

CHAPTER 1

Walāyah in the Islamic Tradition

In the search for an understanding of Shiʿite identity in the earliest period of Shiʿite history, few concepts are more important or more elusive than that of *walāyah*—a term that may designate, at one and the same time, the nature of the authority of the Shiʿite Imām, the principle underlying the relationship of the disciple to the Imām, and the common bond between all persons who considered themselves to be members of the *shīʿat ʿAlī*. Despite the importance of this concept in Shiʿite thought and consciousness, it is one that has received relatively little scholarly treatment in the field of Shiʿite studies. While there is considerable material available on the concept of *imāmah* or the Shiʿite doctrine of the imāmate, and while the concepts of *walāyah* and *imāmah* are intimately related in Shiʿite thought, it is only quite recently that serious study is beginning to be devoted to the religious and spiritual implications of *walāyah*, most importantly and recently in the work of Amir-Moezzi.¹ Amir-Moezzi’s analysis of the term in its Shiʿite context is detailed and profound, and examines the concept of *walāyah* as it relates to the ontological reality of the Imām, the Shiʿite disciple’s love and devotion to the Imām, and what he refers to as the “theology of the metaphysical Imām.”² The concept of *walāyah*, however, is both more comprehensive and more prevalent than *imāmah* in the earliest period of Shiʿite history,³ and, as we aim to demonstrate, is also intimately connected to notions of Shiʿite individual and communal identity.

In this chapter, we examine the meaning of the term *walāyah* and its related cognates within the broader Islamic tradition—from its usage in the Qurʾan and early Islamic society, to its esoteric interpretation in

Sufi or Islamic mystical discourse, as well as in some later Shi‘ite theosophical writings that were heavily influenced by the mystical tradition—in order to elucidate its full connotation in Shi‘ite thought. In this way, we hope to demonstrate that *walāyah*, far from being an amorphous term with multiple meanings in different forms of Islamic discourse, is a fundamental and unitive concept that underlays notions of spiritual identity and community in a variety of Islamic contexts, even if one is hard-pressed to find a single English word that can adequately convey its rich and nuanced meaning.

THE MEANING OF WALĀYAH

The word “*walāyah*” is one of several nouns that can be formed from the Arabic root *w-l-y*, and while this root can have numerous meanings depending on its context, all of its related cognates can be said to designate a type of relationship between persons of either equal or unequal stature. It can, for example, be used for the relationship between lord and servant, patron and client, ruler and subject, as well as between paternal relations or friends. Due to the peculiarity of this root, both parties to these various relationships—even those of a nonsymmetrical character—can be designated as “*mawlā*,” such that in classical Arabic the word “*mawlā*” may denote both master or lord, servant or dependent. The other personal noun that is frequently formed from this root is “*walī*,” which can be synonymous with *mawlā*, but which is most commonly used to denote parties to a relationship of friendship or near kinship, or to relationships entailing inheritance.

There are two verbal nouns derived from this Arabic root, *walāyah* and *wilāyah*, and while these two are indistinguishable in an unvocalized text, they are not entirely coterminous in meaning. Both words may serve as verbal nouns expressing the action of *waliya/yalī*, which can mean: (1) to be near, adjacent or close to something; (2) to be a friend or relative of someone; and (3) to manage, administer, rule or govern, to have authority, power or command. While the two words *walāyah* and *wilāyah* generally refer to different aspects of the verb’s meaning, the boundaries between the two are not always clear. The word *walāyah* may refer to all three actions covered by this verb, as well as the state of being a “*walī*” or a “*mawlā*,” but it is most commonly applied to the first two types of actions or states expressed by the verb *waliya/yalī*—that is, the state of closeness and nearness, or of friendship and kinship—although it may also be used for the meaning of “rule or command.”⁴ Most Arabic authorities understand the noun *wilāyah*, on the other hand, as referring specifically to a ruling or managerial office (*imārah, sulṭān, tadbīr*).⁵

Of course, to fully understand the connection between these two meanings derived from the root *w-l-y*, we should bear in mind the kind of authority or power that is expressed in the word *wilāyah*. In its common usage in Islamic historical texts, the term does not imply the kind of absolute authority denoted by other Arabic terms such as “*mulk*,” which the Qur’an uses to denote kingship—either the divine sovereignty over the heavens and the earth, or that of the prophets⁶—or “*imāmah*,” a kind of spiritual and temporal authority tied to the state of prophecy, as when the Qur’an refers to God’s having designated Abraham as an *imām* over mankind (*al-nās*),⁷ or to Isaac and Jacob as having been made “*imāms*” in a spiritual or religious sense.⁸ *Wilāyah* refers, by contrast, to a kind of authority that is limited and circumscribed, confined within a particular locality or jurisdiction, and subject to a higher authority. In early Islamic tradition it most commonly denoted governorships to which the caliph appointed men whom he trusted, and whom he could remove at will, if he were dissatisfied with their performance. It is perhaps the local nature of this authority that accounts for its relation to the verb *w-l-y*, meaning nearness or closeness—the *wālī* (preferred to *walī* when used to denote governorship) was, in principle, merely the local or “near” representative of the distant authority of the caliph, residing within the principality that he controlled on the caliph’s behalf. In fact, there was no *wālī* located in the province in which the caliph resided, as he himself fulfilled the position of local authority there in addition to his general authority over all provinces of the Islamic state. Such authority was not usually interpreted as spiritual authority; it represented, above all, managerial control over the economic and military affairs of the principality and the responsibility of maintaining order and executing—but not interpreting—the divine law, the *sharī‘ah*, on the one hand, and the will of the caliph, on the other.

