

Layers of Authority in Shāh Walī Allāh's Persian Interlinear Qur'ān Translation

Shah Waliyullah (181555)

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Abstract

This article explores the genealogy of the Persian Qur'ān translation of the eighteenth-century Indian scholar Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762/3). Firstly, I argue that this translation engendered a populist engagement with the Qur'ān, which allowed Walī Allāh to decentralize the interpretive agency of the Mughal scholarly class, all the while building his own authority. Including the Arabic text with the Persian translation allowed lay Muslims to recite the text, but with the new caveat of understanding it. Secondly, I argue that Walī Allāh's amalgamation between 'under-the-line' and 'succinct summary' models in his interlinear translation affirmed the inimitability doctrine. This is the belief that the Qur'ān is inherently defined as an Arabic text, in word and meaning. Thirdly, I argue that the inclusion of the Arabic text in this translation prevented the potential emergence of a hegemonic interpretation by a subversive political authority. The results of this hypothesis can be observed in relation to nineteenth-century British efforts of translating Islamic law texts into English common law in India; and twentieth-century attempts by secular nationalists in producing a Turkish-only Qur'ān in modern Turkey. Walī Allāh's Qur'ān translation also carved a path for later Urdu and English Qur'ān translators to follow.

Introduction: Decline of the Mughal Empire

The eighteenth-century witnessed two seminal Qur'ān translations come to fruition. While George Sale's English translation proliferated in Europe and America,¹ Quṭb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Dahlawī—known by his epithet Shāh Walī Allāh—completed his Persian translation in India in 1738, titled Faṭḥ al-Raḥmān bi Tarjamat al-Qur'ān (Unveiling of the Most Merciful in a Translation the Qur'ān). Born in the apogee of Mughal rule during emperor Aurangzeb's reign, Walī Allāh witnessed the instability of the empire throughout his life. In a span of sixty-five years, the empire was ruptured by the demise of

eleven emperors, the sacking of Delhi by the Afsharid king Nādir Shāh (d. 1160/1747), and financial mismanagement by rulers coupled with their levying of high taxes on the people. This eventually led to fractured relations between the emperor and noble class, who were seeking to guard their fortunes.² In sum, the empire was left with a diminishing economy and a weak state open to enemy incursions.³ Walī Allāh posited that the nurturing of the socio-cultural and politico-economic needs of humans leads to overall societal progress, which peaks in an Islamic state. Only when the societal needs of people are met can they engage in studying the Islamic tradition. Hence, the destruction of a society's social, cultural, political, and economic structures is caused by the fracturing of the state.⁴ Walī Allāh's revival project spoke to these economic and political vacuums, but more pointedly to the gap of religious illiteracy that was steadily widening in society due to the looming dissipation of the Mughal empire.

Walī Allāh was a paramount scholar who wrote in Arabic and Persian. His unpublished works leave much to be discovered about his era and life. His scholarly training began under his father Shāh 'Abd al-Raḥīm (d. 1131/1719) and culminated into a teaching position at his family's *Madrasa Rahmīyya* in Delhi later in his life. In between, he spent two years in the *Ḥijāz*, where he became part of an international scholarly community in Makka and Madīna. This group of students and scholars was ideologically amorphous, but bound together through *ḥadīth* chains and *Ṣūfī* networks for the sake of Islamic reform.⁵ As such, the famous north Indian scholar Shiblī Nu'mānī (d. 1914) considered Walī Allāh a polymath and Islamic reformer of his era in India, in line with al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328).⁶ The magnum opus of his religious revival project was *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Balīgha* (The Manifest Proof of God), which sought to reconcile tensions between Islamic rulings and their universal objectives (*maṣlaḥa*).

