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Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī (d. 1762): The Hajj Journey and Intellectual Scholarship Between India and Arabia

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Abstract: Rather than simply claiming the “unorthodox” or “pluralistic” mindset of an early modern Muslim thinker, this intellectual micro-history aims to show the complexity of Shāh Walī Allāh’s (d. 1762) thought-world. This article follows him to Mecca and Medina for the *Hajj* pilgrimage. While pilgrimage is traditionally included in the fundamentals of Islamic practice, it is also important to realize that the majority of Muslims have not historically participated in this pilgrimage. Due to the physical limitations of travelling as the Muslim community rapidly expanded in the 7th century onwards, we have nearly a thousand years until the 18th century where only a select few Muslims, usually wealthy enough to make the arduous journey, participated in the yearly practice. This created a complex culture of pilgrims in the Holy Cities with the cities functioning as informal circles of scholarship. Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī engages in this knowledge production process *while* carrying out the mandatory rituals associated with the Hajj pilgrimage. Thus, this article shows that the complex interplay of Walī Allāh with Meccan and Medinan scholars is a highly dynamic process with unexpected outcomes as specific sacred geography interacts with the conceptual (and genealogical) categories that scholarly pilgrims bring *with them* to this intellectual encounter. In doing so, we catch a glimpse of the 18th century through a very particular set of Indian Sufi eyes.

Keywords: Hajj pilgrimage; Sufism; Islam; South Asia; shrine visitation (*ziyārat*); Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujūd*); intellectual history



Citation: Shairani, Khan. 2024. Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī (d. 1762): The Hajj Journey and Intellectual Scholarship Between India and Arabia. *Religions* 15: 1378. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111378>

Academic Editor: Susanne Olsson

Received: 9 September 2024

Revised: 3 November 2024

Accepted: 4 November 2024

Published: 13 November 2024



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1. Introduction

The Hajj pilgrimage remains one of the mainstays of Islamic tradition, and it is regularly cited as one of the “Five Pillars” in Western introductions to Islam as well as traditional accounts of the obligations of Muslims globally. However, beyond the first- and second-century Hijri, it had already become an impossible ideal for most Muslims to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. Mostly, this was due to the rapid expansion of the early caliphate and the difficulty of covering thousands of miles for the suddenly far-flung new Muslims, those who were Arabs and had conquered the territories of the Sasanian and Byzantine empires, as well as new converts, largely Persian peasants, who joined the empires in droves, creating an urban crisis for the Umayyad administrators (Hoyland 2017, pp. 56–60, 160–69). The wealth and time required of the journey limited the pilgrimage mostly to those within close proximity or immensely wealthy.

However, the 19th century oversaw an immense expansion of the Hajj as the technological innovation of steam engines, and, consequently, steam ships, increased the numbers of Hajj pilgrims significantly (Ozyuksel 2014). At the same time, the development of railroad technology also produced infrastructural projects on the part of the Ottoman government (who controlled the Holy Cities) for a railway from Istanbul to Mecca in the late 19th century (Green 2015). This later explosion of migration and pilgrimage spread both diseases and ideas through imperial pathways in a virulent, “global” sense (Low 2008; Mishra 2011). However, in Walī Allāh’s Indian Ocean world of the 18th century, neither these intensifying technologies nor the imperial networks that connected them had yet come into existence.

Thus, the Hajj in the 18th century was on a smaller scale, and, consequently, scholars going had to have prior intellectual connections to groups of scholars already there.

The world of the Hajj was part of an older Indian Ocean trade network. Subsequently, the numbers of pilgrims were both fewer and much more of an elite, scholarly nature. Walī Allāh was part of these older networks of scholars coming to Mecca and Medina and sometimes staying permanently as attendants to the holy sites in the Arabian peninsula. This category of pilgrims, known as *mujāwirūn*, would become part of the scholarly landscape of these two cities (Sindī 1872, pp. 386–88; Phulātī 1999, p. 150; Troll 2003, pp. 53–80; Husain 1912, p. 173). While attending the Hajj was often glossed in legal manuals as one of the obligations of each individual Muslim, scholars who actually had the opportunity were aware of the immense significance of the event; a trip that took several months would culminate in a short five or six days in which the pilgrim fulfilled the rites and rituals: circumambulating the Ka'ba seven times, walking between the hills of Safa and Marwa seven times in remembrance of Abraham's wife Hagar, the stoning of Satan by throwing pebbles, and the sacrifice of an animal.

These rituals were simply the highlight of the trip, for scholars attending would also have the opportunity to interact with other scholars who resided in Mecca, or were visiting from other parts of the world. From distant West Africa, to the Indonesian Island of Java, to China, these pilgrims made up a massive network of religious scholars already trained in different religious disciplines. This network was described as undergoing significant changes in the 18th century, becoming an informal center of "*tajdīd*-oriented Sufism" (Voll 2002, pp. 356–72). *Tajdīd*, or renewal, is an important concept that is often paired with reform, or *iṣlāḥ* (Moosa and Tareen 2012, pp. 462–63). This paradigm has overshadowed the field of South Asian Islam, for it traps the conversation and intellectual production of individuals for the purposes of the colonial moment. Scholars either were effective at reforming the state to fight against colonialism, or they were intellectual failures. Instead, there was, in fact, much more continuity with the pre-colonial past rather than simply a total rupture (Purohit and Tareen 2020, pp. 134–36).

