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An Early Modern South Asian Thinker on the Rise and Decline of Empires: Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi, the Mughals, and the Byzantines*

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In the eighteenth century, Western intellectual history witnessed the production of a rich body of writing on the origins and decay of human civilization and the emergence and fall of empires, exemplified by such monumental works as Baron de Montesquieu’s (1689–1755) Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence (Reflections on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline, 1734), Giambattista Vico’s (1668–1744) Scienza Nuova (New Science, 1745), and Edward Gibbon’s (1737–1794) History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776–1788). The quest to identify the forces that shape social evolution and the factors involved in the formation and decline of the state is not a phenomenon unique to the Western intellectual scene, however. In the eighteenth-century Mughal context, Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī (1703–1762), an eminent Sufi and theologian, propounded a theory of civilization and the

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origins and downfall of social organization that has much in common with Montesquieu’s, Vico’s, and Gibbon’s models and lends itself, as I will show, to a cross-cultural study of ideas on imperial formation and decay.¹

Shāh Walī Allāh’s father, Shah ‘Abd ar-Rahīm (1646–1719), was one of the founders and teachers of the Madrasah-i-Raḥīmīyah in Delhi.² Shāh Walī Allāh received his early education in the taafsīr, hadīth, Qu’ranic sciences, and logic from his father. He subsequently taught at his father’s school and then left for Arabia in 1730 to pursue higher education. When he returned to Delhi in 1732, he worked to spread knowledge about Islam, attracted a number of illustrious disciples, and produced a number of writings in Persian and Arabic. While the bulk of his œuvre is devoted to theological questions, in certain sections of his principal philosophical works, notably the Hujjat Allāh al-Bālighah (The Conclusive Argument from God)³ and his Al-Budūr


al-Bāzighah (The Full Moon Rising on the Horizon), he formulates an intriguing theory about the genesis of human civilization and the decay of social organization.

A substantial body of literature on Shāh Walī Allāh’s political doctrines exists. But his theory of empire has been much misunderstood or neglected, due to a persistent tendency of previous scholarship to extrapolate and reconstruct Shāh Walī Allāh’s ideas on the “decline” of the Mughal Empire by focusing on his vitriolic polemic against the proliferation of Hindu practices as expressed in his letters and portray Shāh Walī Allāh as an ardent apologist of jihād in the South Asian context.

One of the main purposes of this paper is to show that Shāh Walī Allāh’s position is much more complex than has been hitherto assumed. I propose to challenge the standard reading of Shāh Walī Allāh’s private writings as mere jeremiads against Hindu influences or part of a program designed to invigorate or revivify Islamic rule in a state enervated by constant conflicts. In particular, I call attention to certain aspects of his political theory as set forth in his philosophical treatises, and I argue that he pursues an agenda that is not confined to the politi-

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cal and social realities that prevailed in late Mughal India. Although I do not mean to dissociate Shāh Wali Allāh’s private writings from his philosophical works and will occasionally include references to his letters, my goal is to uncover the broader political program that he articulates, one that extends beyond Mughal political realities. As such, my analysis contrasts sharply with the traditional image of Shāh Wali Allāh as the representative of a rabid trend of anti-Hinduism and the harbinger of revivalist movements in South Asia. I show that his rationalistic approach to the dynamics of social life and mechanics of power reflects a nuanced understanding of the process of state formation that heretofore has not found its due place in modern narratives of imperial state building and decline.

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7 Shāh Wali Allāh uses the Arabic term madīnah, which literally means “city” and is roughly equivalent to the Greek polis, in the sense of a political entity that encompasses a number of cities and is characterized by an administrative and governmental organization similar to that of the modern state. Accordingly, Shāh Wali Allāh envisions the caliphate as incorporating a multiplicity of existing states and political units. On the meaning of madīna and its derivatives in medieval Arab political writing, see Soheil M. Afnan, A Philosophical Lexicon in Persian and Arabic (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1969; repr., Tehran: Nashr-i Nuqrih, 1362 [1983]), s.v. madīna (278–279); Dimitri Gutas, “The Meaning of madīnah in al-Fārābī’s ‘Political’ Philosophy,” in The Greek Strand in Islamic Political Thought, ed. Emma Gannagé et al. (= Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph; 57; Beirut: Dār el-Machreq, 2004), pp. 259–279. For a useful orientation to the various definitions of the concept of “empire,” consult Kathleen D. Morrison, “Sources, Approaches, Definitions,” in Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History, ed. Susan E. Alcock et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 1–9, esp. 1–3.

In the first section of my article, I discuss how Shāh Walī Allāh’s theory of the state relates to a broader scheme about the emergence and evolution of civilization. In particular, I focus on his ideas on the origin of communal life, the constituents of efficient rulership, the duties and attributes of a rightful ruler, the modes of conduct necessary to preserve social order, and the conditions for strong and lasting imperial rule. I will also identify potential sources and explore how Shāh Walī Allāh’s theory relates to previous Islamic accounts of social origination—particularly the akhlāq tradition as represented by Ṭūsī and Dawwānī—as well as Indo-Islamic political literature, notably Barānī’s, Abū’l-Fazl’s, and Najm-i Sānī’s works. In the second part of the article I engage in a detailed analysis of Shāh Walī Allāh’s views on the decline of the state and empire/caliphate and investigate how they relate to the political and social realities that prevailed in late Mughal India.

In the concluding section, I suggest ways in which the findings of
this article might be of more than historical relevance for the study of Shāh Walī Allāh’s political thought. I specifically examine how Shāh Walī Allāh uses the examples of the Sassanians and Byzantine empires as heuristic devices to illustrate the process of decay of Mughal power. I also point to parallels between Shāh Walī Allāh’s ideas on the economic dimensions of imperial decay and the ways in which Byzantine statesmen and literati theorized remedies for the weaknesses of Byzantine society in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

I. The Rise of the State

The Origins of Social Life

The pivot point of Shāh Walī Allāh’s social theory is the concept of irtifāq. The term bears connotations that cannot be adequately rendered by any single English term, but it generally refers to various stages in the process of social genesis. In the first irtifāq, people engage in tillage, create languages, learn how to cook food, and a man chooses one woman as his partner. The second irtifāq witnesses the emergence and evolution of sciences acquired through experience, elegance, delicate living, and comprehensive view (al-ra’y al-kullī).

Shāh Walī Allāh names five types of wisdom: (1) the wisdom of living (al-hikmah al-ma’ashiyah), which deals with human conduct and practical knowledge about eating, drinking, dressing, and so forth; (2) the wisdom of domestic life (al-hikmah al-manziliyah), which concerns the organization of the household; (3) the wisdom of earning a livelihood (al-hikmah al-iktisabiyah), which refers to functional specialization and the various crafts and professions which people practice according to their skills; (4) the wisdom of mutual dealings (al-hikmah al-ta’amuliyah), which pertains to commercial operations (mu’āmalāt); and (5) the wisdom of cooperation (al-hikmah al-ta’awuniyah), which deals with partnership and commercial enterprises. But social evils

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10 For a similar interpretation, see Johannes M. S. Baljon, “Social and Economic Ideas of Shah Wali Allah,” in Readings in Islamic Economic Thought, ed. Abul Hasan M. Sadeq and Aidit Ghazali (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 2006), pp. 356–368, 358. The term irtifāq (literal meaning: support) derives from the Arabic root r.f.q., which signifies kindness or gentleness. For further discussion, see Hermansen, The Conclusive Argument from God, pp. xviii–xix.

such as avarice and envy soon creep in, giving rise to social tensions and disputes, and some men seek to overpower others or are naturally inclined to plunder and kill. Hence, the members of the community feel compelled to appoint a ruler, who possesses abundant resources and is able to attract wise men from other countries, to correct and punish evildoers and collect taxes. In the fourth irtifāq a caliph is appointed to merge together and rule over preexisting states and kingdoms.\(^\text{12}\)