It seems that we need to look beyond the connection between *walāyah* and ordinary forms of authority to understand the true significance of this term in Shi‘ite thought. We might also consider that, despite the various relationships to which the words *walāyah* and *wilāyah* can refer, they can all be said to have a common denominator in the idea of *nuṣrah*, meaning support, aid, backing, or assistance. In traditional Arab culture, a lord was bound to protect his servant just as a servant was to defend his lord; a ruler’s legitimacy depended on his ability to aid and protect his subjects just as they were bound to support him in times of war, the *wālī* of the caliph was his ruling support in the distant parts of the Islamic state, and friends and relations were obviously obligated by love and mutual respect to defend one another against any threat or danger. Thus, the relationships that fall under the category of *walāyah* can be said, in most cases, to involve

the idea of mutual aid and support (*nuṣrah*) and usually entail the idea of a strong attachment of loyalty and devotion to the other party. This attitude is deeply tied to the culture and patterns of social organization of Arab tribal society, in which such an attachment to tribe and clan was necessary for survival. But, like other Arab cultural features, this, too, was incorporated into Islamic religious norms, to the point that the breaking of these kinds of bonds of attachment—in Islamic times, to the family or to the Islamic *ummah*—was considered both socially and religiously blameworthy.⁹ Therefore, *walāyah* in its most generally applicable sense can be said to denote a reciprocal, but not necessarily symmetrical, relationship between two parties, entailing the responsibility of mutual aid and support as well as the principle of profound loyalty and attachment. We would argue that it is this basic meaning of *walāyah*—perhaps as much or moreso than its relationship to authority—that accounts for its role in the formation of Shi‘ite identity. Throughout the remainder of this study, we will use the term *walāyah* to express the state of being a “*walī*” or “*mawlā*,” in a general way, and only use the term *wilāyah* to express the aspect of this word that relates specifically to authority or jurisdiction.

WALĀYAH IN THE QUR’AN

The connection between *walāyah* and *nuṣrah* is more well-established in the Qur’an than the relationship between *walāyah* and authority, and it is reasonable to presume that it is the Qur’anic sense of the term that underlies its religious significance in the Shi‘ite tradition—particularly in its earliest formation. In the Qur’an, *al-Walī* and *al-Mawlā* are frequently cited names of God, and the term *walī* or *mawlā* is often presented in conjunction with the term *naṣīr* in describing God’s relationship to His creatures,¹⁰ relations between human beings themselves,¹¹ or between human beings and Satan. For example, the Qur’an frequently repeats the warning that, apart from God, the believers have no *walī* (or *mawlā*) and no *naṣīr*,¹² that God is sufficient as a *walī* and *naṣīr* for the believers against their enemies,¹³ that the *kuffār* have no *walī* or *naṣīr* in this life save the fickle Satan,¹⁴ or, variously, that they have none at all or will have none in the next life.¹⁵ While there are instances where the terms *walī* or *mawlā* are used in the Qur’an to mean “guardian,” “lord,” or “master,” both in relation to God and in the context of human relations,¹⁶ they are not used to refer explicitly to earthly authority over a particular human collectivity or religious community. The reciprocal and relational nature of *walāyah* is obvious in the Qur’an as well, given that the term *walī* is used not

only for God, but also (in its plural form, *awliyāʾ*) for those who show absolute devotion to God. Such “friends” of God, the Qurʾan tells us, experience neither fear nor grief¹⁷ in the face of divine judgment.

In the Qurʾan, the concept of *walāyah* is also frequently juxtaposed, directly or indirectly, with that of enmity (*ʿadāwah*), forming a subtle rhetorical pair, similar to, but not as explicit as other Qurʾanic pairs, such as *īmān* and *kufr* (faith and unbelief) or *jannah* and *nār* (Paradise and Hell). God is the only true *walī*, or friend, of the believers. He knows who the enemies [of the believers] are, and He is a sufficient *walī* and *naṣīr* against them.¹⁸ The believers should trust that God’s “protecting friendship” overcomes the enmity of all their opponents. Humanity’s greatest enemy, however, is Satan, and this enmity is providentially established in the Qurʾanic account of the creation and fall of man. God forewarns Adam of the treachery and inherent enmity of Satan, but when, despite this warning, Adam and his wife fall prey to Satan’s deception, God simultaneously casts Adam, Eve, and Satan out of the Garden, saying in multiple Qurʾanic renditions of the story: “Go (you, pl.) down, with enmity between you!”¹⁹ Satan is repeatedly identified as humankind’s “clear enemy (*ʿaduww mubīn*)” throughout the Qurʾan,²⁰ and human beings are warned not to take Satan and his followers (literally, “offspring”) as *awliyāʾ*.²¹