The primary way that this paradigm is deployed is to shoehorn individual scholars in the 18th century into "revivers/reformers of tradition" without any regard to their own agency and context. Shāh Walī Allāh is an example *par excellence* of a "reviver-reformer" who fulfills the needs of a Western historiography that teleologically assumes the failure of Islamic tradition against European colonialism. From an Indian perspective, he is instead looking forward even beyond the failures of the 18th century to the Indian nationalist movement in the 20th century, providing the tools to reconstruct Islamic tradition in prescient ways. Here, we will try to contextualize Walī Allāh's journey to the Hajj through his own particular intellectual conceptualizations to understand what the pilgrimage meant to him and how it affected his scholarship.

The old Orientalist complaints of a decline in Islamic civilization have slowly transitioned into a conversation about why these scholars made important contributions to Islamic intellectual history in response to European encroachment, centering the causal factor of change on Europe. The most recent wave of scholarship has tried to read Islamic scholars in this period on their own terms (Dallal 2018; El-Rouayheb 2015b). For much of the 18th century, European colonial projects did not have the kind of strength they gained in the 19th century, and thus did not have the impact on "discourse" that later became a mainstay of the colonial reshaping of their imperial subjects (Mahmood 2016, pp. 1–28). Mahmood follows Asad in viewing secularism as a discursive operation of power that generates the spheres of the public, private, political, and religious, rather than a simple organizing structure for social organization. Discourse in this Foucauldian sense can describe the imposition of external values as a fundamental feature of the British imperial/colonial project. It is one way to describe "colonialism" in India as a radically different project than imperial projects in the pre-modern world. Yet, many scholars have seen 19th-century Sufi reactions to colonialism (from violent revolt to strained collaboration) as continuations of reform movements in the 18th century before the spread of European colonial projects

in Asia (Haykel 2003; Levtzion and Voll 1987). The paradigm of reform is then projected backwards to conceptually imprison figures like Walī Allāh as pre-cursors, or prescient divines that saw the colonial ships on the horizon, or to claim that figures even before that were central to the eventual partition of the Indian subcontinent (Rahman and Moosa 2000, p. 202). The partition is then projected backwards as inevitable by holding religious scholars from centuries before at fault for the violence that erupted in the 20th century. As an example, Rizvi (2004, pp. 285–86) complains that for “Shah Wali-Allah the mark of the perfect implementation of the Sharia was the performance of jihad. There were people, said the Shah, who indulged in their lower nature by following their ancestral religion, ignoring the advice and commands of the Prophet Mohammed. If one chose to explain Islam to people like this it was to do them a disservice. Force, said the Shah, was the better course—Islam should be forced down their throats like bitter medicine to a child. This, however, was possible only if the leaders of the non-Muslim communities who failed to accept Islam were killed, the strength of the community was reduced, their property confiscated and a situation was created which led to their followers and descendants willingly accepting Islam. Another means of ensuring conversions was to prevent other religious communities from worshipping their own gods. Moreover, unfavourable dis-criminating laws should be imposed on non-Muslims in matters of rule of retaliation, compensation for manslaughter, and marriage and political matters. However, the proselytization programme of Shah Wali-Allah only included the leaders of the Hindu community. The low class of the infidels, according to him, were to be left alone to work in the fields and for paying jiziya. They like beasts of burden and agricultural livestock were to be kept in abject misery and despair”. This is hardly fair to Walī Allāh’s views as it severely distorts Indian society in the 18th century. Since such indigenous scholars typically adopt a moralizing tone, and often critique their contemporary moment as a decline from former glory, it has been easy to take their larger intellectual projects out of context (Abou-El-Haj 2005, pp. 23–25). This is particularly true for a scholar like Walī Allāh, who never held office in any official capacity within the Mughal imperial system.

In these ways, Walī Allāh has been painted as a reviver of Islamic tradition, an emic category, while simultaneously called a reformer who participated in a larger scholarly network centered in Mecca and Medina. In this reading of Walī Allāh, he simply attends the Hajj in Mecca, absorbs ideas from the quintessential Islamic center, and returns as a carrier of a “Neo-Sufism” intended to either react to colonial forces, or, in later scholarship, to triumphantly transform society into a pure Islamic ideal (Rahman 1968, pp. 206–9). The conversation about Neo-Sufism has developed over the last four decades to include considerable nuance about the wider phenomenon of Wahhabism and other critical social movements (Voll 2002, pp. 356–72; 1975, pp. 32–39). The fact remains that the assumed connection between Wahhabism and a reforming Naqshbandi Sufi order has not borne fruit (Dallal 2018, pp. 5–6). However, it is worthwhile to try to think about an individual scholar like Walī Allāh as a South Asian Delhi scholar first, and see the tradition within which he sees *himself*. This will require us to go beyond the typical story of Sufis versus anti-Sufis that form the protagonists of the narrative of intellectual decline in the 18th century Islamic world (Sirriyeh 1999).

