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Introduction

THIS IS a book about the evolution of key facets of Islamic thought and, to a lesser extent, practice in India during the eighteenth and the early to mid-nineteenth centuries and their subsequent career until our own day. It explores developments in Islamic political and social thought and its theological underpinnings, law, theorizations of ritual practice, Qur'anic hermeneutics, the study of hadith (the reported teachings of the Prophet Muhammad), and Sufi thought and practice, not in isolation, as has often been the case in studies of those topics, but rather in close interaction with one another. The century and a half with which this study is primarily concerned was a time of great upheaval: the decline of the Mughal empire; invasions of northern India from Iran and Afghanistan; military and other conflicts among Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus; the rise to power of the English East India Company; and later the formal establishment of British colonial rule. It was also a time when Muslims and others came to adopt new technologies, including print, and an age that saw great contestation within the Muslim community on questions of religious authority and of proper Islamic belief and practice. Over the following century and a half, scholars, activists, and ordinary believers would continue to be shaped by many of those developments and to adapt them to their varied purposes. This book seeks to place Islam in South Asia in this vast intellectual, social, political, and cultural landscape.

I focus here on a family of religious scholars whose influence on subsequent generations of Muslims remains unmatched in South Asia. At the center of this family stands Shah Wali Allah of Delhi (d. 1762), a prolific scholar who wrote in both Arabic and Persian on the Qur'an (including a translation of it into Persian), hadith, law, political theory, and Sufism. He was also a keen observer of the political developments of his late Mughal era, as is clear from his surviving letters, a number of which were addressed to leading political figures of his time. Three of Wali Allah's sons—Shah `Abd al-`Aziz (d. 1824), Shah `Abd al-Qadir (d. 1813), and Shah Rafi` al-din (d. 1818)—also figure prominently in this book. The writings of `Abd al-`Aziz include a substantial commentary on the Qur'an in Persian; juridical responses (*fatwās*) to the questions posed to him by

ordinary believers, fellow scholars, and politically influential men; a major anti-Shi'a polemic that provoked numerous Shi'i responses; and, not least, a work on music. An aging 'Abd al-'Aziz saw the English take control of Mughal Delhi in 1803, and his stature is reflected well in British efforts to cultivate ties with him. Another son, 'Abd al-Qadir, is best known for producing one of the earliest complete translations of the Qur'an into Urdu, the principal language of the Muslims of north India that was then in the process of acquiring a literary form and is now the official language of Pakistan. This language was commonly referred to as "Hindi" at the time, which is how he refers to it as well.¹ No other translation has had a more decisive influence than 'Abd al-Qadir's on subsequent translations of the Qur'an into Urdu. Rafi' al-din, another son, also translated the Qur'an into Urdu, though his repute rested primarily on his theological and Sufi writings. He was also involved in a well-documented Hindu-Muslim fracas not long after the arrival of the British as the de facto rulers of Mughal Delhi, which offers one of many illustrations of how his family's footprint extended into realms well beyond the intellectual.

Shah Muhammad Isma'il (d. 1831), a grandson of Wali Allah, also features prominently in this book. He is best known as the leader, together with his mentor, Sayyid Ahmad of Rae Bareilly (d. 1831), of a movement that sought to reform Muslim beliefs and practices in light of the Islamic foundational texts. Some of the religious practices in Wali Allah's own household did not pass muster with Isma'il, and the controversy that this movement generated continues to echo in many Muslim circles to this day. Isma'il and Sayyid Ahmad had political ambitions, too. After visiting the Hijaz to perform the hajj along with many of their followers, they moved to what is today Pakistan's northwest frontier (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) bordering Afghanistan. This was in pursuit of the effort to establish an Islamic polity there and to combat the Sikh kingdom in the Punjab, whose authority loosely extended to that northwestern region as well. There was much resentment that this puritanical movement of the *mujāhidīn* (holy warriors) engendered among the local Pashtun tribesmen, who were committed to their own understanding of Islam; and though the defeat would come at the hands of the Sikhs, tribal disaffection was a key factor in it. A great-grandson of Wali Allah, a hadith scholar named Muhammad Ishaq (d. 1846), had some indirect association with this movement, too. Late in life, in 1842, he emigrated with his family to Mecca, at a time when rumors were going around that a Muslim insurgency, with sinews extending from Hyderabad in the south all the way to Afghanistan, was about to break out. The British were then engaged in what is remembered as the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839–42), a venture that would end disastrously for them. It is not clear if Ishaq's association with the mujahidin movement or the wider political uncertainty of the time had any direct bearing on his departure from India. For purposes of this book, his importance lies

