Lecturer in the Committee on the Study of Religion at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. He holds a Ph.D. from Georgetown University, Washington, DC, and an M.A. from the University of Tehran, Iran. As a scholar of Islamic studies his research areas include Shii studies, Qur'anic studies, Sufism and Persian literature. Boylston's publications include, "Islam from the Inside Out: ʿAyn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī's Reconception of Islam as Vector" (Journal of Quranic Studies, forthcoming)*; "Qur'anic Exegesis at the Confluence of Twelver Shiism and Sufism: Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī's al-Muḥīṭ al-aʿẓam" (Journal of Quranic Studies, 23:1, 2021); and "Speaking the Secrets of Sanctity in the Tafsīr of Ṣafī ʿAlī Shāh"* (Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Iran, *ed. Alessandro Cancian, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).*

doi:10.2979/jims.5.2.06

Sainthood and Authority in Early Islam: Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's Theory of *wilāya* and the Reenvisioning of the Sunnī Caliphate

Aiyub Palmer
Leiden: Brill, 2019. 219 Pages.

In ʿAṭṭār's *Tadhkirat al-awliyāʾ*, he recounts a story from al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's (d. 907–912 CE) youth. Desirous of setting out in search of knowledge, as was the custom of the day for serious students, he was held back by the responsibility he felt towards his mother, whose old age and illness, along with the death of his father, had put her in a position of dependency and need. One day, overcome by sadness at the obstacles that stood in the way of ever becoming a scholar, he prayed at a local cemetery, "Alas! I am left an illiterate and uncultured man. My companions will be returning very soon after completing their education." No sooner did he utter these words that the immortal guide Khiḍr appeared, asked him why he wept, and then, on learning of his predicament, proceeded to teach him in such a way that he soon came to surpass his peers.[1] Regardless of what one may make of the historicity of the tale (ʿAṭṭār frequently gave himself poetic license to inspire his readers), it reveals at least two features of medieval Sufi piety. The first was the value placed on receiving knowledge directly from Khiḍr, identified by much of tradition as the enigmatic interlocutor of Moses in the Qurʾān, and the recipient of a special "knowledge from on high" or *ʿilm ladunnī*

---

of which
the privi
his own
singled o
Uways al
was the
Prophet.
that the
him, to
are infor
knowled
Whi
we step o
other fig
lives are
autobiog
remind
Tirmidh
learning
southern
of the 9t
inhabita
Arabs wh
his autob
into the
after stur
him the
Mecca w
the page
saint, wh
an angel
he was t
(satisfac
alone bu
fluttering
area beca
faith (*īm*
Dhik
he held r
his stude
they bec

of which even the Israelite prophet was unaware. The second feature was that the privileged relationship he enjoyed with Khiḍr was made possible, to quote his own words, "because I pleased my mother."[2] The divine gift for which he was singled out, a response to his sacrifice, calls to mind the life-story of the Yemeni Uways al-Qaranī, whose filial piety towards his own elderly mother, for whom he was the sole care-giver, prevented him from travelling to Medina to be with the Prophet. And yet his sanctity was such, at least according to the hadith literature, that the companions would later be instructed by the Prophet, if they ever met him, to request from him a prayer of forgiveness.[3] In the case of Tirmidhī, we are informed by Hujwīrī in the *Kashf al-maḥjūb* that he reached such heights of knowledge that even Khiḍr would seek him out for it.[4]