2. The Indian Background in the Holy Cities

India was not a peripheral part of the Islamic world in the 17th and 18th centuries. Its landscape was dotted with Sufi shrines and it was hardly an exceptionally mystical place compared to other traditionally Islamic cities like Damascus, Baghdad, or Samarqand. India became a refuge from marauding Mongol warriors for thousands of highly-skilled Muslims in Central Asia, and became one of the few places to stave off Mongol advances in the 13th century. Simultaneously, Delhi grew to become one of the world’s major Islamic cities just as the Mongols wiped the symbolic authority of the caliphate in Baghdad from the map. For South Asian rulers, “the Mongol holocaust in Central Asia proved a timely boon, unlike the catastrophe it represented for millions in Asia and the Middle East” (Eaton 2019, p. 47).

This set up the Indian subcontinent as one of the great centers of Islam in general, and Sufism in particular, as different Sufi orders migrated into the bountiful environs of North India, transforming the metaphysical landscape along with the physical. Eaton shows how Sufi saints turned jungles into arable land while simultaneously creating centers of worship that slowly converted local indigenous peoples over many generations (Eaton 1993). In 1572, the Mughal conquest of the port city of Surat gave them access to the Indian Ocean for the first time, enabling a new imperial authority to have access to the far easier sea route for the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The purpose of the Hajj was manifold. Not simply to be read as a spiritual journey without political, economic, or social functions, the Hajj as a ritual practice encompassed a powerful symbolic place within many Muslim societies, not least the Mughals from the 16th century onwards. Naimur Rahman Farooqi has shown how the Emperor Akbar attempted to rival the sovereignty of Ottoman control of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina by sending a large contingent of Mughals on pilgrimage in the 1580s (Farooqi 1996, pp. 32–48). This was a symbolic gesture to exemplify the rise of a new claimant to the throne of “caliph” but this was by and large a resounding failure. The political benefits of control of the Holy Cities bestowed legitimacy on every realm, and the Ottomans conquest of the region in the early 16th century along with Egypt had created new intellectual currents in the Ottoman empire. Egyptian and Arabian scholars were highly specialized experts on hadith scholarship, and the conquest brought new intellectual expertise with *hadith* into the Ottoman center (Pfeifer 2020, pp. 31–61). By the 18th century, several scholars had made the pilgrimage either as a short trip for the purpose of personal training, as a retinue of a more famous scholar (like Ahmad Sirhindi’s son, Muhammad Ma’sūm’s trip in the 1660s), or, finally, to immigrate and spend the rest of their lives in the Holy Cities. Shāh Walī Allāh chose to visit the Hejaz in 1730, fully intending it to be an educational and spiritual voyage. But, in doing so, he was in a long line of South Asian scholars leaving Hindustan to both fulfill what he saw as an obligation and to match wits with some of the best scholars in the Islamic world. Many of those scholars had come from places like Morocco, Syria, Egypt, and India.

There had always been a long interplay between Mecca and Medina and any part of the world where Muslims were able to travel and perform the pilgrimage. Simultaneously with the performance of the pilgrimage rituals, they all found opportunities to engage with circles of scholarship in the Holy Cities. While some scholars spent their entire lives in Mecca or Medina, some spent a few years and returned home. The constant flux in scholarly attendance meant that ideas were introduced, challenged, and transformed in the fecund intellectual climate. Its economic and political worth, however, was far less obvious. The intellectual value of Arabia to the wider network of Muslim scholars is undeniable. However, the *process* of intellectual transformation has been generalized without sufficient detail. Thus, the major paradigm of revival–reform in the 18th century is based on the centrality of prophetic reports, or *hadith*, for the changes that wracked Muslim societies starting in the 18th century. This was largely to push back against the earlier scholarship that framed changes in the Islamic world as responses to European actions.

A prime example of a “reforming” Sufi order is usually given as the Naqshbandi–Mujaddidi order founded by Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624). Mujaddidi Sufis were in conversation firstly with Central Asian Naqshbandis, then with Chishtis upon their advent into India in the 16th century, and, finally, became one of the most far-flung orders with a presence within both Mughal and Ottoman courts in the 18th and 19th centuries, overshadowing the original Naqshbandi order (Abu-Manneh 2003, pp. 303–8). However, during and for several generations after Ahmad Sirhindi’s death, there does not seem to be any example of a “reformer” that takes up the mantle of Sirhindi and tries to impact political power to reform society. Although Walī Allāh is seen as a *mujaddid* (renewer) by 20th-century Muslims in South Asia, he was also influenced by Naqshbandi scholars in the Holy Cities, who had come to Mecca and Medina as Indian immigrants in the early 16th century, around the same time Baqi Billah (d. 1603) had brought Naqshbandi Sufism to Hindustan (Coptly

2003, pp. 322–48). At the same time, Walī Allāh was part of other Sufi orders as well, typical for Muslims in South Asia in the 18th century. The complex of ideas he produced was thus not simply beholden to a single author or idea. However, a major concept that suffused many of the ideas of Sufis in the early modern period was that of *wahdat al-wujūd*, or the Doctrine of Unitary Being. This means that God’s relation to the cosmos is defined as giving “existence” to it, and the only “real” existence is God. This can be interpreted in many ways, some controversial for certain Muslims, but, for Sufis, accepted with minor inflections until the modern period.