instead in the fact that he was the last eminent scholar of Wali Allah's family, and especially in that he figures prominently in the immediate intellectual background of the founders of the Deoband madrasa, an institution of Islamic learning, established in 1866, that would spawn tens of thousands of "Deobandi" madrasas across South Asia, Afghanistan, Britain, South Africa, and elsewhere from the late nineteenth century onward.² The first concern of this book, then, is to delineate the contours of Islamic thought in early modern India with reference to the intellectual history of one distinguished north Indian family of scholars and Sufis.³

Wali Allah and his sons were hardly the only scholars and Sufis of distinction in their time, and yet their legacy has overshadowed that of most others as well as of not a few among their predecessors. The noted Pakistani modernist scholar Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) went so far as to say of Wali Allah that "before him Islam had produced great masters of individual disciplines—who in one or even in more than one discipline, taken *separately*, perhaps even excelled Shah Waliy-Ullah—but no one before him attempted an integration . . . of the total Islamic structure."⁴ The hyperbole of this assessment notwithstanding, it is a remarkable fact that all major Sunni orientations that emerged in South Asia in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries—the Deobandis, the Barelawis, the Ahl-i Hadith (or Salafis), and, as Rahman's observation illustrates, the Muslim modernists—see Wali Allah as a key figure in the kind of Islam they profess to stand for, and this despite their unhappy relations with one another.⁵ How members of this family acquired that stature is also a story this book tells, which takes us into the world of South Asian Islam in the late nineteenth, the twentieth, and the early twenty-first centuries. Here we will see some of the different ways in which Wali Allah's legacy has been curated in accordance with the evolving identities of the various Sunni orientations of South Asia. Wali Allah and his sons were very much a product of the intellectual and religious culture of their time, of course.⁶ He wrote major works on hadith and law, but he could simultaneously justify the belief of his father and uncle, both Sufis, that God had "excused" them from adhering to core shari`a obligations. He could even speak of (and *to*) the sun in reverential terms reminiscent of the famously heterodox practices of Mughal emperors like Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan. He professed being told by God in a dream that people prostrating to a bee should not be condemned as polytheists, that the bee in this case was simply a pointer to God rather like the Ka`ba is for Muslims praying in that direction. For his part, `Abd al-`Aziz, in his Qur'an commentary, could equate major Hindu deities with what Muslim theologians and Sufis viewed as particular attributes of God.⁷ When the Salafis—with their insistence on basing all belief and practice on the Qur'an, the normative example of the Prophet, and the practice of the first Muslims—published Wali Allah's books, they tended to leave aside his Sufi writings. The Deobandis, despite their concern with anchoring Islamic belief and practice in law and the foundational texts, have made

considerable room for Sufism. Yet there is a good deal in the writings of Wali Allah and his sons that Deobandi Sufism, or Deobandi veneration of Wali Allah, has been unable to accommodate. Conversely, the more devotionally inclined Barelawis are embarrassed by the occasions on which Wali Allah could, indeed, sound like a strict scripturalist. The family's oeuvre and the sustained but complicated engagement with it by later Muslims provide us an unparalleled view of the intellectual and religious history of Islam in South Asia not just in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries but in the following two centuries as well. An evocation, with reference to this family's legacy, of influential Islamic trends since the late nineteenth century is my second concern in this book.