All men need food, drink, and shelter. In Shāh Wali Allāh’s view, every species has a law implanted into the breasts of its individuals, and all creatures strive to meet their needs. But man has three capacities that are not found in other animals. First, he possesses a comprehensive view: while animals are directed to an objective perceived through the senses or to an imagined objective driven by their physical needs such as hunger, thirst, and lust, man is uniquely endowed with the ability to perceive and strive after a rational benefit that has no motivation in his physical nature. This prompts human beings to establish a social order, perfect their character, and seek mutual affection. Second, while animals desire things such as food to fulfill their needs and protect themselves against the cold, man has been equipped with aesthetic sensibility (zarāfah). He thus tries to move beyond the level of bare necessity and aspires to aesthetic and emotional delight and elegance, a beautiful partner, delicious food, good clothing, and a comfortable house. Third, man is characterized by takāmul, that is, an inner drive toward self-perfection. Men of intelligence discover and develop the appropriate supports of civilization, look for water resources or dig wells and store water, learn which seeds are edible and figure out how to cook or store them; those who are unable to discover those supports on their own perceive their utility and follow what the “wise” propose to them.\(^\text{13}\)

Shāh Walī Allāh comes very close to Montesquieu when he acknowledges that differences in temperaments and social mores exist


among various peoples and explains that the three capabilities unique to men are not found in equal measure in all nations. On one level, he explains, are primitive societies such as the Bedouins, who live on mountain peaks and in regions far from sound climates. On another, higher level are settled populations and the urban centers of healthful regions that are inhabited by people endowed by nature with superior virtues and produce wise men.\textsuperscript{14}

The Emergence and Evolution of Human Civilization

Science takes root during the second \textit{irtifāq}, as men explore ways to go beyond the mere satisfaction of needs. It specifically examines and tests developments of the first \textit{irtifāq} and lays down criteria for the selection of attitudes that bring benefit. People with the best temperaments are predisposed toward superior virtues, and they communicate these virtues and morals to one another through social interaction. The refinement of morals concerns the proper manner of drinking, walking, sitting, and clothing, and every nation develops a style and set of manners and habits according to its own temperament and habits.\textsuperscript{15}

Language serves as a means of expressing and designating acts, attitudes, and bodily movements associated with a particular sound through onomatopoeia and causal connection. Sounds are imitated and then used to derive forms that correspond to various meanings. Arts and crafts follow, such as agriculture, digging wells, cooking, making pots, domesticating and taming animals, creating shelter from heat and cold in caves and huts, and producing clothing from animal skins or trees.\textsuperscript{16} A male is guided to select a mate and not share her with anyone else in order to alleviate his lust, perpetuate his lineage, and receive assistance in domestic needs and in raising and educating children. He is also guided to create tools for cultivating, planting, digging wells, and domesticating animals, and soon the exchange of goods and cooperation take place. The wisest and strongest men subjugate others and become leaders, and people need to devise methods for settling quarrels and disputes, restraining malefactors, and repelling external enemies. The members of every nation contribute differently to the

\textsuperscript{14} Hujjat Allah al-Bālighah, 1:39; Hermansen, \textit{The Conclusive Argument from God}, p. 117.

\textsuperscript{15} Hujjat Allah al-Bālighah, 1:40; Hermansen, \textit{The Conclusive Argument from God}, p. 121.

evolution of civilization: one might love beauty and luxury; another might excel in such qualities as courage, magnanimity, eloquence, or intelligence; and others might aspire to fame or higher ranks.\textsuperscript{17}

The second phase of social development signals the emergence of the art of economic transactions, that is, the science that concerns the exchange of products, cooperation, and the means of earning. As people become more refined and seek pleasures and luxury, the crafts and professions expand and become more diverse. Every man pursues a single occupation that suits his natural disposition and skills.\textsuperscript{18} For example, a courageous person enters the military and an intelligent man with a good memory goes into accounting. Sometimes coincidence plays a role, as when a son or neighbor of a smith finds the art of smithing easier or when a person who lives by the sea practices the art of fishing. However, some people lead parasitic lives or engage in activities harmful to society, such as robbery, gambling, and begging.\textsuperscript{19} Men exchange property for property or property for usufruct, that is, hire and lease. Goodwill and mutual affection among the members of society are essential conditions for domestic stability and prosperity. They develop practices for contracts and conventions and establish guidelines for share-cropping, partnerships, and hire and lease. They also lay down rules for borrowing and entrusting money and redressing financial fraud; subsequently, witnessing, the composition of legal documents, and mortgages take place and a monetary system comes into being.\textsuperscript{20}

The second \textit{irritāq} gives rise to division of labor and aesthetics as well. People agree among themselves that each one will pursue a distinct occupation and will attain expertise in the use of its tools. When many people simultaneously desire the same object, it becomes necessary to develop conventions for commissioning and paying for goods, and gold and silver are used as means of exchange because of their small size, portability, homogeneity, and suitability to adorn the human body and be used as currency. Following the emergence of the main occupations—that is, agriculture, herding, and distribution of products, and crafts, such as carpentry, iron smithing, and weaving—

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Hujjat Allāh al-Bālighah, 1:40; Hermansen, \textit{The Conclusive Argument from God}, pp. 119–120.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Compare Plato, \textit{Politeia}, 372A–374E.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Hujjat Allāh al-Bālighah, 1:41–42; Hermansen, \textit{The Conclusive Argument from God}, p. 127.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Hujjat Allāh al-Bālighah, 1:43–44; Hermansen, \textit{The Conclusive Argument from God}, p. 128.
\end{thebibliography}
trade evolved into distinct professions, as did the administration of the affairs of the city.\textsuperscript{21} Shāh Walī Allāh’s discussion of the third irtifāq—that is, the science that investigates ways to preserve and strengthen the bonds among the inhabitants of the city—is his longest. Pursuant to his notion that human society arises from the aggregation of persons who live in proximity to one another and engage in mutual collaboration although they dwell in separate houses, Shāh Walī Allāh conceives of the state as a single individual composed of distinct parts that share a common attitude and work together toward a common purpose. But as the equivalent of a living organism, human society also suffers from disorders, disturbances, and illnesses. Shāh Walī Allāh sees strife and conflict as endemic to social life: because human society comprises a large number of individuals, agreement on how to maintain the just practice is elusive. Moreover, it is difficult for one man to rebuke others unless he is distinguished by rank; anything else risks infighting and killing. Thus, the majority of influential people agree to obey a person who has his own circle of supporters and enough force to contain disorder and punish those who are greedy, violent, or prone to anger and killing.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{The Ideal Ruler}

Shāh Walī Allāh elaborates on the practicalities of government, the qualities required in the paradigmatic ruler, and the relations between the sovereign and his subjects, staff, and subordinate officials. A ruler who lacks courage, valor, and fortitude in combat and prowess to confront those who attempt to subvert his rule will incur the contempt of his subjects. At the same time, if he is not forbearing and lenient, he will crush them through his strength, and if he lacks wisdom, he will be unable to discover the best ways to administer the affairs of the city. The ruler should be in full possession of his mental faculties, of mature age, free, and male, and have the senses of sight, hearing, and speech intact. People must agree on his nobility and that of his ancestors; he should display praiseworthy skills and must convince the people that he will not spare any effort to uphold order in his realm.\textsuperscript{23}

Shāh Walī Allāh devotes particular attention to the skill sets necessary for a ruler to gain the confidence of his people. The exemplary

\textsuperscript{21} Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bālighah, 1:42; Hermansen, The Conclusive Argument from God, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{22} Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bālighah, 1:45; Hermansen, The Conclusive Argument from God, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{23} Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bālighah, 1:45; Hermansen, The Conclusive Argument from God, p. 132.
ruler is expected to epitomize superior leadership virtues such as courage, wisdom, generosity, forgiveness for malefactors and evildoers, and should be driven by the desire to promote the public welfare. He should also have a keen insight into human nature, exhibit sagacity and the ability to discern the secrets in men’s hearts, and refrain from procrastinating, especially if he detects animosity toward himself or attempts to undermine his position and erode his power. To illustrate how the sovereign ought to deal with his subjects, Shāh Wali Allāh employs the metaphor of the hunter who studies a gazelle in the forest and deliberates on the best strategy, remaining in his position and lying in wait until he sees that his quarry is not paying attention, at which moment he quietly crawls toward it or tries to lure it with music and throw it a fine decoy. Similarly, the ruler ought to cultivate bonds of love with the people and display the attitude that people like in clothing, speech, and manners. He should approach them humbly, offer them advice, and show affection in a way that is not frivolous. But until he feels that they are convinced of his superiority and preeminence and commands their loyalty and respect, he must constantly remind them that no one is equal to him. Then he should strive to keep them in this condition and grant them favors.24