It is highly misleading to focus on *particular* Sufi orders when trying to understand the story of this Doctrine of Unitary Being, because it was a far wider phenomenon than simply the idea of a particular group of Sufis. All Sufi orders participated in a larger intellectual conversation that spoke to the interaction between Sufism and *shariah*, a topic that continues to animate the discussion with the false dichotomy raised between the legal and the mystical in Islamic thought. In the 17th century, Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī, the famous Sufi scholar of Medina, and his teachers and, subsequently, his students engaged Indian scholars and furthered a long conversation on Unitary doctrine in the new venue of the Arab-dominated Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina—one of the last places where such metaphysics was not regnant. However, a generation earlier, it was initially Shattari Sufis from South India that brought the metaphysical theories of the mystic Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240) to the Holy Cities (just as it had been Shattari Sufis like Muhammad Ghawth who had engaged in the study of yogic practices in India) (El-Rouayheb 2015b, pp. 249–58). Neither was the rise of Mecca and Medina as *scholarly* cities new, for the scholars of Prophetic reports had been patronaged by the Mamluk sultans (r. 1250–1517) until the conquest of the Mamluks by the Ottomans. The Mamluks had controlled the Holy Cities and contributed to their increasing population of long-term visitors, *mujāwirūn*, and made the cities a center of scholarship. In particular, the Mamluk sultans were great patrons of Prophetic reports, or *hadith*, which led to the rise of *hadith* studies in the Ottoman empire as Egyptian scholars engaged more with the new Ottoman center (Pfeifer 2020, pp. 31–61).

Thus, if one dismisses the supposition of European ideas transforming the Islamic world in the 18th century, should we not also dismantle the reform paradigm that seems to suppose that Muslim scholars wished reform based on some pre-modern universalist fanaticism? Reform in response to what, and why in the 18th century? Rather, we will argue here that 18th-century intellectual history is part of a continuity with 16th- and 17th-century scholars interested in God’s relation to the world. The intellectual arguments found in scholarship until colonization in the 19th century is part of a dialogue that spreads the Doctrine of Unitary Being as the doctrinal basis for Islamic societies, with other kinds of thought being largely a minority in India and Arabia. The picture formed above points to the emerging triumph of Sufism as the reigning ideology of the Muslim world in the 17th and 18th centuries until colonialism renders Sufism the only viable target for internal dissension in Muslim societies in the 19th century. Walī Allāh is one of the last generations of scholars engaged in making Sufism the heart of the Islamic sciences, as evidenced by his wide-ranging oeuvre and enthusiastic theorizing of everything from the individual human, to civilization, to the metaphysical firmaments of existence.

3. In a Sufi World: Walī Allāh’s Hajj Journey

Shāh Walī Allāh was adding to a long legacy of Indian Sufism by going on Hajj, and he was not necessarily part of the “Mujaddidi” Naqshbandis. Instead, he was representing a middle opinion amidst a network of Sufis that disagreed with Ahmad Sirhindi on the issue of *wahdat al-wujūd*, as well as the “preference” of the Ka’ba over the Prophet. The scholars in the Holy Cities disagreed sharply with Sirhindi on this issue, culminating in a fatwa, solicited by an Indian ulama of the scholars in the Holy Cities, that declared someone who believed such a doctrine as outside the circle of believers (Copt 2003, pp. 331–45). The later visit to Medina in 1656 of Muhammad Ma’sūm, Sirhindi’s son, seems to have placated the scholars there, defusing this temporary disagreement amongst Sufis.

Walī Allāh's visit, studying with the son of the scholar who had met Muhammad Ma'sūm, culminated in his translating one of Ahmad Sirhindi's treatises against the Shi'ites. Clearly, Sirhindi's ideas had been rejected as controversial, then modified to be acceptable by later scholars, and finally accepted and honored by the early 18th century, a process that shows the variable reception and highly contested process of incorporation of scholarly contributions to this tradition of Islamic knowledge. In the same way, Walī Allāh's ideas would be wrestled with, modified, and accepted partially by later generations of scholars, transformed into a corpus that highlighted the political and suppressed the metaphysical.

Shāh Walī Allāh was born in the small village of Phulat to the 62-year-old Sufi and legal scholar 'Abd al-Rahīm and his second wife, Fakhr al-Nisā', about a half-century after Muhammad Ma'sūm travelled to the Holy Cities. Despite an attempt at pilgrimage when he was twenty years old, it was not until Walī Allāh turned twenty-seven that he was able to leave for the Hejaz, following the steps of innumerable Indian scholars before him (Phulatī 1999, pp. 136–37). The Hajj that year was to be performed on June 13–18th, 1731. Upon having a vision of holding a brilliant banner aloft and headed towards the House of God, i.e., the Ka'ba, Walī Allāh started his trip on 21 October 1730. He had given himself eight months to reach the Holy City of Mecca. He first built up his spiritual grace for this important event by visiting nearby shrines of Sufi masters, from the shrine of Bu Ali Qalandar, to Shams-i-Turk, and then Shah Jalāl in Panipat, just north of Delhi. He followed this spiritual path with disciples onward to Sirhind and the shrine of Ahmad Sirhindi in the Punjab. From there, it was onwards to Lahore and the famous Ali Hujwiri's shrine, the author of the first Persian Sufi text, *Kashf al-Mahjūb* (*Unveiling the Hidden*), then, to Multan and Makhdūm Bahā' al-Dīn and Shah Rukn i-Ālam's shrines.