It is frequently noted in discussions of the nature of evil in Qurʾanic and Islamic discourse that Satan is rightly viewed as the enemy of humankind, not of God, personally. However, the Qurʾan tells us God and the believers do share another mutual enemy—namely, the unbelievers and rejecters of God’s messengers. God is said to be the “enemy of the unbelievers,” as they are his. Qurʾan II: 97–98 reads:

Say: Who is an enemy to Gabriel! For he it is who hath revealed [this Scripture] to thy heart by God’s leave, confirming that which came before it, and a guidance and glad tidings to believers; Who is an enemy to God, and His angels and His messengers, and Gabriel and Michael! Then lo! God is an enemy to the disbelievers.

The unbelievers (and hypocrites) are those who show enmity toward God and His emissaries (be they angels or prophets) and earn, thereby, the reciprocal enmity of God.²² The unbelievers and the hypocrites, however, are identified as the enemies of the believers as well,²³ and God aids the believers against these enemies.²⁴ Moreover, the believers are expected to separate themselves from, and if necessary to fight, these enemies of God on His behalf. God and the believers, then, are united in a bond of mutual friendship and support (*walāyah*) against a mutual enemy—the unbelievers—and true belief requires that the division between friend and enemy be clearly drawn. The believers

are warned: "O you who believe! Do not take My enemies and your enemies as *awliyāʾ*." ²⁵ Anyone who is an enemy of God must be understood to be an enemy of the believer, and this enmity must not be clouded by personal relationships. The prototype for this is the Qurʾanic Abraham, who prayed for his father "until it became clear to him that [his father] was the enemy of God," ²⁶ at which point Abraham definitively dissociated (*tabarraʿa*) from him. As we shall see, the notion of dissociation (*tabarruʿ* or *barāʿah*), like that of enmity, is often rhetorically juxtaposed to *walāyah* in both early Shiʿite and Kharijite polemics.

The reciprocal nature of the *walāyah* between God and the believers means that God will support the believers against their common enemy, but also that the believers must set themselves militarily, or at least socially, against the enemies of God as well. In this way true faith and the *walāyah* of God are inextricably linked to relationships between human beings and, more directly, to the notion of a sacred community united in both faith and mutual worldly protection. The Qurʾan states that the believers have no *walī* save "God and those who believe," ²⁷ and the believers are warned on more than one occasion that they should not take *awliyāʾ* (protecting friends) from among the unbelievers in preference to the believers; ²⁸ the unbelievers and the evildoers (*ẓālimūn*) are protecting friends (*awliyāʾ*) to one another. ²⁹ Thus *walāyah* is connected to the more general principle that an individual's most intense social loyalties should be to the members of his/her own faith community, and conversely, that one's social associations have implications for one's religious identity. The Qurʾan also tells the believers not to take Jews and Christians as *awliyāʾ*, for they are *awliyāʾ* of one another, "and he among you who takes them for protecting friends is [one] of them (*minhum*)."³⁰ However, this does not mean that Jews and Christians are to be identified with the "unbelievers," with whom believers are also supposed to avoid relationships of *walāyah*, since the Qurʾan makes an explicit distinction between the two in other similar contexts. In a passage that follows soon after the one just quoted, for example, the Qurʾan tells the believers that they should take *neither* the People of the Book who belittle Islam *nor* the unbelievers (*kuffār*) as *awliyāʾ*; ³¹ and later in this same *sūrah*, the Jews and Christians are themselves criticized for having taken the unbelievers as their *awliyāʾ*. ³²

The emergence of the idea of community based upon religious belief, rather than on tribal or genealogical ties, is a theme found subtly in the Qurʾan and more explicitly in the events of the first Islamic community—particularly in its heroic, early Medinan phase. Although the ties of tribal relationships continued to dominate Arab politics for

more than a century after the death of Muḥammad, and strong notions of family loyalty continue to remain central to Islamic societal norms, the idea that common religious faith was the basis of one's most obliging social loyalties emerged, at least temporarily, in the extraordinary situation of this first Muslim community. These early believers, many of whom were forced to leave their families behind when they emigrated to Medina, were warned not to take even their fathers and brothers as *awliyā'* if the latter preferred unbelief to belief.³³ The idea of loyalty based on religious brotherhood, rather than on blood relations, was also reinforced by the Prophet in the second pact (the *bay'at al-ḥarb*, or pledge of war) that he concluded with the Yathrib delegation prior to his emigration there. A member of the Yathrib delegation expressed anxiety over the fact that, having cut their ties with the Jews of their city in order to join the religious community of the Prophet, they might later be abandoned by their Meccan coreligionists when their cause had been won and they had reconciled with their own people in Mecca. Muḥammad, however, reassured them, saying: "I am of you and you are of me; I am at war with the one with whom you are at war, and at peace with the one with whom you are at peace."³⁴ While the word *walāyah* is not mentioned explicitly here, the phrase "I am of you and you are of me" recalls the Qur'anic passage that states that whoever takes members of other religious communities as *awliyā'* is "of them."