Shāh Wali Allāh also discusses how the sovereign should deal with animosity and threats to his rule. He should compel obedience and punish the unruly. He should also raise the rank or increase the salary of those who excel in war or in the collection of taxes or management and shun and reprimand those who display treachery, opposition, or disobedience by reducing their salaries and demoting them. Although the ruler is entitled to lead a more comfortable or luxurious life than the people, he should not assign them too difficult tasks, such as cultivating wasteland or guarding a remote district. He should not hesitate to punish malefactors, but only after there is sound evidence adduced by officials and for the sake of the common good.25

A substantial part of Shāh Wali Allāh’s treatment of the principles of effective leadership is devoted to the criteria for the selection of the various officials: the ruler needs people to assist him in fulfilling his tasks and administering financial resources to sustain the military and

remunerate his aides.26 Able and loyal administrators protect the ruler from evil just as the hands carry weapons and protect the entire body. They also proffer advice to the ruler just like the mind and the senses provide information to the human organism. The ruler’s ministers must be trustworthy, carry out orders, and bear goodwill both in private and in public. The ruler must be quick to dismiss any official who strays from these principles.27

Shāh Walī Allāh enumerates five principal aides and court functionaries: (1) the judge (qāḍī); (2) the commander of the armed forces (‘amr) in charge of selecting and training soldiers, deploying spies, and gathering intelligence about the plans of potential enemies; (3) the governor of the city (sā‘īs), who is in charge of appointing a leader for each group; (4) the revenue collector (‘āmil); and (5) the minister (wakīl), whose function is to administer the income and expenditure and minister to the ruler’s daily needs.28 In the al-Budūr al-Bāzighah, Shāh Wali Allāh provides an expanded list that includes another two offices: (1) the head of religious affairs (shaikh-ul Islām) in charge of propagating religion and providing spiritual guidance, and (2) the sage (hakīm) who possesses expertise on medicine, poetry, astrology, history, mathematics, and letter writing.29

The ruler should have the ability to distinguish between those who pretend to love him out of fear or greed and those who genuinely support his rule. He should also be able to discern each person’s merits, monitor the conduct and activities of the state officials, and keep abreast of new developments. He must select a number of assistants proportionate to the needs and the size of the state and must determine their salaries. Shāh Walī Allāh recommends that the ruler adopt a just system of collecting land taxes without burdening the people; taxes should be levied on those who possess large property and wealth derived from husbandry, agriculture, and commercial pursuits.30

In his exposition of the modes conducive to stable and lasting rule,

26 Waliyullah, Al-Budūr al-Bāzighah, pp. 77–78; Baljon, Full Moon Appearing on the Horizon, pp. 85–86.
29 Waliyullah, Al-Budūr al-Bāzighah, pp. 94–95; Baljon, Full Moon Appearing on the Horizon, p. 100.
Shāh Walī Allāh devotes special attention to the ruler’s relationship with the military, using the analogy of a skilled and experienced riding master who knows all of his horse’s gaits and bad habits, and the best way to train it: the trainer closely observes the horse and, when it displeases him or disobeys his orders, he tames its impetuousness in a way consistent with the horse’s nature. He does not aim to perplex the horse’s mind, for the horse cannot understand the trainer’s motives; instead, he seeks to engrave the image of what he teaches in the mind and heart of the horse. Once he has made sure that the horse will perform the right acts and refrain from reprehensible ones, the trainer continues his training until he is sure that the desired mode of behavior is habitual for the horse, so that even without his whips the horse will desist from actions that do not conform to the desired goal. Likewise, the ruler as the trainer of the military must know the best methods for taking action and for using the things that will serve as a warning to them.31

The Caliphate

The fourth īrtifāq signals the apex of political organization. In each city a ruler is appointed, courageous persons gather around him, and wealth is collected in the form of taxes. The differences in the temperaments and abilities of the kings elicit friction: certain rulers attempt to conquer another’s territory or fight one another for unimportant reasons, such as desire for wealth or land or due to envy, greed, resentment, and malice. Thus, the kings were compelled to appoint a caliph or to obey a single ruler who has the authority of the caliphate (khilāfah). The true caliph holds undisputed sway over his realm and possesses so much military might and equipment that it is almost impossible for another person to challenge him. Just as the head of the state soothes or remedies social tensions, the fourth īrtifāq is the science that examines the policies of the cities and their rulers and the means whereby collaboration among people of various regions can be fostered. And just as political authority within the first political communities originates in a primordial compact the caliph is appointed upon the consent of the rulers of existing states. The caliph must be on guard against all factors that can jeopardize his authority: emergencies, natural calamities, disarray and factious commotion, the expenditure of large amounts of money, and wicked individuals who plunder

the property of the people, incarcerate their sons, and dishonor their wives.\textsuperscript{32}

One of Shāh Walī Allāh’s novelties is that he offers one of the most analytically refined accounts of the origin, nature, and function of the caliphate. Shāh Walī Allāh goes beyond previous Islamic writers such as al-Fārābī, who envisage the caliphate as the pinnacle of a constant process of associational evolution starting from the creation of simple types of political organization.\textsuperscript{33} As al-Fārābī puts it, the increase of human needs leads to more complex forms of social organization and culminates in the creation of a universal state encompassing all existing nations. In order to secure the means for his subsistence, man by nature needs various things that he cannot acquire by himself, so he relies on mutual aid and is compelled to live in association with others. The increase of men results in the formation of communities, some of which are perfect, some of which are imperfect. The imperfect types include the union of people in a village, a quarter, a street, or in a house. The perfect types can be classified into small, medium, and great: the small one is the union of the inhabitants of the city in the territory of any nation, the middle one results from the formation of one nation in a certain region, and the great one signals the union of all the communities of the inhabited world.\textsuperscript{34} Just as people living in a city strive for those things that allow them to attain ultimate perfection through mutual collaboration, the excellent nation is one in which all of its cities aspire to felicity. Accordingly, the excellent universal state can come into being when all the nations that compose it work together to reach felicity.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{32} Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bālighah, 1:45; Hermansen, The Conclusive Argument from God, p. 137. See also Waliyullah, Al-Budūr al-Bāzighah, pp. 97–98; Baljon, Full Moon Appearing on the Horizon, pp. 101–103.

\textsuperscript{33} On the reception of al-Fārābī’s political ideas in the Indo-Islamic world as mediated by Tūsī’s Nasirean Ethics, see Saiyid A. A. Rizvi, Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar’s Reign, with Special Reference to Abu’l Fazl (1556–1605) (New Delhi: M. Manoharlal Publishers, 1975), pp. 355–357.


\textsuperscript{35} Al-Farabi on the Perfect State, p. 230/231, as well as pp. 424, 432–433, 497.
Shāh Walī Allāh provides a more detailed distinction among three types of caliphate: \(^{36}\) caliphate in a special sense (khilāfat-i khāṣṣa); caliphate in the general sense (khilāfat-i `āmma); and tyrannical caliphate (khilāfat-i jābira). \(^{37}\) When humankind was in a state of sin and anarchy, God sent the Prophet Muḥammad for its guidance, and the function of the first four special caliphs was to complete the mission of the Prophet. The general caliphate is a human-made institution that emanates from human agreement and the opinion or judgment (rāʿy) of a particular group of men. The caliph in the general sense, then, is an ordinary human being and as such he is susceptible to human weaknesses; therefore his rule can easily slide into tyranny. As I will discuss later, Shāh Walī Allāh refers to the Sassanian and Byzantine empires as exempla of the caliphate in the general sense. The tyrannical caliphate comes into being when the caliph breaks his obligation to enforce religious precepts and fails to wage jihād and apply the shari‘a or, when he applies Islamic law, does so erroneously.