Needless to say, this latter is a highly complex terrain that no single study can expect to capture in a satisfactory manner. Yet, precisely because Wali Allah has come to permeate South Asian Sunni Islam since the late nineteenth century, varied Muslim engagements with his ideas and with those of his descendants allow us to view not merely that influence but also the particular facets of Islam that echo and reflect it. I have attended to those facets in two principal ways in this book. First, in almost every chapter that follows, I have brought out how the ideas of important figures among the *ʿ*ulama, Sufis, Islamists, modernists, and others compare and contrast with select themes in Wali Allah thought.⁸ In my discussion of Wali Allah's understanding of core Islamic rituals, for instance, I note some striking parallels between it and how Muslim modernists have tended to "rationalize" ritual. Yet Wali Allah's view of ritual turns out to be very different from that of the modernists, and those differences can tell us much about new and evolving understandings of Islam since the late nineteenth century. Likewise, my discussion of power and authority in Wali Allah's work seeks not only to explicate the contours of his political thought but also to contrast it with other, later, understandings of the issues in question. The second way in which I have taken Wali Allah's legacy as a vantage from which to examine some later developments is by providing a panoramic overview of those developments in the final substantive chapter of this book. That, too, is necessarily a selective overview, but my hope is that it is illuminating nonetheless in bringing out some major changes that Islamic thought and practice have undergone since the early eighteenth century. I have sought throughout to show not only how different Islamic paths crisscrossed in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries but also what those and other paths have come to look like since the late nineteenth century at the hands of lesser known but often highly ingenious scholars, reformers, polemicists, editors, publishers, and educators.⁹ I thereby provide what I hope is a richer, more substantive, and more fully contextualized account of the transformations of Islamic thought since the eighteenth century than is currently available for any major region of the Muslim world, let alone for South Asia.

My third goal in this book is to place the ideas under discussion in both their wider Islamic as well as their specifically Indian contexts. Wali Allah's writings and those of his descendants are in conversation, so to speak, with major figures in the exegetical, legal, theological, ethical, and mystical traditions from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. Scholars of the law, from Malik b. Anas (d. 795), the eponymous founder of the Maliki school of Sunni law, to Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), the fourteenth-century jurist and theologian of the Hanbali school who has come to cast a large shadow on modern Islamic thought, find their place in Wali Allah's world. So do hadith scholars and Qur'an commentators. Among the Sufis, by far the most influential figure for Wali Allah is the Andalusian mystic Ibn al-`Arabi (d. 1240), though we will meet many others in the following chapters. Ethicists like Nasir al-din Tusi (d. 1274) impacted his thought as well. Wali Allah had spent nearly two years in Mecca and Medina, and he had interacted with some notable scholars there. They, in turn, came to serve as crucial links in his intellectual genealogies. One of them, Abu Tahir Muhammad (d. 1733), was the son of Ibrahim al-Kurani (d. 1690)—a Sufi, theologian, and hadith scholar who, though not well-remembered now, was arguably one of the most important figures on the religious landscape of seventeenth-century Islam.¹⁰ But the context in which Wali Allah and his successors wrote was equally Indian, and not just in an obvious geographic, social, and political sense but also in intellectual, cultural, and religious terms.

This way of putting it is somewhat misleading, of course, because it assumes a separation between the Islamic and the Indian. Such disjunctions have long served polemical purposes, as when a rival group might be accused of being mired in Indian and, by extension, Hindu, customs and therefore of suspect religious commitments; but otherwise, for all practical purposes, Indian Muslim scholars had long remained, by Wali Allah's time, major contributors to all aspects of the Islamic intellectual and religious tradition. The point is, however, that Wali Allah and his sons were keenly responsive to their Indian context as well, not always in a complimentary way but often unapologetically so. The customary norms that had long been part of many a Muslim's life are another useful vantage, besides the intellectual, from which to observe how the belief and practice not just of ordinary believers but also of distinguished scholars could be embedded—sometimes uncomfortably, other times with self-assurance—in their Indian contexts. In writing about Islam in South Asia, it is surprising but hardly uncommon for scholars to lose sight of the fact that Muslims and non-Muslims would have crossed paths regularly, if not daily, and to ask what that meant for their understanding not just of the other but also of themselves.¹¹ The corpus of writings by members of Wali Allah's household, on which this book draws throughout, has much to tell us in that regard.