While Walī Allāh's contributions to revival and reform have been hitherto given academic attention by scholars such as Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad al-Ghazali, Muhammad Qasim Zaman, and Marcia Hermansen, this paper examines the authoritative underpinnings of the comparably less studied Persian Qur'ān translation Faṭḥ al-Raḥmān. Over an eight year period, Walī Allāh's lessons in Qur'ānic hermeneutics culminated into an interlinear Qur'ān translation. Novelty placing a vernacular Persian translation under every line of Arabic text, the work targeted lay Muslims who were detached from the Qur'ānic

¹ Z. Elmarsafy, *The Enlightenment Qur'an: The Politics of Translation and the Construction of Islam*, (Oxford, UK, Oneworld Publications, 2009), 14-15.

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² M. Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India*, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997), 299.

³ Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Shāh Walī Allāh Ke Siyāsī Maktūbat* [Shāh Walī Allāh's Political Writings] (New Delhi, Nadwat al-Muṣannifin, year not published), 35-37.

⁴ M. Al-Ghazali, *The Socio-Political Thought of Shāh Walī Allāh*, (Islamabad, International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2001), 84.

⁵ A. Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 30-31.

⁶ Muḥammad Ishāq, *The General Acceptance of the Qur'ān in Hindustan and Shāh Waliullah al-Dahlawi's Contributions* (*Hindustān Mein Qur'ān ki Awāmī Maqbuliyat aur Hazrat Shāh Waliullah ki Khidmāt*), in "Shah Waliullah al-Dahlawi's Contributions to Qur'anic Studies" (Shāh Waliullah Dahlawī ki Qur'ānī Khidmāt) eds. Y.M. Siddiqi and Z. Islām (Aligarh, India, Idārah 'Ulūm-e-Islāmiyyah, 2013), 250.



ARTICLE

Is the *fiṭra* mutable? A reformist conception of human perfection in Shāh Walī Allāh's *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*¹

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Abstract

This article examines the question of whether the created human nature, or *fiṭra*, is portrayed as mutable in Shāh Walī Allāh's (d. 1762) *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*. I argue that Walī Allāh uses the *fiṭra* – or the perfection of four qualities that make for human flourishing – to anchor a unified concept of human perfection that can fit different ages without essentially changing. Walī Allāh accomplishes this by affirming the particularity of divine laws and the efficacy of local customs in realising the eternal demands of the human form. More specifically, he posits that established practices can become second nature to a community, enter the divine system of requital, and thus help a people develop the necessary qualities through highly contingent means, all without violating the Qur'anic and traditional claim that the original nature itself never changes. With recourse to some of his other works and potential influences, I conclude that Walī Allāh's conception of the *fiṭra* accommodates traditional theological assertions regarding the singularity of human perfection, on the one hand, and the possibility of reformed norms, on the other.

Keywords: Shāh; Walī Allāh; *fiṭra*; *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*

I. Introduction

This original nature (*fiṭra*) is that religion (*dīn*) which does not differ according to the differing of eras and all of the prophets agree on it.²

When this rightly-guided practice is clearly established the Highest Council raise prayers for those who conform to it and against those who oppose it. When the customary practices are of this type, they are counted as being part of “the original nature (*fiṭra*) according to which God, may He be Exalted, created human beings”.³

¹ I am indebted to the incisive comments of my reviewers, the feedback of engaged respondents and audiences at the Princeton Islamic Studies Colloquium (2016), the 33rd. Deutscher Orientalistentag (2017), and the Society for the Study of Muslim Ethics (2018), as well as comments by Omri Matarasso and Hanna Siurua on earlier drafts of this article. My deepest gratitude goes to Muhammad Q. Zaman, who has patiently listened to and, more importantly, gently pushed back against my take on the question of the mutable *fiṭra* for several years.

² Marcia K. Hermansen (translation), *The Conclusive Argument from God: Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi's Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha* (Islamabad, 2003), p. 72; Shāh Walī Allāh, *Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha* (Cairo, 1952–53), pp. 52–53. Subsequent references to the *Ḥujja* are to the English translation in Hermansen (*Ḥujja*) and/or to the first volume of the Cairo edition, the latter indicated by “Ar.”

³ *Ḥujja*, p. 144; Ar. p. 104.

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