While the precise details of Tirmidhī's life remain unclear, especially once we step outside the realm of hagiography, we do know more about him than most other figures from the formative period of Islamic mysticism, many of whose lives are cloaked in obscurity. Part of this, no doubt, is because he left us a short autobiography, the *Buduww sha'n* (the style and content of which, incidentally, remind us in many ways of Ghazālī's *Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*).[5] We know that Tirmidhī was born during the reign of the ʿAbbāsid caliph and patron of Greek learning al-Ma'mūn (d. 833 CE). The city of his birth (Tirmidh) is located in the southern region of modern Uzbekistan, just north of Afghanistan. By the end of the 9th century, it was home to anywhere between thirty and forty thousand inhabitants. His father was a scholar, and the family traced its lineage back to the Arabs who settled in the region in the wake of the early Muslim conquests. From his autobiography, where he recounts the circumstances surrounding his entry into the mystical path, we also learn that a major turning point in his life came after stumbling across a book by Antākī (a companion of Muḥāsibī) which taught him the importance of disciplining the soul. This was following a pilgrimage to Mecca where he earnestly prayed for divine direction. His wife also appears in the pages of the *Buduww sha'n* as a woman of great spiritual gifts, a *waliyya* or saint, whose veridical dreams served as counsel for Tirmidhī. In one of them, an angel advised her to instruct her husband to avoid useless talk; in another, he was told to purify his tongue; and in yet another, she was informed that *riḍā* (satisfaction, contentment, good-pleasure) is not obtained by prayer and fasting alone but purity of heart. And in one particularly vivid dream, she saw a bird fluttering across a tree, from branch to branch, such that wherever it flew, the area became lush with greenery. The tree, she was told in the vision, symbolized faith (*īmān*), while the bird, the invocation "there is no god but God."[6]

Dhikr or invocation was a central part of Tirmidhī's spiritual regimen, and he held regular, semi-private gatherings (*majālis*) for its performance, along with his students and disciples at his home, accompanied by talks of instruction. Soon they became so large that the lane next to his residence became full, forcing him to move them to the local mosque. From his autobiography we also learn that Tirmidhī was accused of heresy by the local *'ulamā'* because of his discourses on love (*ḥubb*), following which he was taken to Balkh for prosecution. Fortunately, his name was cleared of all charges, and as time went on, the number of those who congregated around him grew. His words seemed to have an alchemical effect on his listeners so that even his adversaries were often won over once they met him in person. Yet it was not through his students, but rather through his writings that he came to exercise a lasting influence on the development and maturation of Islamic mysticism. To quote Massignon, "al-Tirmidhī's written works have probably had a greater influence on later Sufism than any direct influence he may have had through his disciples."[7]

The present monograph by Aiyub Palmer, a revised version of a thesis completed under the able supervision of Alexander Knysh, builds on the scholarship of Vincent Cornell, Geneviève Gobillot, Yves Marquet, Bernd Radkte, Sara Sviri, Khalid Zahri, and others. Divided into six broad sections, it covers *wilāya/walāya* as the basis of authority in early Islam (Chapter 1); the historical and social context of Tirmidhī's life (Chapter 2); the nature and role of *ḥikma* (Chapter 3); the theological significance of *wilāya* (Chapter 4); gnoseology (Chapter 5); and finally, Tirmidhī's relationship with Islamic mysticism and Sufism - for Palmer the two are not synonymous - (Chapter 6). Since the author did not want simply to repeat the findings of earlier research, he chose to avoid a more conventional study of his life and thought. Instead, his aim, as he states, was to "reframe the discourse around Tirmidhī and his ideas and provide a new and hopefully beneficial approach to the study of Islamic Mysticism" (p. 196). Palmer does this largely by focusing on the social, political, economic, cultural and historic factors that shaped Tirmidhī's ideas, and more specifically, his construction of a language of sainthood, one that would be bequeathed to Sufi tradition.

In the opening of the study, Palmer explains how *wilāya* was employed in the first two centuries of Islam to refer almost exclusively to either political authority over the Muslim community (*umma*), or legal authority of one individual over another (as in a parent-child, or master-slave relationship). In early political documents, *wilāya* signified protection and authority by the *walī* over the *mawlā*, while *walāya* referred to the support given by the latter to the former (pp. 3, 14–15). This distinction finds conformation in the *Lisān al-'arab*, where Ibn Manẓūr defines *wilāya* as a noun that indicates protection and governance, and *walāya* as a verbal noun that refers to an act of support or aid. In addition, notes Palmer, the relationship between the *walī* and the *mawlā* was sealed through a covenant of *bay'a*. In the Prophet's community, it played such a critical role in cementing the tie that it signified for the *mawlā* ultimately a *bay'a* with God (pp. 3–4). As the Qur'ān famously states, *those who pledge allegiance to you*