As we noted earlier in this discussion, the root *w-l-y* and its cognates are often connected to the idea of inheritance and to relationships entailing inheritance. In the Qur'an, derivatives of this root are used in this sense as well. For example, in Qur'an XIX:5, the prophet, Zakariyyā, implores God to give him a *walī*, who will inherit from him and protect his legacy from his other relatives. While the notion of *walāyah* as inheritance, based traditionally on family relations, may seem to be quite different from the notion of social relations based exclusively on common faith, the two connotations of *walāyah* come together in an extraordinary verse found near the end of the eighth *sūrah*, which reads:

Lo! Those who believed and left their homes and strove with their wealth and their lives for the cause of God [i.e., the Emigrants or *muhājirūn*], and those who took them in and helped them [i.e., the Medinan Helpers, or *anṣār*]; these are the *awliyā'* one of another. And those who believed but did not leave their homes, you have no duty of *walāyah* toward them till they leave their homes; but if they seek help from you in the matter of religion then it is your duty to help [them] except against a folk between whom and you there is a treaty. God is Seer of what you do.³⁵

Here a relationship of *walāyah* is explicitly ordained between the Meccan Emigrants and the Medinan Helpers who sheltered and assisted them. But what did this relationship entail, precisely? A quick reading of the verse suggests that *walāyah*, here, involved a duty to support, aid, and protect one another against outside threats and harm, since these represent the parameters of the Emigrant-Helper relationship established in the *bayʿat al-ḥarb* between the Meccan and Yathrib Muslims, discussed above. While there are some *tafsīr* traditions that understand the relationship of “*walāyah*” mentioned here as pertaining to mutual aid and support (*nuṣrah*),³⁶ the majority of *tafsīr* traditions state that this verse established relationships of mutual inheritance between the *muhājirūn* and the *anṣār*,³⁷ and many *tafsīr* traditions connect this verse to the famous incident of the “brothering” between the two groups that occurred shortly after the Emigrants’ establishment in Medina.³⁸ In this incident, Muḥammad paired each Emigrant with a Medinan Helper as his “brother”—a relationship that explicitly included mutual inheritance and that was meant to compensate the Emigrants, in part, for their loss of family relations in Mecca. This *walāyah* between the “brothered” pairs meant that each would be as close and as obligated to the other as to any of their blood or clan relations, helping to create bonds of real solidarity between these two groups within the fledgling Islamic community. As one *tafsīr* tradition notes, it created a new kind of *walāyah*, a “*walāyah fiʿl-dīn*” or *walāyah* in religion, between the two groups and within the community at large.³⁹ It is perhaps worth noting here that on this occasion the Prophet specifically exempted himself and his family from this “brothering,” because, as one modern biographer has noted, “it would have been too invidious for him to choose as his brother one of the Helpers rather than another. . . .”⁴⁰ The Prophet therefore made ʿAlī his own “brother” (and his uncle Ḥamzah the brother of his adopted son, Zayd), effectively establishing a *walāyah fiʿl-dīn* between himself and ʿAlī, something we will discuss further in the next chapter. This relationship of inheritance established between the Emigrants and the Helpers in preference to their own blood relations, and exclusive of those believers who had not emigrated to Medina to join the community physically, was nullified with the conquest of Mecca in the year 8. A verse officially abrogating the arrangement can be found a few verses later in the same *sūrah* (Qurʿan VIII:74–75), where brothers who have fought together for the cause of Islam are said to be “of” one another, but that blood relationships (*uluʿl-arḥām*) entail greater mutual obligation than relationships of religion. In any case, competition between these two loyalties was obviated by the conversion of the Meccan Quraysh, and eventually much of the Arabian Peninsula, to Islam.

Thus we can see that the Qurʾanic usage of *walāyah* and its related cognates pertains to an interrelated set of ideas, including a variety of intimate relationships entailing mutual protection, loyalty, and inheritance. The Qurʾanic concept of *walāyah* relates to the bonds of loyalty and trust between God and those who believe in Him, as well as among all those united in their belief in a religion sent by Him (be it Muslims, Christians or Jews)—or in their rejection of it (as in the case of the unbelievers). As such, it is a term that establishes a profound link between faithfulness to God and loyalty or attachment to one’s religious community.

WALĀYAH, CHARISMA, AND SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY IN SUFISM AND SHIʿISM

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that *walāyah* is connected with notions of religious brotherhood and spiritual community in its Qurʾanic and Prophetic context. Insofar as the Qurʾan urges the believers to consider God as their primary *walī* or “protecting friend” and Satan as their “clear enemy,” the Qurʾanic notion of *walāyah* demands an unhypocritical stance in favor of God and His cause, and against the deceptive lure of Satan and his supporters, thereby linking sincere devotion to God with unshakeable loyalty to the community of believers. This connection plays an important role in the relationship between faith and *walāyah* in Shiʿite discourse, as we will discuss later. But in what sense are all of these things linked to the notion of charisma, or a charismatic community?