Upon reaching Sindh, and, apparently, brushing off throngs of new disciples who wished to join him on the pilgrimage, the major scholars and Sufis of Gujarat gathered themselves to him to partake in his blessed presence in Thattha (Phulatī 1999, pp. 147–49). However, the frequent stops on the journey to Surat made their caravan late, and, upon reaching the coast, most of the ships had already departed, and one of the few ships left was filled with pilgrims and merchants already. To complicate matters, the time for ships to leave the west coast was nearing its end, and the dangers of an older ship making it to the Arabian coastal city of Jeddah without having severe hardships on the way was mounting. However, Walī Allāh was adamant in completing his voyage and the ship sailed and arrived in Jeddah forty-five days later on 22 May 1731, just in time for completing the pilgrimage in mid-June (Phulatī 1999, p. 150). In fact, they had enough time to perform the '*umrah al-tamattu'*', the lesser pilgrimage performed before the Hajj, that is not restricted to particular days in the Islamic calendar and takes far less time to perform than the days-long Hajj.

Yet, the most significant portion of the journey for Walī Allāh's intellectual development was yet to come. After several months interacting with the religious scholars of Mecca, Walī Allāh and Muhammad 'Ashiq, his cousin and companion, travelled to Medina in September. There, conversations with Abū Tāhir al-Madanī, the son of the famous Kurdish scholar Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī, a major exponent of the theories of the Sufi theorist Ibn al-'Arabī, led Walī Allāh to write a series of short treatises about Sufism, and particular practices of different Sufi orders (Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī 1883; Baljon 2003, pp. 189–97). However, these treatises were hardly new intellectual achievements by Walī Allāh, and mostly comprised overviews of the rules and regulations of Sufi orders particular to India. Returning to Mecca, he performed another Hajj the next year, and, while he was getting ready to return home, news of the passing of his mother, Fakhr un-Nisā', reached him. Walī Allāh and Muhammad 'Ashiq boarded a ship headed toward Surat and reached it in a remarkably quick twenty-three days.

His journey after the Hajj raises some interesting questions about the standard impact that the Hajj had on Walī Allāh. Whether seen as a transformation into a form of scholarship closer to the informal circle of scholars in Medina such as Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī or Abdullah al-Basri, or being impacted by "reformist" ideas, one could expect that Walī Allāh's trajectory

after his return from the Hajj would vary significantly from his earlier trip towards the Hejaz (Voll 2002, pp. 356–72; Knysh 1995, pp. 40–47). Instead, we find much more of the same, with only a slight difference: the path Walī Allāh took back home would travel first to the dargah of the Shattāri Sufi master, Muhammad Ghawth (d. 1562), famous for his incorporation of Hindu yogic practices into Sufism. This time, instead of following the route they had taken to Surat, they turned instead towards the Deccan, going south on their way back to Delhi. They passed through Agra, visiting Mīr Abu al-‘Āla’s shrine, and, finally, arrived back in Shāhjahānabād (Delhi) on 30 December 1732 (Phulaṭī 1999, p. 157). After two years of travelling, they had finally reached home.

4. Shrine Visitation: Criticism and Its Scope

Shrine visitation (*ziyārat*) in the modern period is considered an unlawful innovation by many Muslims. This reaction to Sufi practices is best exemplified by Salafi attitudes that draw on the intellectual heritage of Ibn Taymiyya, who strongly condemns shrine visitation (Talmon-Heller 2019, pp. 227–51). However, this modern general condemnation of shrines was incomprehensible to Sufis who thought of the landscape as imbued with divine blessings in the sacred landscape of Sufi shrines. More generally, prominent hadith scholars like Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ (d. 1149) and Ibn Ḥajar (d. 1449) defended the visitation of holy places other than for the Hajj, and criticized Ibn Taymiyya’s position. Thus, Ibn Taymiyya’s position was a minority opinion until the anti-Sufism movements of the late 19th century (El-Rouayheb 2015a, pp. 269, 290–94).

The biggest difference between the Hajj journey and its return was not a sudden change in Walī Allāh’s attitude towards the saintly shrines that continue to dot the Indian landscape to this day. Rather, it seems that Walī Allāh and Muhammad ‘Āshiq made their way through central India rather than the way they had originally come. There could be two different reasons for this. Firstly, Walī Allāh had the same kind of spiritual connections, both in terms of spiritual lineage and contacts, in the Indian south to boast of the same kind of reception he received in Multan. Secondly, the pilgrimage itself was such a major spiritual undertaking that others wished to partake in its spiritual munificence as well by interacting with the admittedly youthful Walī Allāh, for he was hardly the wizened and powerful master that would occasion such a welcoming from the elite classes of the city. Both explanations may be correct, as Walī Allāh’s father, Abdul Rahīm, was, in fact, a disciple of Mīr Abū al-‘Ulā (b. 1582), who had been part of the army of the general Man Singh, Governor of Eastern India, before becoming a major Sufi saint in Agra (Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī 2007, pp. 78–82). In visiting Gwalior and Agra, Walī Allāh was piecing together his own father’s connections to the spiritual landscape of India as well as others farther removed from his own spiritual lineage. The Sufi Master, Muhammad Ghawth, and Khwaja Khanū, whose tombs were both in Gwalior, were not associated with Walī Allāh’s lineage, and were more likely an addition to the itinerary as they *were* in the lineage of his Medinan teacher Abū Tāhir and his father, Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī.