[O Prophet], pledge allegiance to God. In this sense, *wilāya* and *walāya* symbolized two faces of an inter-dependent relation consecrated through an oath of allegiance, the *bay'a*. This political and social dynamic of governance, while retraceable to pre-Islamic tribal norms, was no less present in the life of the Prophet, the recognition of whose *wilāya* among Arabs in the peninsula was "something hard won," evidenced by the Ridda Wars following his death (pp. 35–36). In the early Muslim sources, Abu Bakr and Ali were also described as exercising *wilāya* over those under their rule.

Palmer argues that Tirmidhī played a critical role in the transformation of these conceptions of *wilāya/walāya* and their integration into early Muslim mysticism, although the seeds for such a process were already present in the Qur'ān, and especially so in the hadiths (where the ideas of "intimacy" and "friendship with God" that would become central to Sufi conceptions of sainthood are underscored more prominently). Yet the political undernotes, or residues of the social and historical context in which Tirmidhī wrote, are still discernable in the nomenclature he employed to describe and categorize both the nature and levels of sainthood. We find this, for example, in the distinction he made between two kinds of "friends of God" or saints: the *walī* who is on the path of disciplining his lower self, yet never obtains complete and total success in the endeavor; and the *walī* who is freed from his lower self not by his own effort, but by God's generosity and aid. The second realizes a level of sanctity, sainthood and freedom beyond the reach of the first. Most importantly, for Palmer, the first for Tirmidhī is like the non-Arab Muslim *mawlā* (pl. *mawālī*) who is contractually bound to the Arab Muslims wielding power, while the second (who stands at the rank of the "free ones" or *aḥrār*) is akin to the Arab Muslim ruler who experiences true liberation, and whose freedom is a result of divine generosity and will. For Palmer, this is just one example among many illustrating how his language and thought reflected the unique social and political realities of the day (pp. 78–82, 192–193). While Tirmidhī's ideas were instrumental in positioning the *awliyā'* (sing. *walī*) as "the inheritors of the prophets" (p. 55) who stood at the nexus separating the seen from the unseen worlds, the *ẓāhir* from the *bāṭin,* Palmer contests Michel Chodkiewicz's claim that Tirmidhī introduced *walāya* as the technical term for sainthood, distinct from *wilāya* (p. 2). Part of the ambiguity here no doubt rests on the fact that in written Arabic the letters are unvocalized, making it difficult to distinguish whether the word in question is *wilāya* or *walāya.*

As noted, the principal influence of Tirmidhī, an author considered to be one of the most prolific to come out of Khurāsān in the first three centuries of Islam, came through his vast literary output. Palmer's own counting of his works, both published and in manuscript form, puts their number squarely at a hundred, with some spanning a few hundred pages and others no more than a few pages. The topics covered are extensive in scope and range from Qur'ānic exegesis and theology to law and spiritual practice, although one encounters, observes Palmer, a great deal of repetition. Tirmidhī's most frequently cited authority (aside from the sacred sources of faith) appears to have been al-Hasan al-Baṣrī (p. 56), considered by many later figures such as Abū Ṭālib al-Makki to have been the principal founder of the science of *taṣawwuf*. As a scholar nestled in the Ḥanafī juridical and theological tradition, Tirmidhī also composed polemical works against the Mu'tazilīs (such as his *al-Radd 'alā al-mu'aṭṭila*) and "proto-Shī'īs" (such as his *al-Radd 'alā al-rāfiḍa*) (pp. 27, 71), the latter of whom who were emerging as a political force. (The Zaydī Shi'ī dynasty had captured Baghdād by 945, becoming the "de facto ruler of the 'Abbāsid empire," and in 969 the Fatimids had set up a counter-caliphate in Cairo [pp. 71–72]).