The caliph ought to determine the purpose of war, suppress interstate conflict, restrain malefactors, repel enemies, and crush those who ignite seditious activities by intimidating them, assassinating or arresting their leaders, or seizing their property. But at the same time, Shāh Walī Allāh cautions against the caliph’s setting goals beyond his capacity and resources or seeking to acquire wealth by murdering his supporters. The caliph should try to gain support from resourceful people and the notables. In war, he should inspire awe in his enemies and attempt to erode their power. In case he suspects that his former enemies engage in intrigues, he should levy heavy land and poll taxes,

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\(^{37}\) A precedent of this distinction can be found in the *Fatūwā-i-Jahāndārī (Precepts on [World] Rulership)* of Ziyāʾ al-Dīn Barānī (1284–1356), a confidant of the sultan of Delhi Muhammad bin Tughluq (ca. 1300–1351, r. 1325–1351) and major historian of fourteenth-century India: Barānī distinguishes two forms of justice, one that aims at general equality (‘adl-i musāwāt-i talabī-yī ūm) and one concerned with special equality (‘adl-i musāwāt-i talabī-yī khāṣṣ). The former is the ideal form of justice, can be realized only in the Islamic setting, and was exemplified by Caliph ‘Umar (ca. 586–644, r. 634–644). The latter was applied by the Persian king Anūshirwān (Chosroes I, r. 531–579) and presupposes the existence of a ruler acting as an arbitrator and settling disputes. For further references and comment, see Alam, _The Languages of Political Islam_, pp. 38–39.
destroy their strongholds, and take all possible measures to neutralize their power.\footnote{Hujjat Allâh al-Bâlîghah, 1:48–49; Hermansen, The Conclusive Argument from God, pp. 138–139.}  

\textbf{Medieval and Early Modern Islamic Sources on the Emergence of Social Life}  

It will be instructive here to briefly explore Islamic accounts of the origins of social life and identify possible sources of Shâh Walî Allâh’s thought. One such source might be Naṣir al-Dîn Ţûsî’s (1201–1274) \textit{Akhlâq-i Nâširî} (The Nasirean Ethics), an ethical-political treatise that had an enduring influence on Syriac, Persian, and Indo-Islamic political writing. Affinities to Shâh Walî Allâh’s ideas may also be found in the writings of Dawwânî, especially in his \textit{Jalalian Ethics}, as well as in Abûl-Faṣl’s \textit{Institutes of Akbar} and Najm-i Sânî’s \textit{Admonition of Jahângîr}.  

Ţûsî operates on the Aristotelian idea that humans are political by nature\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{Politics} 1253a1–3. On the following, see also Vasileios Syros, “Shadows in Heaven and Clouds on Earth: The Emergence of Social Life and Political Authority in the Early Modern Islamic Empires,” \textit{Viator} 43, no. 2 (2012): 377–406.} but also stresses that they need crafts to meet their needs. He reckons that divine wisdom has ordained disparity in the aspirations and opinions of the members of society and that each person is inclined to a different occupation. The diversity of the aptitudes and interests of the members of human society generates internal disorder and division. Since mutual aid depends on a diversity of crafts, which results from the diversity of ends, the perpetuation of social life is contingent on the existence of a set of rules and a ruler in charge of enforcing justice and suppressing intermecine strife.\footnote{Naṣir al-Ţûsî, \textit{Akhlâq-i Nâširî} (Lahore: Punjab University, 1952), p. 242; \textit{The Nasirean Ethics by Naṣir ad-Dîn Tūsî}, trans. from the Persian George M. Wickens (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 189. See also Guang-Zhen Sun, “Nasir ad-Din Tusi on Social Cooperation and the Division of Labor: Fragment from \textit{The Nasirean Ethics},” \textit{Journal of Institutional Economics} 5 (2008): 403–413.}  

In keeping with his idea that man is by nature formed to live in a society, Ţûsî holds that man by nature needs a “civilized life.” But the motives and ends of human actions differ. So, if men are left to their own natures, no cooperation can result, because the powerful will seek to exploit and oppress the others and the greedy will covet the property of the others. As soon as strife sets in, men engage in mutual destruction and injury. Ţûsî infers from this that government is a certain type of management that is required to render what is deserved to each
individual, to restrain each individual from encroaching upon the rights or disturbing the function of the others, and to ensure that each member of the society carries through the specific duty at which he is adept by nature.\footnote{Al-Ṭūsī, Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī, p. 243; The Nasirean Ethics, pp. 190–191.}


Dawwānī restates Ṭūsī’s doctrine that man is by nature inclined to civilization, which is derived from the term “city” (madīnah).\footnote{Practical Philosophy of the Muhammadan People, p. 321; Deen, The English Translation of the Akhlak-i Jalali, p. 163.} At the same time, however, he warns of the danger of social havoc and disruption, should a central authority within human society cease to exist. Dawwānī’s justification of political authority rests on the idea of disparity in the dispositions and claims of the members of human society. Men cannot be left to their own natures, because each one of them would pursue his own interest and would cause injuries to the other. Hence, some provision must be made for rendering all individuals content with their rightful portion and restraining them from causing mutual harm. This provision is a government, and to this end there must be rules, an executive, and a currency.\footnote{Practical Philosophy of the Muhammadan People, p. 322; Deen, The English Translation of the Akhlak-i Jalali, p. 163.} The ruler is a person endowed with divine
support in order to satisfy the interests of the various segments of the
body politic and uphold domestic stability and order. 46

Ṭūsī’s and Dawwānī’s views on social genesis had a distinguished
Nachleben in the Indo-Islamic context and penetrated Mughal politi-
cal discourse through the circulation of copies of the Jalalian Ethics by
former students of Dawwānī in the Deccan and Gujarat. 47 Similar ideas
occur in the Ā’īn-i Akbarī (The Institutes of Akbar), written by Abū’l-
Fazl ‘Allāmī (1551–1602), the famous vizier of the Mughal emperor
Akbar (1542–1605; r. 1556–1605). By Abū’l-Fazl’s time the influence
of the old Aristotelian doctrine about human sociability seems to have
withered away: in his exposition of the genesis of social life, Abū’l-Fazl
builds on the akhlāq tradition 48 but dispenses with the standard formula
that man is by nature a gregarious creature destined to live in asso-
ciation with others. He highlights instead the diversity characterizing
human nature and sets forth the vision of the state as consisting of het-
erogeneous parts. These considerations form the basis for Abū’l-Fazl’s
vindication of kingship as the guarantee of social stability: pād stands
for stability and shāh indicates that the ruler is the source of stability.
The absence of authority gives rise to strife and selfish ambitions, caus-
ing humankind to lapse into a state of anarchy and lust. By the light of
imperial justice, Abū’l-Fazl argues, some men follow with cheerfulness
the path of obedience, whereas others abstain from violence through
fear of punishment. 49

Shāh Wali Allāh’s more immediate precursor was Muhammad
Bāqir Najm-i Sānī (d. 1637), who served as governor in various parts
of the Mughal Empire under Jahāngīr (1569–1627, r. 1605–1627) and
Shah Jahān (1592–1666, r. 1628–1658). According to Najm-i Sānī’s
Mau’īzah-i Jahāngīrī (Admonition of Jahāngīr or Advice on [the Art]
of Rulership, 1612/13), the defining characteristics of royal rule are

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46 Practical Philosophy of the Muhammadan People, pp. 324–325; Deen, The English Trans-
lation of the Akhlak-i-Jalali, pp. 164–165.
47 Alam, The Languages of Political Islam, p. 50; Alam, “State Building under the
Mughals: Religion, Culture and Politics,” in L’Héritage timouride: Iran-Asie centrale-Inde
XVe–XVIIIe siècles, pp. 105–128, 111–117; Rizvi, Religious and Intellectual History of the Mus-
48 In the administrative manual (dastūr al-’amal) issued by Akbar in 1594, the Nasirean
Ethics was included in the standard readings for Mughal officials—see Mukātabāt-i-’Allāmī
(Inshā’i Abū’l Fazl) Daftar I: Letters of the Emperor Akbar in English Translation, ed. Mansura
49 Abū’l-Fazl ‘Allāmī, Āīn-i Akbarī, trans. Henry Blochmann, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Asi-
atic Society of Bengal, 1927), p. 2.
exalted rank and high station. Unless the ruler regulates the affairs of the people and acts as the refuge of the vulnerable members of human society, clandestine rebels and insurgents, who are driven by tyrannical feelings and engage in contumacious and aberrant conduct, will seek to disturb the nobility and the common people.\(^50\)

A salient theme in Shāh Walī Allāh’s theory of the state is the variety of ways whereby domestic balance can be maintained and harmonious interaction among various social groups can be ensured. Shāh Walī Allāh evokes the “circle of justice” formula in medieval Islamic political literature. And these ideas are rooted even further back in history, in the works of ancient political thinkers, such as Plato, and Iranian ideals of rulership.