Some scholars have used later 19th-century anti-Sufi logics that interpret shrine visitation as a kind of pilgrimage to point to the prohibition by the Prophet on any pilgrimage (*hajj*) to anything other than the “three mosques” (Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem) (Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī 1996, p. 188). Of course, Muslims do not carry out a “pilgrimage” to Jerusalem or Medina, as the formal pilgrimage is only to the city of Mecca. But, in the enthusiasm to link Walī Allāh to the later 19th-century *islāhi* (reform) movement, we see precisely a juxtaposition of the prophet’s prohibition of “pilgrimage” to places other than Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem with a quote from Walī Allāh that “According to me, one ought to include in this prophetic interdiction also the visiting of a saint’s shrine” (Baljon 2003, p. 192). Unfortunately, I have not found this quote in other copies of this text, perhaps pointing to an editor’s remark instead. It is eminently reasonable to see the two practices of shrine visitation and the pilgrimage as quite similar. But, for Walī Allāh, these were two different practices, for the purpose of the *Hajj* was to “esteem the House, since it is one of the symbols of God, and esteeming it is esteeming God Almighty” (Shāh Walī Allāh

al-Dihlawī 2005, p. 87). Shrines were not in the same conceptual umbrella as pilgrimage, for, although people attended to shrines, and had dreams of saintly figures, and even requested that they, due to their high spiritual status, request something on their behalf from God or the Prophet, it simply was not a “pilgrimage.” Thus, it did not figure that such a visit would constitute the theological problematics of a pilgrimage to other places. Clearly, a *pilgrimage* “undertaken to other sites either involve associationism or some baseless innovation,” but not simply the visiting of someone’s grave or even supernatural communication with the dead (Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī 1996, p. 227).

In this way, it is simply untenable to argue that Walī Allāh could possibly be against the visitation of shrines in the manner of 19th-century anti-Sufi reformers. In fact, he is careful to defend the honor of Mīr Abū al-‘Ulā when it came to the playing of musical instruments in his study circles, another anti-Sufi polemic from the 19th century:

“It should be absolutely clear that Mīr Abū al-‘Ulā’s Sufi path was nothing more than following the *shariah* of the prophet and the Muhammadan path (*tariqa-i Muhammadi*), for he did not add anything to the path of his *tariqa* and he never deviated from the way of the prophet in word or deed”. (Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī 2007, p. 84)

Moreover, while the strong dismissal of any possible deviation from correct actions would suggest that perhaps Abū al-‘Ulā must never have listened to a musical instrument in his life, Walī Allāh instead adduces the authority of the great Chishti saint, Mu‘īn Al-Dīn Chishtī (d. 1236), saying that “he used to listen to musical instruments sometimes coincidentally”, according to the saying of Khwaja Buzurg (the Great Master, Mu‘īn al-Dīn) that ‘Neither do I do it, nor do I prohibit it’ (Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī 2007, p. 84). Thus, Walī Allāh demonstrates that, instead of applying the strongest condemnation on the practices of his time as some later 19th-century reformers/polemicists were wont to do, he instead preferred a gentler admonition of very particular Sufi practices. In this case, he draws the line of listening to music at dancing, saying that “it was not the case that someone in his sessions would perpetrate something against the *shariah* and play musical instruments *and dance*” [my emphasis], although he had just mentioned that the saint *had* indeed listened to music. The manner of admonition here is perhaps particular to Walī Allāh’s personality, for his greatest criticisms tend to come after lengthy arguments explaining both sides of the issue. Clearly, for Walī Allāh, a saint such as Abū al-‘Ulā would not condemn the use of musical instruments (as it simply was not condemnable), nor permit someone to dance if such instruments were playing, for that would be against the etiquette (*adab*) of a scholarly mystical session. Rather than a decontextualized and universal prohibition of certain practices, a 19th-century innovation of anti-Sufi “reformers”, he, instead, was fond of the finer details of the context of permissibility or prohibition according to the spatial and temporal qualities of the situation.

Walī Allāh also exhibited an important feature of 17th- and 18th-century Sufi scholars in that he was initiated into multiple Sufi paths while in Medina. Initiated by Abū Tāhir, he maintained a connection with him until his death, sending a letter of condolence to his son, Ibrāhīm al-Madanī (Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī 2010, pp. 19–20). The connections to the Holy Cities seem to have continued after his return to India, but this does not mean that Walī Allāh was following the orders of scholars at the “center” of Islam. Instead, he had visions while on the pilgrimage that started his interest in writing and theorizing about a host of different Islamic disciplines, from prophetic reports and legal history to Sufi metaphysics. In fact, Walī Allāh’s interests in knowledge seem to be wholly unique to him, and hardly derived from any particular thread of prior Islamic intellectual activity. What we can confirm, however, is that he was deeply influenced by Sufi metaphysics, and his reading of the other Islamic disciplines was informed by his knowledge of Sufi thought and premised on visions, another major pillar of Sufi practice.

5. The Paradigm of Knowledge Diffusion

These questions of Sufi etiquette and whether certain practices were acceptable were not issues that Allāh learned to critique *after* he went on Hajj. Although scholars tend to assume that Walī Allāh's pilgrimage was a transformative experience that lent him the tools of critique to return to Hindustan and reform it, the picture is far more complicated. Rather than reading Walī Allāh as a young scholar transformed by his pilgrimage into a powerful scholar largely due to the efforts of his instructors in the Holy Cities, a quick review of his youth will unveil an inquisitive mind with individual proclivities well before he ever went on pilgrimage. The first thirty years in the Hindustan of the early 18th century were not simply formative—they were the foundation of his critiques, interests, and scholarly output throughout his life.