As for the question of Tirmidhī's relationship with Sufism, and by extension, whether or not we should categorize him as a "Sufi," for Palmer the answer depends on how one understands *taṣawwuf*. If we take the phenomenon to have its origins in a certain mode of piety that emerged in Baghdād in the second half of the 9th century, centered especially around the figure of Junayd, as argued by a number of Islamicists, then it would indeed be anachronistic to classify him as such. This is the view of Radkte, among others. It is also the position of Palmer, who sees the movement later synthesizing with certain mystical currents in Nīshāpūr in the 11th century where it reached maturity, and from where it then spread across the Islamicate world. The position also rests on the grounds that Tirmidhī never explicitly identified himself as a Sufi, nor was he classified so by any of his contemporaries. At the same time, Palmer acknowledges that Tirmidhī "exhibits many of the foundational concepts that came to be associated with Sufism," and that he was recognized as a part of the Sufi tradition by those who came soon after him, such as Sulamī, Qushayrī and Kalabādhī (pp. 193–194). While the scholarly meticulousness and care with which Palmer both explores and employs the category of Sufism is admirable, one wishes he might have done the same with "mysticism," which he uses quite flexibly throughout the entire work, and without anywhere near the same degree of scholarly rigor. To say that Tirmidhī was a Muslim mystic is really no less fraught with complexities than to say he was a Sufi, or for that matter a proto-Sufi.

This minor issue aside, Palmer's research is impressive. He has consulted all the relevant scholarly literature in English, French, German and Arabic, and also displays an impressive grasp of Tirmidhī's Arabic (which is not easy reading). Since the study is primarily historiographical, if one's principal aim is to better grasp Tirmidhī's cosmology, psychology, or metaphysics, one should look elsewhere. However, as a work that situates his thinking within the political, cultural and religious currents of early Islam, Palmer has done an admirable job within the parameters of what he set out to accomplish. The book is very well-edited and free of the kind of grammatical and typographical errors that have recently begun to mar Brill publications.

Atif Khalil

Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, where he has been teaching for more than a decade. His research interests lie in Sufism, Islamic theology and philosophy, Islamic virtue ethics, the Judaeo-Islamic tradition, and comparative mysticism. He is the author of Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism *(Albany: SUNY Press, 2018); co-editor of* In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought *(Albany: SUNY Press, 2012); and co-editor of* Islamic Mysticism and Ethics *(Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, forthcoming). He is currently working on a monograph on the theory and practice of* dhikr *in Sufism. His more than two dozen articles have appeared in such venues as Philosophy East and West; Studia Islamica; The Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies; The Muslim World; Journal of Islamic Ethics; Journal of Sufi Studies; and Studies in Religion. In 2016, he served as the Kenan Rifai Visiting Research Professor at the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at the University of Beijing, China. He completed his doctorate (2009) at the Center for Religious Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada.*

doi:10.2979/jims.5.2.07

Endnotes

1. ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, abridged translation by A. J. Arberry (Arkana: Penguin Books, 1990), 244.
2. ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, 244.
3. For more on Uways and his reception in later tradition, see A. S. Hussaini's dated but still useful, "Uways al-Qaranī and the Uwaysī Ṣufis", *Muslim World* 57, no. 2. (1967): 103–113. See also Katia Zakharia, "Uways Al-Qaranī, Visages d'une légende," *Arabica* 46, no. 2 (1999): 230–258.
4. Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, trans. Reynold Nicholson (1911; Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1992), 141–142. Cf. ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, 245–246.
5. The Arabic text of this work can be found (easily through JSTOR) in Muhammad Khalid Masud, "al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's *Buduww Sha'n*," *Islamic Studies* 4, no. 3 (1965): 315–343.
6. Masud, "Tirmidhī's *Buduww Sha'n*," 325.
7. Cited in Masud, "Tirmidhī's *Buduww Sha'n*," 319.