, vol. ii, pp. 118–120.
[75] Abdul Hakim, *Islamic Ideology*, pp. 277–278. Though he does not identify his source, Abdul Hakim is referring here to *HA*, vol. ii, pp. 118–120.

effect. Wali Allah makes this point in regard to the Sayfī prayer (more formally known as the *Duʿā-i hirz-i Yamanī*), which is believed to go back to the first Shīʿī imam ʿAli b. Abi Talib.[76] Those expatiating on this supplicatory prayer spoke not only of its otherworldly and worldly benefits, but also of the specific guidelines that needed to be followed in the recitation if it was to have the desired effect.[77] We are told that Shaykh ʿUbayd Allah, Wali Allah's uncle and the father of his biographer Muhammad ʿAshiq Phulati (d. 1773), was in the habit of reciting the Sayfī prayer three times a day.[78] It might be tempting to interpret Wali Allah's statement about the efficacy of such prayers as suggesting some scepticism on his part about divine intervention in response to human supplications: people's persistence in their supplications eventually leads them to believe that their prayers are being answered. His view is different, however. Supplications, when performed with a particular regimen long enough, acquire the ability to call forth a divine response, much like particular devotional practices, when undertaken over a long period of time, become obligatory, complete with promises of reward for their performance and punishment for their dereliction. And, as Wali Allah says explicitly, one supplicatory prayer is no different in this respect from another.[79] Society and God, this world and the hereafter, human agency and divine intervention are all part of the equation.[80]

In a letter to ʿAshiq Phulati, Wali Allah commended him for the view that Quran 51.56 ('I [God] have not created jinn and mankind except to worship Me') ought to be interpreted according to its apparent (*zāhir*) meaning rather than metaphorically (*bar taʾwīl*). Worshipping God really did mean that here, he says, rather than affirming His oneness or gaining knowledge of Him.[81] Wali Allah made the same point to another correspondent, but, in that instance, he added that worship signified 'disciplining the limbs for the sake of God the Exalted' (*ādāb al-jawārih liʾllāh taʿāla*); that is how human beings are able to perfect their practical and intellectual capacities, and that, in turn, leads to complete happiness.[82] Human interests, too, are being served in this case, but they are furthered through an understanding of worship (*ʿibāda*) *as* worship rather than as a stand-in for something else. Indeed, as illustrated by ʿUmar's performing the prayer while his mind was on other things, it is the formal aspects of prayer rather than the spirit behind it that needs to be preserved in the first instance. This, incidentally, is a point on which some contemporary ritual theorists would agree with Wali Allah. As the anthropologists Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw have argued, while our ordinary actions are typically guided by our intentions, ritualised action is non-intentional (as distinguished from unintentional): 'the intentions and thoughts of the actor make no difference to the *identity* of the act performed. You have still done it, whatever you were dreaming

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[76] Phulati, *al-Qawl al-jalī*, pp. 320–321.

[77] See the anonymous manuscripts included in Islamic Manuscripts, new series #662, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, ff. 240b–251a (on the 10 religious [*dīnī*] and 30 worldly [*dunyāʾī*] benefits of reciting the Sayfī prayer); ff. 251a–253b (the guidelines for this recitation); ff. 263a–280b (the text of this prayer); ff. 280b–290a (the supplicatory prayers that are to follow this recitation).

[78] Phulati, *al-Qawl al-jalī*, p. 382.

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 321. It is worth noting that Wali Allah, too, had received the authorisation for the Sayfī prayer from a Shattārī Sufi master in Lahore, while returning from the Hijaz in 1732. See Shah Wali Allah, *Intibāh fi salāsil awliyā Allāh* (Delhi, 1893), p. 138.

[80] Cf. Rahman, 'Dream', pp. 178–179.

[81] Nasim Ahmad Faridi (ed.), *Makātīb-i Hazrat Shāh Wali Allah Muhaddith Dihlawī*, two vols (Rampur, 2004), vol. i, part 2, p. 329 (#85). Though this work has been published in two volumes, the first volume itself comprises two parts and all of Wali Allah letters published here are to be found in that two-part first volume.

[82] Faridi (ed.), *Makātīb*, vol. i, part 2, pp. 331–332 (#87). The letter is addressed to his disciple Baba ʿUsman Kashmiri.

of.'[83] This view does not contradict the well-known emphasis on intention (*niyya*) in Islamic rituals as long as it is understood that, unlike many modern views of it, 'the function medieval jurists assign to *niyya* is not vaguely spiritual but explicitly taxonomic'. It is to signal the intention to perform the ritual itself.[84] Ritualised action does not exclude the purposes one might have in mind for engaging in it, in this case beyond worship itself. But while ritualised action might prove conducive to those purposes, it does not depend upon them.[85] As Wali Allah puts it, worship is good for the refinement of the self, the regulation of the household, and the polity—the three broad areas that medieval ethical treatises typically dealt with. But it is anchored in God's command and carries with it the promise of otherworldly reward.[86]

From Wali Allah's perspective, then, the formal performance of prayer is not 'mere' ritual, as it would be for many a modernist and even an Islamist. The form and the spirit go together, but, ultimately, it is the form that makes ritual what it is. Though the social function is integral to ritual, the worship of God, as enjoined in the Quran, is not reducible to anything else. The strength of this theory is that it allows Wali Allah to re-centre Muslim life around the core Islamic rituals, against those Sufis who were either too lax in their performance of them or too demanding in terms of their spiritual standards. With that re-centring accomplished, the strength of the theory also lies, paradoxically, in its making rituals far less inscrutable *and* more socially meaningful than is common in other discussions of the subject.

Conflicts of interest. The author reports none.

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[83] Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship* (Oxford, 1994), p. 5; emphasis in the original. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 89.

[84] Paul R. Powers, *Intent in Islamic Law: Motive and Meaning in Medieval Sunni Fiqh* (Leiden, 2006), pp. 61–95; quotation at p. 73.

[85] Humphrey and Laidlaw, *Archetypal Actions*, p. 187.

[86] Shah Wali Allah, *al-Khayr al-kathīr* (Dabhel, 1933), p. 102. Under the regulation of the household, he notes the unifying function of ritual; under politics, its ability to restrain people from oppression through its constant reminders of God.