Even in his own youth, Walī Allāh had anxieties about the practices of certain Sufi circles, particularly those who had taught his own father. This is why he asked his father about Mīr Abū al-ʿUlā multiple times before he passed away when Walī Allāh was seventeen years old. A young Walī Allāh says: "I once asked him [his father] that I have heard people say that [Abū al-ʿUlā] was incredibly attracted to the practice of *samāʿ*, and he replied: 'I do not remember other than a few festivals that he participated in it'". Undeterred, the young and inquisitive Walī Allāh continued: "People say that upon whosoever Mīr Abū al-ʿUlā turned his gaze or gave them his chewed *pān* (betel-nut), they would fall unconscious". His father responded: "I have personally used his chewed *pān*, and this was not the causality" (Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī 2007, p. 840).

While Walī Allāh certainly had personal convictions about what constituted right practice and what kinds of beliefs (*aqāʾid*) were against the intellectual efforts of his own predecessors, he did not simply dismiss the entire edifice of received thought he gained from his father and his teachers upon visiting Mecca and Medina. Instead, we see a young scholar very confident in his own position within this web of interrelated scholars whose goals were not simply the accumulation of knowledge, but the cultivation of the human soul so it could *taste* (*dhawq*) Truth. The audience for such a tradition would not be the uninitiated, and, in fact, neither would such a tradition try to *convert* others to their way of thinking. Conversations within this tradition happened between equals, and Walī Allāh found peers in the Holy Cities with whom he engaged in conversations that tweaked his understanding but did not fundamentally convert him to some other kind of Islam.

The problem with this kind of *proselytizing* paradigm of knowledge is that it does not give enough credit to the receiver of knowledge for their processing, incorporating and actualizing knowledge. In such a simplistic vision of knowledge, it is simply a bit of data that can be transferred from one person to the other. The scholar is *converted* to the new way of seeing things, and, upon return to their indigenous environment, they then proceed to proselytize their ideas amongst the local "flora and fauna", in the process slowly transforming the intellectual and societal conceptualizations of previous concepts in a process called "reform". In this way, the conceptual paradigm of "neo-Sufism," a kind of activist political Sufism organized in new ways, became entangled with the revival of hadith studies, an intellectual reaction against Ibn-ʿArabī's ideas, and an attempt to center *Shariah* compliance at all levels of society (Rahman 1968, pp. 206–9; Voll 2008, pp. 329–30). According to this school of thought, this entire process, of course, began at the center of "Islamic orthodoxy" in Mecca and Medina. This entire conceptual paradigm is highly misleading, and is wholly inaccurate when it comes to figures like Shāh Walī Allāh, who conceived of his own part in history as highly important as part of a hierarchy of Sufis in the world with intimate insight into God and his prophet.

6. Walī Allāh the Scholar of "New Beginnings"?

Upon his return to Delhi, Walī Allāh was now a full-fledged scholar who had a sense of the wider world of Islamic scholarship, and his writing career began in earnest. His disciple, Muhammad ʿAshiq Phulati, future son-in-law, would be the scribe for much of his writings, and both Walī Allāh's dream-visions in the Holy Cities (*Fuyūḍ al-Haramayn*)

as well as his autobiography (*Qawāl al-Jalī*) are both related as having been compiled and edited by him. While, before the Hajj, Walī Allāh had studied widely and taught his father's students after his death, the role he fulfilled was typical of scholarly heads of madrasas. Once back in Delhi, he was moved to write due to the spiritual blessings that he felt he had accrued as part of his pilgrimage. He explains, "'As for the gifts of God, speak [of them]' (Qur'ān 93:11). The greatest gift on this pitiful servant was that he was given the robes of commencement [*fātihiyyat*], and the beginning [*fath*] of the later ages were made through his hands" (Husain 1912, p. 174). The polysemous nature of these words has introduced much confusion into Walī Allāh's self-image and projection for later scholars. The origin of his image as a reformer can be read in these words. However, a careful reading of the rest of this selection offers clues as to what exactly the "robes" were and what Walī Allāh was commencing.

Rather than a period of transformation for the Mughal Empire, the reform of societal practices in India, or even the revival of ancient traditions in a more typical and classical mode of Islamic scholarship, Walī Allāh was inaugurating a new discipline of Islamic knowledge. This did not signify a radical departure from previous kinds of scholarship, but was rather an emphasis on areas of scholarship that had been neglected. In particular, he notes several subjects in which others had written little about before him, as students asked him about the issues relating to jurisprudence which he wrote about before turning to the interpretation of hadith and *maslahah* (common good jurisprudence), of which scholars before him had written little. He gives the example of Izz al-Dīn al-Sulamī (d. 1262), who had written *Greater Laws* (*Qawā'id al-Kubra*), pointing to its inadequacy. Then, Walī Allāh wrote the *Altāf al-Quds*, and the *Hama'āt*, on Sufism, followed by texts criticizing the theologians and their rational sciences, and the Four Perfections (types of God's creations), and the capacities of human beings altogether (*irtifāqāt*), along with its perfection, and ultimate end.