Within religious studies discourse, a charismatic leader may denote an individual whose followers consider him/her to have been chosen to enjoy a privileged relationship with the divine. This perception is often based on unique and observable powers or distinctions that the individual is considered to possess by virtue of this privileged relationship. The charisma is believed not only to draw followers in, but also to radiate outwardly, such that his/her followers may be considered to benefit from the charisma of their leader, and in some cases, to possess a kind of derivative charisma by virtue of their association with him/her. Note the paradigmatic case of Christ, whose miraculous powers of forgiveness and healing were conveyed to his disciples, even during his own lifetime. In similar fashion, a charismatic community could be said to denote a community whose members—either individually or collectively, or both—have been chosen to enjoy a privileged relationship with the divine, and whose “closeness” and privileged status is reflected in qualities and powers believed to

be uniquely possessed by its members by virtue of their membership in the community. Conversely, it may also be that their membership in the community is considered to be the result of their prior or inherent possession of such qualities and powers as individuals. The charisma of a particular community may be a derivative charisma that exists by virtue of its association with a recognized charismatic leader, or else this charisma may be thought to reside primarily in the individual members or collectivity of the community, independent of a recognized leadership. In the Shi'ite case, we find elements of both, for while the spiritual distinctions of the Shi'ites are inextricably linked to their association with the spiritual figure of the Imām, their attraction to the Imām's leadership in the first place is often considered to be the result of an inherent spiritual qualification and distinction on the part of the individual Shi'ite that sets him/her apart from the larger society of Muslims. Both the Imāms and their disciples can be referred to as "*awliyā*" and their spiritual distinctions, as we will demonstrate in Chapter 8, are clearly related to one another and rooted in a sometimes very mystical conception of *walāyah*.

Given the more esoteric conceptions of *walāyah* that pertain to the spiritual position of the Imāms and their followers in some strains of Shi'ite *ḥadīth*, it would be instructive to briefly examine similar conceptions of *walāyah* pertaining to spiritual leadership and spiritual community in the context of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. The affinity of Shi'ism and Sufism have long been legitimately noted by scholars of both traditions, and with regard to the issues of *walāyah*, charisma, and spiritual community, the similarities are particularly evident. Just as the term *walī/awliyā*³ can be used in Shi'ism to denote both the Imām and his disciples, these terms in Sufism may likewise refer both to fully realized Sufi masters and to Sufi disciples and aspirants. The technical use of this term in Sufi literature can be traced to at least the third century in the writing of the Sufi al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, although there is evidence that this term was used among earlier Sufi thinkers who did not leave systematic, doctrinal works on the subject.⁴¹ This is perhaps more interesting in light of the fact that many Sufi chains of authority (*silsilah*, pl. *salāsīl*) include the first eight Imāmī Shi'ite Imāms (the last of whom died in the early third century) and consider all eight to have been important or even axial links in their spiritual genealogies. Although this direct link between Shi'ite and Sufi authorities appears to be broken after the eighth Imām, 'Alī al-Riḍā—and indeed some animosity between Shi'ite and Sufi figures appears later in the third century—Shi'ism and Sufism would continue along overlapping paths throughout Islamic history. This is clear enough in the intellectual and esoteric elements of Ismā'īlī Shi'ite thought, in certain pre-Safavid Iranian Shi'ite thinkers, such as Haydar al-Āmulī,

and most productively in the Sufi-Shi'ite synthesis engendered by the establishment of the Safavid Empire in Iran in the tenth Islamic century. In this last period, one witnesses the emergence of a school of Shi'ite "theosophy," a type of mystical Shi'ite philosophy, that is frequently referred to as "*irfān*," in order to distinguish its highly intellectual perspective from that of the more ecstatic, popular, and often antinomian strains of Sufi mysticism that also flourished in this period.