The Indian context is not adequately captured, however, through an examination of the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims alone. The Islamic scholarly tradition to which Wali Allah and his successors were major contributors had itself evolved in its Indian milieu. It is not just scholars of the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia but also Indian Muslim scholars and Sufis of the previous generations who figure in the writings of Wali Allah and his descendants. It was through their works that an understanding of the broader religious tradition was itself mediated and passed on to the next generations. It was their tombs that one visited to establish, from this side of the grave, a connection with those masters and, by extension, with their understanding of the Islamic tradition, its inflections, and its nuances in the Indian context. Some of those masters had made the Hijaz their adopted home and had become influential among scholars and Sufis of varied backgrounds there. This, once again, makes it difficult to draw any clear lines between Islam in India and in the wider world. Of Taj al-din Sanbhali (d. 1640), a Naqshbandi master whose writings he had studied as part of his own education, Wali Allah writes that “of the latter-day Indian Sufis, there was no one to whom I saw the people of Mecca to be more devoted than they were to Shaykh Taj or whose mystical feats they spoke of more often.”¹² Besides what Taj al-din represented to him in terms of his actual teachings, it is scarcely far-fetched to think that Wali Allah would have looked to his likes as modeling for him the kind of authority that transcended time and region.

The Indianness of the context in which Wali Allah and his descendants did their work is simultaneously highlighted and, paradoxically, obscured by the languages in which they wrote. Though he did not write in Hindi (understood here, as noted earlier, as the forerunner of modern Urdu), his use of that language is attested in our sources, as it is also in case of his father, Shah `Abd al-Rahim.<sup>13</sup> As noted, two of his sons, Shah `Abd al-Qadir and Shah Rafi` al-din, produced separate translations of the Qur`an in that language. This use of Hindi for scholarly and other purposes is among the most notable markers of the family’s Indian moorings; it is a dialect of Hindi that they would have spoken at home, too. Persian is equally an expression of the family’s Indianness, of course, for that was the language of the Mughal court and administration, and virtually all educated Muslims and substantial numbers of non-Muslims would have been well-versed in it. That is the language in which Wali Allah wrote some of his most notable works; the principal language in which he corresponded with his associates and with members of the ruling elite; and the one in which `Abd al-`Aziz’s commentary on the Qur`an, fatwas, anti-Shi`i polemic, and many other writings by him and by his brothers have come down to us. Building on earlier studies, recent scholarship has done much to demonstrate the depth and breadth of the engagement with all matters Persian in pre- and early colonial India and to place India in the broader Persian cosmopolis.¹⁴

There are, however, two related points that can easily obscure what this scholarship has so meticulously illuminated. First, if Persian was an Indian language in premodern and early colonial times, so was Arabic.¹⁵ Wali Allah wrote major works in Arabic, including what would become his most famous book, *The Conclusive Argument from God* (*Hujjat Allah al-baligha*). His sons wrote extensively in it, too, and South Asian religious scholars have continued to write in Arabic until the present. We cannot hope to understand the full range of Muslim intellectual and religious life in precolonial India unless we are attentive to the vast corpus of writing that exists in *both* Persian and Arabic. Second, it might be tempting to assume that because Arabic is the language of Islamic scriptures, the language that exegetes, hadith scholars, jurists, theologians, and others have used from the beginnings of Islam as the vehicle for a great deal of their writing, that it was therefore the language people used when they wanted to write on “religious” matters.¹⁶ While religious and nonreligious matters could certainly be distinguished from each other in particular instances, associating Arabic exclusively with the former has the unwarranted effect of marginalizing its historical significance in the Indian context. By the same token, to do so primes us to see Persian as the language of choice for anyone seeking a subversion rather than an affirmation of religious norms, a transcending of boundaries between Muslims and others, a quasi-secularism; the use of Arabic comes to stand for an Arab Middle Eastern orientation, often assumed, in turn, to be the source of purist Islamic trends. This is tied, in turn, to the assumption that an engagement with Islamic scriptural and other religious texts—especially, though not exclusively, in Arabic—necessarily produces certain kinds of highly prescriptive ideas, and that one needs to look away from such exegetical and legal texts to find other, less rigid, more expansive forms of Muslimness.¹⁷