According to Shāh Walī Allāh, the various parts of the state are interrelated; the preservation of balance and harmony is like salt seasoning food.\(^51\) The third \textit{irtifāq} necessitates the appointment of a ruler in charge of maintaining social balance and domestic tranquility; with the multiplication of cities and states, in the fourth \textit{irtifāq} a caliph is appointed to erase interstate conflicts.\(^52\) Shāh Walī Allāh is particularly emphatic about the caliph’s function in maintaining balance among opposing and conflicting elements and purging the body politic of excesses. The ideal caliph ought to be on his guard against revolutionary activities and subversive tendencies, must create an extensive network of spies and informers, and must effectively employ perspicacity about human character. As soon as he sees a faction forming among his men, he should swiftly form another group and ensure that it will not connive with the rebels. It is vital that this new group obey the caliph’s commands, show goodwill toward him, and pray for him, acclaiming his glory in large assemblies and on coins bearing his name.\(^53\)

The ruler’s duty to uphold the delicate equilibrium among the various segments of the body politic is compared in medieval Islamic writing to the physician’s function in maintaining the equilibrium (\textit{i’tidāl})
in the human body. Moderation is important both as a means for moral perfection but also in the context of the ruler’s role as the healer of the social organism who, like a skilled physician, diagnoses diseases and applies remedies. As Shāh Wali Allāh phrases it, the city is not merely the presence of walls, markets, and high buildings but constitutes a bond among the various orders of human society. In the progress of civilization, different groups engage in mutual dealings and become woven together like a single body. Shāh Wali Allāh deduces from this the need for a physician (i.e., ruler) to preserve the healthy condition of the city and to treat maladies. By the same token, on a transnational level, the caliph is the physician of states that suffer from corruption and factional discord.

Shāh Wali Allāh here stands in a philosophical tradition that can be traced back to the “circle of justice” concept in medieval Islamic political writing. The “circle of justice” or “circle of power” maxim has its roots in two popular dicta imputed to Aristotle and Ardashīr, king of Persia (r. 224–241 C.E.) and founder of the Sassanid dynasty. In the saying ascribed to Aristotle, the world is parallel to a large gar-

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54 For further discussion on the use of medical metaphors in early modern Islamic political writing, see Vasileios Syros, “Galenic Medicine and Domestic Stability in Early Modern Florence and Islamic Empires,” Journal of Early Modern History 17, no. 1 (2013, forthcoming).

55 Alam, The Languages of Political Islam, pp. 47, 57–58, 61, 140; A. J. Halepota, Philosophy of Shah Waliullah (Lahore: Sind Sagar Academy, [197?]), p. 166.

56 Waliyullah, Al-Budūr al-Bāzighah, pp. 49–50; Baljon, Full Moon Appearing on the Horizon, p. 48. See also Alam, The Languages of Political Islam, p. 173.


den which is administered by the state; the state signifies authority founded on the law; the law is a way of ruling applied by the king, who acts like a shepherd; the king is supported by the army, the sustenance of which depends on tax revenues; tax revenues are sustenance procured by the subjects; the subjects are slaves procured by justice, which is the element that guarantees the proper function of the world. Ardashīr is reported to have said that government is contingent on the existence of men, men in their turn need money, money comes from cultivation of the land, and cultivation can take place only if there is justice and salutary rule. The “circle of justice” concept assumes that the ideal social organization can be achieved by ensuring that each part of society confines itself to its allocated duties and does not encroach upon the functions of the others. Integral to the “circle of justice” is the notion that the state encompasses diverse functional groupings with competing interests. The satisfaction of these varied desires and interests is seen as a prerequisite to social stability, and often the various social groups are perceived as analogous to the four elements and humors of the natural body.

The “circle of justice” had a pervasive influence on the akhlāq and Indo-Islamic political writing. Ṭūsī, in the Nasirean Ethics, takes his cue from the old Irano-Islamic division of social groups and sets forth a scheme of social organization based on four main parts: (1) men of the pen, such as the masters of the sciences, jurists, judges, secretaries, accountants, geometers, astronomers, physicians, and poets, who correspond to water; (2) men of the sword, that is, soldiers, who are the counterpart of fire; (3) men of transactions, merchants, masters of crafts and professions, and tax collectors, who are like air; and (4) farmers, who correspond to earth. Ṭūsī describes the ruler’s principal function as upholding the balance among these groups, just as a balanced temperament depends on the equilibrium of the four elements. Ṭūsī also points out that just as the domination of one element over the others is likely to upset the equilibrium of the human body, in similar fashion the predominance of one segment over the rest would upset the equilibrium of the body politic.

In his Jalalian Ethics, Dawwānī follows Ṭūsī and proposes a four-
fold division of the populace into: (1) men of knowledge—theologians, jurists, secretaries, fiscal officials, geometry experts, astronomers, physicians, and poets, whose task is to perform religious duties; (2) warriors; (3) merchants, artisans, and craftsmen, who procure the needs of life; and (4) farmers, who produce food. Like Tūsī, Dawwānī points to the detrimental effects of the domination of one of these groups over the others. As long as every class retains its proper place, carries out the specific tasks assigned to it, and receives the merits and rank due to it, the temperament of the social organism remains in a state of equilibrium. But as soon as one passes beyond its proper measure, domestic balance is disturbed, leading eventually to the disintegration of the state. Just as the equipoise of bodily temperament depends on the proper mixture of the four elements, the equipoise of a well-formed body politic is contingent on the balance among the four classes. And just as a physician must be acquainted with the causes of disease and their proper treatment and must seek to preserve the equilibrium of the human temperament, one of the first duties of the king as the world’s physician is to know the reasons and remedies for the political and social maladies and emergencies or misfortunes that might befall his domain.

The impact of the “circle of justice” is discernible in the political literature of the Delhi Sultanate period too. Barānī proposes in his Fatāwa-i Jahāndārī (Precepts on [World] Rulership) a social division among farmers, traders, soldiers, and government officials. Barānī advocates the strict regimentation of the populace and warns of the potential hazards deriving from mobility among the various social groupings. A prime condition for the stability of the state for Barānī is that each person confines himself to his assigned profession. Barānī, like Shāh Walī Allāh, emphasizes the economic factors that account for the devolution of the state. He specifically advocates low prices so that each occupational group can devote itself to its prescribed tasks. He also maintains that high prices can create social chaos because they

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61 Practical Philosophy of the Muhammadan People, pp. 388–390; Deen, The English Translation of Akhlak-i-Jalali, pp. 201–203. See also Black, The History of Islamic Political Thought, p. 185.


63 Practical Philosophy of the Muhammadan People, p. 388; Deen, The English Translation of Akhlak-i-Jalali, p. 201.

64 Practical Philosophy of the Muhammadan People, pp. 325–326, 383–384; Deen, The English Translation of Akhlak-i-Jalali, pp. 165, 199.
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compel people to abandon their own profession and station, leading soldiers to turn to agriculture, farmers to take up trade activities, traders to aspire to high offices, shopkeepers to try to become officers, men of noble birth to become merchants, and merchants to seek government and army posts.65

In like manner, Abūl-Faţl reckons division of labor to be the hallmark of a well-ordered society and defines the principal duty of the ruler as entrusting the citizens with specific functions and monitoring the operation of the segments of the body politic. The ruler should put each of these in its proper place. Drawing on the “circle of justice,” Abūl-Faţl outlines a scheme of four occupational classes that correspond to the four elements: (1) warriors, who represent the element of fire and combat rebellions and strife; (2) artisans and merchants, who may be compared to air; (3) the learned—philosophers, physicians, scholars of arithmetic, geometricians, and astronomers—who resemble water; and (4) farmers and laborers, who are the equivalent of earth.66

II. The Decline of States and Empires

The Disorders of the State

Shāh Walī Allāh does not confine himself to mapping out the various developmental stages of civilization; he also offers an extensive account of emergencies:

a. A number of wicked individuals who possess power form a group and pursue their interests; they subvert just practice either out of desire to usurp the wealth of others or to harm others out of hostility, malice, or the desire to dominate.


b. An offender injures another person or abuses his family by molesting his wife, daughters, or sisters or tries to tamper with his property by violence or secret theft; or one person impugns the honor of another person by slandering or offending him.

c. Persons engage in activities that disrupt social order, such as using black magic or poisons, spreading evil habits, fomenting dissent and discontent, or encouraging people to challenge the ruler, servants to plot against their masters, and wives against their husbands.

d. The propagation of noxious habits, such as homosexuality and bestiality, and modes of conduct that can give rise to disputes and friction, such as a number of men desiring the same woman or addiction to wine. This results in disregard for the necessary supports of civilization.

e. Persons engage in transactions harmful to the city, such as gambling, lending at interest, bribery, cheating in the sale of commodities, high prices, and hoarding commodities.

f. People get embroiled in controversies and vacillate between different positions as long as the situation has not been clarified.

g. The community reverts into nomadic life or a condition similar to the first *irtifāq*, when people migrate to other cities or engage in activities harmful to the city, as is the case when most people turn to trade or make their living through warfare and agriculture declines.