Walāyah and Esoterism

The notion that the outward or literal message of the Qur'an, as brought by the Prophet, does not encompass the entirety of the Prophet's spiritual heritage and teaching is common to both the Shi'ite and the Sufi perspectives, while this notion has historically been somewhat anathema to the nonmystical Sunni view. The strongly egalitarian emphasis in mainstream Sunnism stresses the clear and accessible nature of the spiritual message of Muḥammad, as well as the open and public manner in which this message was conveyed by Muḥammad to his community. Both Shi'ites and Sufis, however, hold that Muḥammad also brought an inner, esoteric teaching that was not intended—nor indeed bearable—for all of his followers, and that he therefore bestowed it exclusively upon an elite inner circle of disciples. For both Shi'ites and most Sufis, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is the central figure, or one of the central figures, in the transmission of this esoteric teaching from the Prophet, and his authority over this esoteric knowledge, and that of his spiritual successors, can be referred to as "*walāyah*" (or "*wilāyah*") in both traditions. In both Sufism and Shi'ism, the term *walāyah* is frequently discussed in relation to *risālah* or *nubuwwah* (messengerhood or prophecy), with *risālah* or *nubuwwah* referring to the particular commission of the Prophet to publicly proclaim the exoteric revelation, and *walāyah* referring to the specific vocation of either the Shi'ite Imāms or the Sufi mystical authorities to transmit and explain its inner meaning.⁴² The two spiritual offices are complementary but hierarchically ordered, for while the transmission of the inner meaning of the revelation represents the necessary fulfillment of the Prophet's exoteric mission, prophecy remains the primary human source of both exoteric and esoteric teachings, and the authority of every *walī* is, therefore, dependent upon that of the prophet (*rasūl* or *nabī*). At the same time, the spiritual emphasis placed by both Shi'ites and Sufis on the inner *ta'wīl*, or esoteric interpretation of the Islamic message, occasionally left the impression that they considered *walāyah* to represent a higher or nobler state than prophecy—and one can indeed find passages in both Shi'ite and Sufi literature that seem to suggest the superiority of

the Imāms or realized Sufi masters, respectively, over the pre-Muḥammadan prophets.⁴³ Thus, in response to their outside critics and, perhaps also to their own overly enthusiastic adherents, both Shi'ite and Sufi authors occasionally felt it necessary to explicitly assert the hierarchy between the prophets and the *awliyā'* and to provide a theoretical systemization of this hierarchy.⁴⁴

Walāyah as Spiritual Inheritance

We have already noted that *walāyah* is etymologically connected to relationships of inheritance, and that this meaning is important to its Qur'anic usage. In both Shi'ism and Sufism, *walāyah* is connected to a spiritualized notion of inheritance that applies to both its leadership and its membership as a whole. The idea of spiritual inheritance is fundamental to Shi'ite views of their Imāms, who are, after all, the biological descendants of the Prophet and of 'Alī. In Imāmī literature the Imāms are clearly identified as the heirs, not only of the Prophet Muḥammad, but of all prophets. In this way, the Imāms are also frequently referred to as the *awṣiyā'* (pl. of *waṣī*, "legatee"), and are considered in some Shi'ite traditions to have inherited many sacred prophetic artifacts, from the original revelations given to the earlier prophets, to the armor and weapons of Muḥammad, to the Ark of the Covenant (*tābūt*) and the tablets of Moses.⁴⁵ The well-known *ḥadīth* that states that the scholars (*'ulamā'*) are the heirs of the prophets is repeated in Imāmī Shi'ite traditions,⁴⁶ and given the numerous traditions that assert the Imāms' inheritance of all the knowledge of Muḥammad and previous prophets, this tradition would seem to pertain most fully to them. It is important to remember, however, that this inheritance is not a purely genealogical one, for not all descendants of the Prophet or 'Alī are considered to have a share in this. Rather there is an initiatic element as well, in that only the descendants designated as the Imām by their immediate predecessor, through a clear and unambiguous pronouncement of successorship, are heirs to this sacred knowledge and these sacred artifacts.

In Sufism, the term *awliyā'* is also related to the idea of spiritual inheritance, and this inheritance may pertain to all those who have undertaken the Sufi path, as seekers after the esoteric bequest of the Prophet, or more exclusively, to those masters and realized saints whose spiritual authority over this esoteric tradition has been transmitted to them by preceding masters leading back to 'Alī and then Muḥammad, himself. For Sufis, however, this notion of spiritual inheritance is purely initiatic in nature. While there have been Sufi brotherhoods in which the membership and leadership of the order have been connected to

particular families—even through generations—this transferral ideally takes place through a conscious act of spiritual transmission, and is not inherited automatically; and as in the case of the Shiʿite Imāms, the transmission of spiritual authority from one Sufi master to his successor or successors sometimes includes the symbolic transmission of items—particularly clothing—invested with sacred meaning. Ibn al-ʿArabī considers the *awliyāʾ*, or the realized Sufi saints, to be the Prophet’s true spiritual heirs, and even went so far as to consider himself the “seal of the sainthood (*khatm al-awliyāʾ*),” as Muḥammad was the “seal of prophethood (*khatm al-anbiyāʾ*).” For both Shiʿites and Sufis, then, *walāyah* is profoundly related to notions of spiritual inheritance, although for Shiʿites this special inheritance is transmitted through ʿAlī and the designated genealogical descendants of Muḥammad through ʿAlī, whereas for Sufis, it refers to a more widely diffused legacy passing through multiple initiatic lines. These two notions of spiritual inheritance come together in the writing of later Shiʿite theologians of the Safavid period, with Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, perhaps the most prominent theologian of the School of Isfahan in Safavid Iran, arguing that the term *awliyāʾ* refers both to the genealogical descendants of Muḥammad and to his spiritual heirs. As an Imāmī Shiʿite, however, he gives a uniquely prominent position to the Shiʿite Imāms by noting that when the genealogical and spiritual lines of inheritance converge—as they do in the case of the twelve Imāmī Imāms—this represents a particularly luminous spiritual station; it is, as he says, like “light upon light.”⁴⁷