It is likely that, in particular instances, the choice of language by Wali Allah and other members of his family was dictated by the intended audience, and not just within but also outside India. Early in his career, while visiting Medina, he had translated a short polemic against the Shi`a by Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi from Persian into Arabic for the benefit of the aforementioned Abu Tahir Muhammad.¹⁸ This would have been a reminder, if any were needed, that writings in Persian would not be equally accessible to all in the Hijaz and elsewhere. Conversely, certain works, including, most notably, Wali Allah’s translation of the Qur’an into Persian, were clearly intended for a wider audience within India than could access the Qur’an in the original. Such explanations do not adequately account for the choice of language in each instance, however. Wali Allah and other family members not only wrote in different languages but they could even switch between Arabic and Persian *within* the same work.¹⁹ More importantly, even Arabic writings like the hadith-based *Conclusive Argument*, could be organized along lines familiar from influential works in Persian, in this instance, the famous

treatise on ethics by Nasir al-Tusi, not usually reckoned as a “religious” work in the sense of writings devoted to the Qur’an, hadith, and Islamic law. Nor is the *Conclusive Argument* lacking in its share of what might be seen today as risqué ideas, supposedly more at home in languages other than Arabic and genres other than the scriptural.

The interface between the Indian and the broader Islamic worlds had significant limits, and these, too, should be kept in view. Wali Allah’s was a family very much rooted in Delhi and its environs. He did travel large distances twice en route to Mecca—first unsuccessfully, in 1722–23, having to return home from the western Indian port city of Cambay; second, successfully, spending two years in the Hijaz (1731–32)—and so did his grandson Isma‘il and his great-grandson Ishaq, again with the Hijaz as destination. However, vast parts of India do not register at all in Wali Allah’s writings, among them Bengal, let alone the British presence there. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, for his part, was much better connected with people and developments in the wider world. Numerous people had spent varying amounts of time in his company and they would subsequently pursue livelihoods across India; they were arguably a key factor in extending the breadth of Wali Allah’s influence across the Indian subcontinent, but also in *fragmenting* his legacy.²⁰ British control of Delhi from 1803 onward also made for a steady stream of information from different parts of India to Delhi, and some of this would have reached ‘Abd al-‘Aziz and other members of his family in ways for which there is no parallel in Wali Allah’s case. Some Indians had traveled to Europe as well; one of them is known to have written to ‘Abd al-‘Aziz about intellectual life in European countries.²¹ The unhurried journey of Isma‘il, his mentor Sayyid Ahmad, and their followers through parts of India on the way to the Hijaz was meant to develop local ties in various parts of the country, and these would serve the network of mujahidin well in the following decades. For all that, this remained a north Indian family, with none of Wali Allah’s sons ever traveling very far from home. Even so, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz’s scholarship had begun to be recognized far and wide already in his lifetime. It is remarkable that a scholar based in Madras (now Chennai) on the Bay of Bengal had translated into Arabic his large polemical work on the Shi‘a in 1812, a dozen or so years before ‘Abd al-‘Aziz’s death.²²

The fourth goal of this book has to do with the fact that Wali Allah and several of his descendants were ‘ulama. There are few books that currently exist in English or other European languages on the ‘ulama of Mughal India—a remarkable quirk of the study of Islam in precolonial South Asia.²³ For perspective, it is worth noting that an eight-volume early twentieth-century biographical dictionary in Arabic describes around 4,500 scholars and Sufis and their writings, from the beginnings of Islam in South Asia to the early twentieth century.²⁴ Underlying this neglect in English-language scholarship are some pervasive, long-standing, and not entirely coherent assumptions about the ‘ulama. Among them

is the idea that the thought of the Indian `ulama was derivative of legal and other intellectual developments in Muslim societies elsewhere, with the implication that it was unworthy of serious scholarly attention in its own right. Further, given the `ulama's entanglement in what is taken to be theological minutiae and its predictable outcomes, the unrelieved dullness of their intellectual and other concerns could be of interest only to the most intrepid of scholars.²⁵ There is also the assumption that much in the `ulama's legal writing was mere theory, that it was inattentive to social and political realities, and that it would have been politically dangerous for those in power to try to uphold the norms as the `ulama articulated them. The implication here is that even when studying law, one can safely ignore what the `ulama had written on the matter.²⁶