h. The stampede of wild animals and the spread of vermin.⁶⁷

In addition to proposing special measures for each of the emergencies mentioned above, Shāh Walī Allāh recommends a series of general measures intended to enhance the defense of the state. For example, he counsels the construction of walls, forts, and bridges; the appointment of border garrisons; and the creation of markets. He also recommends securing water supplies, discovering water springs, building wells, and facilitating the transportation of merchandise through the construction of docks at the shores of rivers. Shāh Walī Allāh’s program for dealing with extraordinary circumstances is not confined to prescriptions of practical nature but extends to the moral aspects of domestic unity and the modes of interaction between the ruler and his subjects. The sovereign should cultivate bonds of friendship among the people and interact in a friendly manner with merchants and foreigners; this

will prompt them to visit his realm more often. He should also make sure that farmers do not leave the land uncultivated and should offer incentives for artisans to improve their work. Finally, the ruler should encourage the people to acquire skills such as calligraphy, arithmetic, history, medicine, and methods of advancing knowledge. Protective measures include being able to distinguish immoral from moral habits, identify which citizens are in need of support, and employ the best craftsmen. 68

Imperial Decline

Shāh Walī Allāh’s theory about the caliphate in the general sense revolves around the two major factors which, in his view, account for imperial decline in his own day: (1) the depletion of the public treasury, and (2) parasitism, or the fact that many people seek to secure income by serving as soldiers or by becoming ‘ulamā’ (religious scholars), ascetics, and poets and by receiving gifts from the rulers. The latter causes heavy taxation on farmers and traders, then the constant increase of taxes leads to the ruin of the productive classes and incites those who survive to stand up against taxation and rebel against the government. 69

In his private writings and letters, Shāh Walī Allāh berates the fact that wealth came to be concentrated in the hands of Hindus. 70 But, more importantly, he construes the malfunction of the Mughal government as a sign of moral decadence and overall failure to implement the teachings of Islam. In an eleventh-hour attempt to save the Mughal state from ultimate downfall, Shāh Walt Allāh called on the Afghan ruler Aḥmad Shāh Abdālī (d. 1772) to invade India. He offers fulsome praise of the Afghan warlord for his bravery and foresight and urges him to launch a full-scale operation against the Marathas and Jats and to wipe out polytheistic practices. 71

Shāh Walī Allāh’s epistles on Mughal political disintegration should be read against the background of a series of events that led to

69 Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bālighah, 1:40; Hermansen, The Conclusive Argument from God, p. 131.
71 Nizami, Shāh Valī Dihlavī ke siyāsī maktūbāt, pp. 15, 52. See also Jalbani, Teachings of Shāh Walīullah of Delhi, pp. 114–117.
the gradual decay of Mughal rule:72 the incursions by Maratha, Jat, and Sikh forces;73 the invasion of the army of the Iranian ruler Nādir Shāh (1688–1747, r. 1736–1747) in 1739, which struck a blow to the stature of the emperor and strained the Empire economically and militarily; a devastating military debacle of the Mughal forces at the battle of Kārnal on 24 February 1739 and the massive slaughter of residents of Delhi perpetrated by soldiers that gave rise to popular resentment; and the constant plots and intrigues of the nobles and courtiers. The situation came to a head when, after the death of the Mughal ruler Muhammad Shāh (d. 1748), his son and successor Ahmad Shāh Bahādur (1725–1775, r. 1748–1754) became a pliant tool in the hands of influential ministers and nobles, which rendered the Empire’s capital vulnerable to assaults by rebels.

Shāh Wali Allāh reproves the imperial administration for its inability to suppress sedition. He points to the Jats’ taking over Gujarat and Malwa; the rulers’ luxurious way of life, profligate spending, and self-aggrandizement; the irregular and disrupted flow of revenues from the provinces; the corruption of local governors and tax agents in the collection and administration of revenue; and the oppression of the lower social strata of the population. In addition to the letters which he sent to Ahmad Shāh Abdālī, Shāh Wali Allāh made a direct appeal to the emperor and the nobles and spelled out an elaborate program intended to ensure the stability and continued existence of the Empire:74


74 The following account is based on Islahi, “Shah Wali Allah’s Concept of Al-Irtifaqat (Stages of Socio-Economic Development),” pp. 48–49; Fazl-e-Mahmud Asiri, “Shah Wali Allah as a Politician,” Islamic Literature 7 (1955): 35–41.
a. He cautions against the policy of appointing a large number of jagirs (fief lords) who end up shirking their duties to the army and rent out their lands. He recommends assigning large pieces of land to nobles and reintroducing Shāh Jahān’s practice of paying the lower members of the nobility in cash.

b. He impresses upon the government the need to ensure that soldiers receive a regular salary, because delays in paying salaries compels soldiers to rely on loans at high rates of interest and neglect their duties.

c. He exhorts the emperor to expand the state property (khāliṣa) to the region surrounding Delhi, Hisar, and Sirhind.

d. He suggests that the central administration reassert its authority and regain its capacity to gather revenues.

e. He urges the emperor and nobles to give up their extravagant and luxurious way of life.

Shāh Wali Allāh stands forth as an intimate observer of the political events of his time. His interest in Mughal politics can partly be explained by his affiliation with the Naqshbandi order. The order advocated the active involvement of leading Sufi figures in politics, with the aim to influence the policies and decisions of rulers and thereby affect the lives of Muslims. In the context of the central

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77 On the history of the order, see Butrus Abu-Manneh, The Naqsbandiyya-Khālidīyya Sufi Order (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 2008); Itzchak Weismann, The Naqsbandiyya: Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition (London: Routledge, 2007);
and eastern Islamic empires, rulers often had to muster the support of the order to legitimate and consolidate their rule and secure popular support.\textsuperscript{78}

\textit{Shāh Wālī Allāh on Byzantine Decline}

What gives particular poignancy to Shāh Wālī Allāh’s theorizing about imperial decline is his use of the Persian and Byzantine paradigms as a heuristic device to trace the root causes of the decay of Mughal power. Shāh Wālī Allāh castigates the Sassanian (‘ajam)\textsuperscript{79} and Byzantine (rūm) empires, noting that their failure to collect sufficient revenues and build up necessary defenses was the principal factor that led to their collapse. Their rulers had passed on hereditary kingship for many
generations and had become so engrossed in the pleasures of this world that they neglected the next world. They became deeply immersed in comforts and derived pride from possessing them; in fact, scholars came from far lands to learn the arts associated with fine living. The Persians and Byzantines pursued life’s pleasures with increasing enthusiasm; their rulers competed and showed off to one another until they used to rebuke those rulers who did not wear beautiful clothes or who wore a girdle or crown whose value was less than a hundred thousand dirhems or who did not reside in a lofty palace that included bathtubs, bathing pools, gardens, swift riding animals, and handsome servitors, or those who were not generous in distributing food. This emphasis on luxury and pleasure penetrated their lives to such an extent that it was like an incurable disease that caused their markets and cities to perish.\footnote{Hujjat Allāh al-Bālighah, 1:106; Hermansen, The Conclusive Argument from God, pp. 306–307.}

Luxurious living papered over mounting expenditures, and to make up for draining the state budget, rulers imposed exorbitant taxation on the peasantry and traders and oppressed them to the point that if they refused to pay taxes they were subjected to torture, and if they obeyed they became like donkeys and cattle, which are used for farming according to their master’s needs and whims. Consequently, greed and luxury set in, and the people were so desperate in such a state of depredation and misery that they totally neglected religion; they were concerned solely with material comforts, and they abandoned the principles of the professions upon which the order of the world is based. Some people ingratiated themselves with the rulers; others emulated the habits of their leaders but did not perform what was necessary and tried instead to merely subsist; still others engaged in parasitic activities by becoming poets, ascetics, and Sufis, relying on gifts and financial aid from the emperors; and some of these groups ended up oppressing and exploiting others and sought to make their living by befriending or flattering the rulers.\footnote{Hujjat Allāh al-Bālighah, 1:105–106; Hermansen, The Conclusive Argument from God, pp. 306–307.}

Shāh Wali Allāh’s statements on Byzantine decline point to a
major lacuna in scholarship. Previous studies rarely address medieval and early modern Islamic views of the political organization of the Byzantine Empire and the ways in which Byzantine historiography and political writing perceived the rise of Mongol rule and the spread of Islam in central and south Asia. Medieval Islamic literature is characterized by the tendency to refer to political leaders and methods of government before the advent of Islam or in non-Muslim lands in the context of discussions on the conditions for salutary rule according to