If the term “*walī*” can be understood as a kind of “spiritual heir” in Sufism and Shiʿism, and esoteric knowledge is considered the essential content of that inheritance, then *walāyah* can be said to refer to a kind of “initiation”—that is, to a process through which that spiritual inheritance is transmitted and assumed. If the reciprocal nature of the term “*walī*” allows it to denote both the master empowered to initiate and the initiates themselves, *walāyah* can be said to refer, quite specifically, to the functional and initiatic bond between them.⁴⁸ This, however, is a particularly Sufi usage of the term. Most Sufi orders are known to have some sort of initiatic procedure that results in a transfer of spiritual power or “grace (*barakah*)” from master to disciple; and although *walāyah* is not the common term for such a mystical initiation (the preferred terms being “*tasharruf*” or “*tabayyūʿ*”), it has been connected to the more initiatic aspects of mystical practice by a number of scholars working in the field of Sufism. For example, Michel Chodkiewicz writes, in his study of the concept of sainthood in the writing of Ibn al-ʿArabī, that *walāyah* is the foundation of “all that is initiatic” in the thought of this prominent Sufi thinker,⁴⁹ and that the realm or sphere of *walāyah* in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s writing is unquestionably

an initiatic one. Henry Corbin, the great twentieth-century scholar of both Sufism and mystical Shi'ism, occasionally preferred to translate *walāyah* as "initiation" rather than "sanctity," arguing that the Western notion of "sanctity" or "sainthood" did not convey the full significance of the term.⁵⁰ In one instance he applied this meaning to the term as it was used in the mystical Shi'ite writings of Haydar al-Āmulī, translating *awliyā'* as "[Shi'ite] initiates" and *walāyah* as the initiatic function of the Imām.⁵¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a prominent scholar of both Sufism and Shi'ism, and an intellectual associate of Henry Corbin, has also translated *walāyah* as "initiation" in his discussions of Sufism and mystical Shi'ism.⁵² The connection between *walāyah* and initiation also exists within medieval Ismā'īlī Shi'ism. The Ismā'īlīs developed an elaborate proselytization and indoctrination process that seems to have been instituted at least by the late third century to recruit and train new members for their growing movement; and within this system, *awliyā'* was the technical term for new initiates undergoing training in the esoteric doctrines of Ismā'īlī thought.⁵³ Despite the presence of a connection between *walāyah* and some form of "initiation" in Ismā'īlī or more mystical forms of Imāmī Shi'ism, there is little evidence to support the notion of a formal initiatic process between Imām and disciple in mainstream Imāmī Shi'ism—although if such a process did exist, it was likely to be surrounded by even more secrecy than was the case in Sufism, given the politically controversial nature of Shi'ite affiliation, particularly during the lifetime of the Imāms themselves. Whether or not such a formal initiatic rite cemented the spiritual relationship between the Imām and his inner circle of disciples, a subtle parallel does exist between the formal spiritual bond linking the Sufi master and his disciples, and that linking the Shi'ite Imām and his followers, for the initiatic rite in Sufism usually represents not only a formal undertaking of the spiritual path (*ṭarīqah*) but also an implicit oath of spiritual obedience to the master administering the initiation.

Walāyah, Divine Proximity and Sanctity

Just as the mundane understanding of *walāyah* as inheritance or a relationship entailing inheritance was imbued with spiritual and esoteric meaning in Sufi and mystical Shi'ite thought, its basic etymological connection to notions of nearness, closeness, and mutual love and support made it an important concept in mystical discussions of the divine-human relationship. Ibn al-ʿArabī assigned metaphysical and mystical significance to the fact that *walī* was a name shared by both God and human beings in the Qurʾān, and considered *walāyah* to

represent a spiritualized form of mutual support (*naṣr*) between God and His faithful devotees. Corbin also translated *walāyah* in particular contexts as “Divine predilection”⁵⁴ toward particular human devotees, and as “spiritual nearness”⁵⁵ between God and the faithful. He also connected it to the notion of reciprocal love between God and the believers, citing, as did many Sufis, the Qur’anic verse that speaks of God replacing the rebellious peoples of the world with a new people, “whom I will love, and who will love Me.”⁵⁶ It will be remembered that all such notions of *walāyah* in the context of the divine-human relationship have a firm basis in the Qur’an, which identifies God as the *walī* and *naṣīr*, *par excellence*—or exclusively—of the believers.