These last two (the perfection and the capacities of human being together), his theory of human civilization and individual human perfection, were the two subjects that Walī Allāh saw as being completely new to the topoi of Islamic civilization, saying, "No one had written about this before this poor soul" (Husain 1912, p. 174). What is most surprising about this statement is that it neither has much to do with the traditional Islamic sciences, nor does it speak to social disorder, societal reform, or even political disorder. Instead, it seems to indicate a Sufi scholar, highly invested in the perfection of his own personal soul, most pleased with the kind of universalist theorizing we are more familiar with in the 18th-century English Enlightenment. For a similar kind of theorizing, see the famous contemporary of Walī Allāh, the French economist Anne Robert Jacques Turgot (d. 1781), who wrote "A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind" (1750), which is the first cited work on the "Idea of Progress". This kind of universalist theorizing leads Walī Allāh to a sociological paradigm of the development of human societies, from the least complex hunter-gatherers to agricultural villages, small kingdoms, and finally, a centralized imperial authority which incorporates many small kingdoms within itself (Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī 1996, pp. 115–44). How Walī Allāh came to understand the unity of the created universe in both material as well as sociological terms is worth a separate treatment. The extent of this article points out the ways he was *not* different from his contemporaries, especially in ways that distort and anachronistically place later historical developments as his intellectual positions (such as shrine visitation).

7. Conclusions

Above, we have relearned that it is dangerous to use 19th-century historical examples to try and understand the motivations and intellectual impetus of individuals in the 18th century. Walī Allāh was part of a wider intellectual climate, but he was trained and grew up in the Indian subcontinent, a place that was home to a wide-ranging Sufi sacred landscape that had been the reason for Islam's spread in India. This same landscape influenced other parts of the Islamic world because it was an economic and cultural center. The shrines

of individual Sufi masters, from a wide variety of orders, were all part of the spiritual munificence of being in Hindustan, grounded in the theory of the Unity of Being, *wahdat al-wujūd*. Walī Allāh did not react negatively to this fundamental anchor to his social existence as the son of a Sufi master, and, in fact, participated unreservedly in local practices that were part of the background of Islam in India.

When he went on a Hajj to Mecca and Medina, he sparred with intellectuals there to show that he was their equal in Islamic knowledge and was participating in the same tradition of Sufism. Thus, he did not feel in the least that he was from some backwater, but rather from a major center of Islamic thought. It certainly helped that the century before his visit had consisted of Indian Sufis spreading the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd*, which was the ground upon which Sufis articulated their unique contributions to Islamic intellectual thought. In this climate, Walī Allāh flourished and found novel insights into the prophetic sayings, or *hadith*, which impressed his teacher, Abū Tāhir al-Madanī, son of the famous Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī. Rather than an alien atmosphere in Medina, instead, Walī Allāh found the same systems of accreditation that existed in the subcontinent. Thus, he took the *khirqā* (robes) of multiple Sufi orders from Abū Tāhir, as well as certifications for his study of different texts of *hadith*. This would be the basis of his intellectual output upon his return to Delhi.

These two aspects of his time in Mecca and Medina, Sufism and *hadith*, were not separate, but part of the same synthesis, that was occurring in Sufism at the time. Sufism and *hadith* were merging in the 17th century through the work of scholars like Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī and his contemporaries, al-Barzinjī and al-Qushashī. These scholars revived the pro-Sunni/Hanbalite *ahl al-hadith* scholars who had long been seen as beyond the pale of Islam by medieval scholars based on their ironically close theological views to the Sufis of the 17th century.

Now, while this intellectual climate seems to exonerate scholars who have highly touted the network of scholars in the Haramayn, it still does not speak to the “reform” of Islamic societies. These networks of scholars were not reformists in the typical sense of the word, but, rather, Sufis who were articulating Sufism through their own theological vision of the world. This trend was in continuity with the ongoing triumph of Sufism as the major theory of Islamic intellectuals for the next two centuries. The strong rebuttal of Sufism that we see in the 20th century is largely in response to the *success* of Sufism in becoming dominant as major Islamic empires fell. For, regardless of location, Sufi orders were the norm, and with far more power than they had ever had in the early modern period, whether they were part of a state (like the Ottomans), or forming their own states, such as in North Africa. Colonialism was the major challenge for Sufis, and, although some vindicated themselves through outright *jihad*, others collaborated, while some, as Francis Robinson has recommended, *accommodated* (Robinson 2000). It was only in response to this new colonial environment that anti-Sufis arose and challenged the long-prevailing authority of Sufi orders with a rationalist, democratic, and legalistic understanding of Islamic tradition modelled on the critiques of the same figures Sufis had recovered in the 18th century (Sirriyeh 1999).

Returning to the story of Walī Allāh, rather than see himself as a reformer of tradition, he instead was a brilliant Sufi intellectual and simultaneously a systematic synthesizer of the old traditional disciplines with this acme of Sufism. While incorporating *hadith* studies into his Sufi metaphysical explanations of the theory of Unitary Being, Walī Allāh simultaneously theorized the human psyche and its relationship to its environment such that civilizations arise. These ideas were only possible within an 18th-century Sufism that freely incorporated the other Islamic disciplines into itself. Reminiscent of contemporaneous French Enlightenment thinkers, he formulated universalist theories of human development that elaborated his metaphysical system at the same time. In his world, God was the prime mover, as he had been for two thousand years since Aristotle. Yet, his description of human societies also created space for human reason to work within this metaphysical system that, at least in one sense, was simply God in a radical unity with His own creation.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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