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the tenets of Islam. The earliest references to pre-Islamic rulers occur in the Qu'ran, in which the term *malik* (king)\(^3\) is applied to the pharaohs of ancient Egypt to signify unrighteous political conduct and arbitrary and unjust rule,\(^4\) although later Arab authors took a more favorable stance toward ancient Egyptian kingship and commended

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the pharaohs for such virtues as generosity, piety, and dedication to the welfare of their subjects.\footnote{Okasha El-Daly, *Egyptology: The Missing Millennium: Ancient Egypt in Medieval Arabic Writings* (London: UCL Press, 2005), pp. 122–126.}

Arab authors also denounced luxury, wasteful extravagance, pomp, and overtaxation as symptoms of the devolution of Byzantine authority. The geographer and traveler Ibn Ḥawqal (tenth century) reports that in an effort to cover the expenses of his military expeditions against the Muslims Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (912–969, r. 963–969) imposed heavy taxes instead of using his own funds and provoked popular discontent and agitation which led to his assassination. Such an assessment persisted down to the fourteenth century as indicated by the characterization of the Byzantines as ungenerous and self-conceited in al-Nuwayrī’s (d. 1333) history of the Mongol conquest of Syria. Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406) likewise observes that whereas Muslims were originally averse to royal decorum and pomp, the caliphate gradually mutated into royal rule and Muslims paid increasing attention to splendor and developed a penchant for luxury, especially after interacting and mingling with Persians and Byzantines who displayed to them their ways of ostentation and luxury. Finally, an interesting precedent to Shāh Wālī Allāh’s ideas on the Byzantine practice of imperial power may be found in the Talkhīṣ kitāb al-khiṭābah li-Aristū (Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s Rhetoric) of the famous Arab philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126–1198): elaborating on Aristotle’s typology of the various regime types, Ibn Rushd distinguishes between cities that are ruled according to fixed and immutable laws, as is the case with the Islamic law, and cities whose laws change according to what is most expedient, as is the case with many of the laws in Byzantium.

Assessing the veracity of Shāh Wālī Allāh’s account of Byzantine decline would require a closer survey of the image of the Byzantine Empire in medieval and early modern Islamic writing, especially in the central and eastern lands of Islam, that exceeds the scope of this arti-

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91 El Cheikh, Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs, p. 197.  
It is possible that Shāh Walī Allāh’s intention is to alert Mughal rulers to the imminent fall of the empire by invoking Byzantium as a negative example of a great imperial state that collapsed due to an economic crisis very similar to the one that afflicted eighteenth-century India. Even so, Shāh Walī Allāh’s statements attest to a keen awareness and appreciation of the economic factors involved in the decline of Byzantine power and the affinities between Mughal and Byzantine political realities and calls for a comparative study of Mughal and Byzantine reactions to the phenomenon of imperial decline.

As noted earlier, a number of medieval Islamic accounts of the Byzantine Empire centered around excessive taxation as one of the major flaws of Byzantine imperial administration. Just like Ibn Ḥawqal,


95 I am grateful to Professor Anthony Kaldellis for discussions on this point.
who ascribed the social tensions that arose during Nikephoros Phokas’s reign to high taxation and the exploitation of the people, John Skylitzes (late eleventh century) mentions in his Synopsis Historion (A Synopsis of Histories) that Phokas, who was vilified by some of his contemporaries as a belligerent ruler, incurred the hatred of his subjects by imposing excessive taxation and turning a blind eye to the abuses of the military and the plundering and pillage of the people’s property. Skylitzes denounces Phokas’s policies to create additional sources of revenues and raise supplement taxes: in particular, he criticizes the Byzantine emperor for abrogating some of the financial benefits of the members of the senate on the pretext of lacking funds to sustain the war effort, terminating the financial aid offered to religious houses and churches, and passing a law that prohibited the expansion of ecclesiastical property. Last but not least, the emperor caused the devaluation of the existing currency (nomisma) by introducing an additional form of currency, the tetarteron.96

The degeneration of Byzantine political strength was visible as early as the eleventh century,97 as evidenced by Michael Attaleiates’s (1020/1030–1085) references to misgovernment and venality in the imperial administration as the prime causes of Byzantine decadence especially in the aftermath of the Byzantine army’s defeat by Seljuq

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97 An extensive treatment of critiques of Byzantine leadership as articulated in Byzantine historiography in the period between the sixth and thirteenth centuries appears in Franz Hermann Tinnefeld, Kategorien der Kaiserkritik in der byzantinischen Historiographie von Prokop bis Niketas Choniates (Munich: W. Fink, 1971).
The steady increase of costs for the administration and sustenance of the Byzantine army, for luxury, finery, and pomp, coincided with Venice’s and Genoa’s dominance in Mediterranean trade. With the Turkish menace looming large in the mid thirteenth century, some of the protagonists of late Byzantine intellectual and religious life engaged in sustained reflection on the causes and effects of the factional strife that raged through the empire. Tirades against profit making, injustice, and rampant corruption were common. Similar to Shāh Wali Allāh, who identified tax burdens laid on the peasantry and the parasitic activities of religious figures as two of the major reasons for imperial decline, a number of Byzantine political theorists blamed the economic problems of the empire on the exploitation of the productive classes and on the tax privileges of the monasteries.

Amidst a famine in Constantinople in the 1300s, the then Patriarch of Constantinople (1289–1293 and 1303–1309), Athanasios I (1230/35–ca. 1323), addressed a number of letters to the Byzantine emperor Andronikos II Palaiologos (1259–1332; r. 1282–1328) in which he makes an impassioned plea for the fair distribution of food supplies.\(^1\) just as the sun radiates warmth, so too is one of the emperor’s prime tasks to uphold security and justice. Athanasios specifically calls upon the emperor to restrain those who, driven by greed, seek to profit by hoarding for themselves public revenues and inflict poverty,\(^2\) and recommends drastic measures against those who receive


bribes and slander the Church. He advocates tight central control over the purchase of grain and bread and the judicious selection of revenue collectors. He also calls for strict monitoring of the bakers and of the transportation and delivery of grain so that cargoes do not end up in the hands of grain dealers and profiteers but are distributed to those who are in need of food, and he threatens to excommunicate all grain dealers.


103 The Correspondence of Athanasius I Patriarch of Constantinople, Letter 65 (152/153).

104 Ibid., Letter 93 (242/243).


106 The Correspondence of Athanasius I Patriarch of Constantinople, Letter 100 (256/257). See also ibid., Letter 106 (266/267).

107 Ibid., Letter 106 (266/267).

r. 1328–1341) death in June 1341, his chief minister, John Kantakouzenos (1292–1383), served as the effective regent for John V (1332–1391), Andronikos’s infant son, and proclaimed himself emperor four months later. In 1342, a political group that called themselves Zealots and were led by the grand duke (= commander-in-chief of the Byzantine navy) Alexios Apokaukos (late thirteenth century–1345) set up a popular regime in Thessalonike. The conflict touched off a series of revolts in other cities, with the nobility backing Kantakouzenos and the middle and lower classes supporting John V and the Zealots. The Zealot regime came to an end when Kantakouzenos recovered Thessalonike in 1350.

Nikephoros Choumnos’s (1250/55–1327) speech *Thessalonikeus sumvouleutikos peri Dikaiosunēs* (Exhortatory Oration on Justice) provides intriguing insights into the background of the events surrounding the Zealot movement and a vivid description of the poverty conditions

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and inequality in late Byzantine Thessalonike.\textsuperscript{109} Choumnos, a distinguished scholar and prime minister (mesazōn) of Emperor Andronikos II, served as governor of Thessalonike in 1309/10.\textsuperscript{110} The speech, written most probably around 1284/85,\textsuperscript{111} was originally intended for the citizens of Thessalonike, but it was never delivered in public and circulated within Choumnos’s circle of friends and associates.\textsuperscript{112} Choumnos castigates the rich for contriving to take over the property and houses of the poor in order to build their luxurious multi-storey residences and points out that the poor in their turn, though initially trying to negotiate, become desperate and succumb to the demands of those who, driven by covetousness and cupidity, seek to seize their property.\textsuperscript{113}

Similar sentiments are echoed in Tois Thessalonikeusi peri omonoias ([Oration] to the Citizens of Thessalonike on Concord),\textsuperscript{114} an exhortatory speech composed by Thomas Magister (or Magistros, also known by his monastic name Theodoulous, ca. 1280–1350/51), an eminent classical scholar and theologian.\textsuperscript{115} The speech draws to some extent


\textsuperscript{111} Verpeaux, Nicéphore Choumnos, p. 35.