Undoubtedly the most complete, theoretical study of the significance of the terms *wilāyah* and *walāyah* for Sufi notions of spiritual nearness, divine proximity, and consequent spiritual authority, is found in the recent, seminal study by Vincent Cornell, *The Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism*. In the detailed introduction to this work, and in subsequent discussions of the notion of Sufi sainthood in its Moroccan context, Cornell argues for a clear, functional distinction between the related terms *wilāyah* and *walāyah*, with *wilāyah* relating to the spiritual authority of the realized Sufi saint as apparent and as exercised outwardly both among his disciples and within his community at large, and *walāyah* referring to the principles of “metaphysical closeness to God” and [divine] “intimacy” that represent the true source of the Sufi master’s spiritual authority (*wilāyah*).⁵⁷ While *wilāyah*, or spiritual authority, belongs only to the recognized Sufi master, *walāyah* represents the divine proximity enjoyed by all Sufi aspirants in varying degrees, correlated to their level of spiritual attainment, and derived from their relationship/proximity (*walāyah*) to the spiritual master himself. Thus *walāyah*, in Cornell’s analysis has a more comprehensive nature than *wilāyah*, relating to the idea of closeness to God on the part of all devoted Sufis as well as to the relationship between master and disciple that facilitates this increased closeness to the divine.⁵⁸ As we shall demonstrate in the following chapters, the Shi‘ite tradition shares with Sufism this multifaceted and comprehensive view of *walāyah* as a term relating simultaneously to the domain of the spiritual master’s (here, the Imām’s) esoteric authority, to the particular proximity to God and the Prophet on which his authority is based, and to the spiritual status and benefits that the Imām’s Shi‘ite disciples enjoy by virtue of their proximity to him.

Finally, for Sufis, the relationship of spiritual inheritance or divine proximity denoted by the term *walāyah* is understood to be one that is “sanctifying” for the individual privy to such a relationship, and most scholars of Sufism prefer the term “sanctity” (Fr. *sanctité*) as a translation of the Sufi or mystical conception of *walāyah*. Seyyed

Hossein Nasr, in one instance, defines *walāyah* as that “spiritual presence which enables men to reach a state of sanctity;”⁵⁹ while Corbin interprets it as that “divine love or favour that renders eternally sacred the ‘Friends of God.’”⁶⁰ As a result of having entered the esoteric and initiatic realm, and consequently into a profoundly reciprocal relationship of love with God, the *walī* is “sanctified” and enters into the state of “sainthood”—another, related definition of *walāyah*, and one that is perhaps most popular with modern scholars of Sufism, such as Chodkiewicz and Cornell. In some Sufi doctrinal works, *walāyah* can refer to a particular station along the Sufi path, with this sanctified or saintly state being variously understood as something that God bestows freely upon select individuals,⁶¹ or else as the result of one’s individual efforts on the path, or both.

In a Shi‘ite context, the Imāms and their descendants may be compared to the realized saints of Sufism, given the moral infallibility (*‘iṣmah*) attributed to the Imāms in Shi‘ite doctrine,⁶² as well as the notions of intercession and the popular shrine culture that consequently developed around the Imāms and their descendants generally. Similar notions of sanctity, however, were not considered to apply to the Shi‘ite community at large. For although Shi‘ites, as we shall see, considered themselves to represent the true believers, and something of a spiritual elite within the larger Muslim community, their participation in *walāyah* and their status as the *awliyā*³ had less to do with a kind of moral attainment or moral perfection than with their special access to divine guidance through their spiritual predilection for the Imām,⁶³ and their special access to divine forgiveness and leniency as a result of their loyalty to, and efforts on behalf of, the divinely chosen Imām. Thus, while Vincent Cornell argues that *walāyah* in its Sufi context is better translated as “sanctity” than as “charisma,” in the Shi‘ite case, the reverse seems to be true. *Walāyah*, as it pertained to lay members of the Shi‘ite community, signified, in part, an innate attraction to the Imāms that provided them with a particularly expedient path toward salvation, and even certain spiritual powers and distinctions that echoed those of the Imāms to whom they attached themselves; but it did not represent, in itself, the kind of moral attainment usually understood as fully realized sainthood, or “sanctity” in English. Yet, like the notion of individual sanctity in Sufism, the individual Shi‘ite’s spiritually beneficial and salvific attraction to right guidance in the form of the Imām was sometimes considered to be the result of a kind of divine selection or privileging. Such notions of spiritual “privilege” separating the *awliyā*³ from the rest of the Muslim community—whether understood as “sanctity” or as “charisma”—are generally at odds with the more egalitarian emphasis of nonmystical Sunni Islam,

but deeply embedded in both the Shi'ite and the Sufi sense of religious identity and spiritual purpose.

We have examined the relationship between *walāyah* and esoteric knowledge in both Sufism and mystical Shi'ism, as well as its connection to notions of spiritual inheritance, initiation, divine proximity, and sanctity or sainthood. We have also demonstrated how the various meanings assigned to *walāyah* in Sufi and Shi'ite contexts are profoundly related both to one another and to the basic etymology and Qur'anic usage of term. *Walāyah*, therefore, should be understood not simply as a term assigned different technical meanings in various contexts but rather as a comprehensive term encompassing a set of meanings that are intimately related to one another, but for which no single English translation suffices. Only when the full breadth of the concepts and ideas it signifies are considered holistically, and in relation to its use across the spectrum of the Islamic tradition, can we hope to arrive at some understanding of the power and meaning of this term for the Shi'ites of the first Islamic centuries, for whom this concept was central to all that related to their spiritual identity.