\textsuperscript{112} Tinnefeld, “Intellektuals in Late Byzantine Thessalonike,” p. 165.

\textsuperscript{113} Boissonade, Anecdota græca e codicibus regis, 2:168–169. See also Zakythinos, Crise monétaire et crise économique à Byzance, pp. 46–47.


on ancient Greek models, especially Aelius Aristides’s (117 C.E.–after 181) orations, and captures the sense of anguish and the political decadence that prevailed in Thessalonike in the wake of the civil wars between Andronikos II and his grandson Andronikos III over the succession to the throne during the years 1321–1328 and on the eve of the Zealot revolution. Magister also wrote two treatises on the proper qualifications for kingship (Peri vasileias [On Kingship]) and the duties of citizens (Peri politeias [On the Commonwealth]), in which he makes an urgent appeal to the civic body of Thessalonike to restore unity and uphold justice, and alerting readers to the deleterious effects of sedition and factional discord (stasis).

The theme of economic injustice was seconded by Alexios Makremvolites (d. after 1349), who offers a prescient analysis of the fall of the Byzantine state as the result of a decision of the world-governing Byzantine philologists in general, see Sophia Mergiali, L’Enseignement et les Lettrés [sic] pendant l’époque des Paléologues (1261–1453) (Athens: Société des Amis du Peuple, Centre d’Études Byzantines, 1996), pp. 49–59.

116 There is no scholarly consensus as to which of the two events Magister is referring to. I am inclined to the view that Magister alludes to both the conflict between Andronikos II and his grandson Andronikos III and the events that precipitated the Zealot revolt. For a similar interpretation and review of previous scholarship, see Triantari-Mara, The Political Thought of Fourteenth Century in Thessaloniki, pp. 37–53. On the conflict between Andronikos II and his grandson, see Nicol, The Last Centuries of Byzantium, chap. “The Question of the Succession and the First Civil War,” pp. 151–166; as well as Leonidas Mavrommatis, The First Palaiologoi: Problems of Political Praxis and Ideology (Athens: Sylogos pros Diadositon Hellenikon Grammaton, 1983), pp. 52–78; Konstantinos P. Kyrris, Byzantium in the 14th Century (Nicosia: Lampousa, 1982) [both in Greek].

Providence that causes the fluctuations in the affairs of the world and transfers sovereignty from one people to another. In the fictional *Dialogos plousiōn kai penētōn* (Dialogue [between] Rich and Poor, ca. 1344), Makremvolites captures the feverish strife and social rifts that convulsed the Byzantine world in the thirteenth century and points to the suffering of the poor, who were at the mercy of the wealthy.\(^{118}\)

Another major late Byzantine intellectual who witnessed the repercussions of the Zealot episode and got embroiled in contemporary debates on the economic and social ills that plagued the empire was Nikolaos Kavasilas (ca. 1322–ca. 1390), a cleric and scion of a prominent noble family from Thessalonike. In his *Peri tokou* (On Interest), an oration addressed to Anna of Savoy (Palaiologina, 1306–ca. 1365) that was written around 1351, he expresses unqualified disdain for the rich who, as he observes, engage in unjust actions, seek profit by ruining others, and behave like robbers, thieves, and wild animals.\(^{119}\)

In his *Logos kata tokizōntōn* (Oration against Usurers), Kavasilas...
offers an extensive treatment of lending at interest and hoarding of resources onto which he has grafted patristic and legal definitions of usury. He also points to the moral dimensions of usury, which he equates with other kinds of crimes such as adultery, murder, and theft, with the only difference that these crimes entail a certain degree of risk, whereas usury is a more detestable form of crime because it is free of risks.\textsuperscript{120} Kavasilas specifically denounces laws that associate interest rates and the character of the lender and forbid clerics from loaning at interest or allow nobles to charge only low rates while permitting wicked and morally corrupt individuals to charge high interest rates.\textsuperscript{121}

If the Zealot rebellion was construed by both pro- and anti-Zealot intellectuals as a portent of Byzantium’s fall, in the first half of the fourteenth century the political disintegration of Byzantine rule due to the wrongs and injustices perpetuated by the imperial administration, a long series of economic crises, and the advances of the Turkish forces came to be broadly regarded as a fait accompli. A number of Byzantine thinkers felt despondent about the process of Byzantine decline, explaining it as a manifestation of divine wrath for misrule or a divine punishment for the Byzantines’ refusal to endorse the union of the churches.\textsuperscript{122} But George Gemistos Plethon (d. 1452), a towering


\textsuperscript{120} Patrologia Graeca 150: 722–750. See also Laiou, “Economic Concerns and Attitudes of the Intellectuals of Thessalonike,” p. 213; Marschke and Tinnefeld, \textit{Die Gesellschaft im späten Byzanz}, pp. 349–355.

\textsuperscript{121} Laiou, “Economic Concerns and Attitudes of the Intellectuals of Thessalonike,” p. 215.

figure of late Byzantine intellectual life and purveyor of ancient Greek and Byzantine learning in Renaissance Italy, pinned his hopes for survival on the organization of the Peloponnese as an autonomous political entity that would serve as the last refuge for Byzantines of “Hellenic” stock, as shown in the two memoranda which he addressed to Theodoros II Palaiologos (1396–1448, r. 1407–1443), Despot of Mystra, in 1416.


and Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1350–1425, r. 1391–1421) in 1418.124

The ideal form of regime envisioned by Plethon is one with a strong monarch with a moderate number of educated men drawn from the middle class acting as his advisers. Plethon also advocates abolition of private property, regulation of commercial activities with an eye to local needs, and strict currency control.125

Conclusion

In this article, I elucidated the central premises of Shāh Walī Allāh’s theory of the state and human civilization and engaged in a closer discussion of the ways in which his political ideas relate to previous Islamic political discourse, notably the akhlāq (Ṭūsī, Dawwānī) and Indo-Islamic strands of political thought (Baranī, Abū’l-Fazl, Najm-i Sānī). I demonstrated that Shāh Walī Allāh articulates a naturalistic approach to the phenomenon of social genesis and posits the goal of meeting human needs as the prime motivating force behind the formation of human society.

I also reconstructed Shāh Walī Allāh’s theory about the factors that account for the decline of the state and the empire and of his program for dealing with a broad range of emergencies. I argued that Shāh Walī

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125 Lampros, Palaiologia kai Peloponnēsiaka, 3:263. Plethon’s economic ideas are dis
Allāh’s statements on the causes of Mughal decay open a window into the intellectual atmosphere in the last centuries of Mughal rule, but also bear intriguing affinities to the ideas expressed by earlier thinkers on the economic aspects of imperial decline. Šāh Walī Allāh’s use of the Byzantine paradigm as an instrument of analysis of the sociopolitical conditions that prevailed in his contemporary India brings him close to a number of Byzantine authors who perceived the eclipse of Byzantine rule as the outcome of social inequalities, oppression of the lower strata of society, and overtaxation.

Moreover, the findings of the preceding analysis of Šāh Walī Allāh’s political thought call for a reassessment of Bernard Lewis’s thesis that the decline of the Islamic world occurred due to intrinsic flaws in the Islamic tradition, notably the status of slaves, women, and unbelievers, and cultural obstinacy and aversion to secularization. Šāh Walī Allāh is in substantial agreement with Byzantine thinkers on the primacy of economic factors in the process of imperial decline. His references to the Byzantine and Sassanian empires reflect a vivid awareness of the importance of maladministration and financial corruption as universal causes for the decay of any type of state organization that extends well beyond the Islamic context.

While previous scholarly attempts to study the history of the Mughal Empire from a cross-cultural perspective have primarily focused on comparisons with the Roman and Ottoman empires, the

results of this article highlight the need for a detailed investigation of Indo-Islamic attitudes toward the political history of the Byzantine Empire and a comparative study of the Byzantine and Mughal patterns of imperial organization. They also call for a critical reevaluation of Shāh Walī Allāh’s political ideas and philosophy of history that will help place him in conversation with eighteenth-century Western thinkers (Montesquieu, Vico, Gibbon) and revisit the relevance of his ideas to ongoing debates on the economic dimensions of state decline.