In fairness, many of these assumptions represent long-standing Orientalist tropes and they are not exclusive to the scholarship on the `ulama of South Asia.²⁷ But while they have begun to be effectively dismantled in other contexts, it has been more difficult to dislodge them in the context of South Asia. In part, this has had to do with the fact that relatively few scholars studying Islam in South Asia have academic training in the study of Islam; but it has to do as well with political sensitivities in post-1947 India, where any serious attention to the legal heritage of the `ulama threatens to foreground stereotypes about the incompatibility between the shari`a and secular modernity. Sufism has been far better served in English scholarship than have the `ulama, but that scholarship, often predicated on sharp contrasts between Sufis and `ulama, has tended to enhance the purchase of assumptions such as the aforementioned and thereby to further marginalize the `ulama.²⁸

It is among the goals of this book to provide a detailed portrait of what the life and thought of the `ulama looked like in late Mughal and early colonial India: as teachers and students; authors and polemicists; preachers; Sufi masters; correspondents of powerful people; and competitors for authority and influence. How might the terror and dislocation brought to their locale, Delhi and its environs, by invading armies, of living through the ravages of famine and pestilence, have shaped their thought? What was it like for a well-educated Muslim of northern India to go on hajj in the early eighteenth century (as Wali Allah did) or in the early nineteenth (as Wali Allah's grandson Isma`il did, in the company of his mentor, Sayyid Ahmad, and others)? How did such sojourns shape claims to authority at home?<sup>29</sup> What scholarly networks were families like this part of, within their region, across India, beyond South Asia? And how have *contemporary* `ulama engaged with Wali Allah's work?³⁰ Going well beyond any narrowly conceived history of ideas, I seek to provide in this book a social, cultural, political, and, of course, intellectual account of Muslim scholarly life, all in a broad historical context. It is not my purpose here to systematically deconstruct assumptions about the `ulama such as those noted earlier. Some

might, in fact, appear to be confirmed in the following chapters, even as others are laid to rest. My concern throughout is to try to move beyond easy caricatures, to view the *`ulama* as they saw themselves, to understand them with reference to the traditions—including one of the most central of them, Sufism—they inhabited and the practices they engaged in, and to understand how they have been viewed by generations of later Muslims.

With these and other goals in view, I will argue for a new way of understanding the relationship between Sufism and the law in Wali Allah's thought. Though there is no mistaking the centrality of these two domains in his work, familiar portrayals of him as a scholar of hadith and a jurist keen to anchor Sufi thought and practice in these textual traditions leave us with an inadequate view both of his Sufism *and* of his legal thought.³¹ Instead, as will be seen, Wali Allah's Sufism comprises a wide and, from many a modern Muslim perspective, unwieldy range of ideas and practices. Yet it was precisely in that unwieldy breadth and depth—one that is evident from his earliest to his last writings—that it was generative of some of his key insights into matters of the law itself. There are two broad implications of this argument, one relating to early modern Islam, the other to the modern and the contemporary. First, though no single figure can be taken to stand for an entire age, of course, this imbrication of Sufism and the law in Wali Allah's thought does shed light on what it might have signified and what kind of results it may have produced in the thought of some influential Muslim thinkers of early modern Islam more broadly. Second, when it comes to Muslim admirers of Wali Allah from the late nineteenth century onward, the unwieldiness of his Sufism represents a serious problem, necessitating efforts to sanitize his image. The significance of those efforts lies once again in their helping to highlight wider processes whereby an earlier era's generative relationship between law and Sufism has come to be increasingly attenuated.

Another key argument of this book centers on Wali Allah's social and political thought. Though I will attempt to bring out its contours in a more focused way in some chapters, I will do so with the understanding that social and political concerns pervade his religious thought as a whole. They are in evidence in his understanding of revelation and of hadith, of ritual, of law more broadly, and of Sufism. Power occupies a central place in Wali Allah's thought, and one of the most important things we will see him do in this regard is to explain how power attends upon processes of religious and legal change and how it undergirds religious authority itself. As we might expect, there are parallels to facets of his thought in the work of other scholars, yet the prominence in it of social and political ideas, and of power more specifically, is unusual for an *`alim*, a religious scholar, and the ways those ideas shape his theories and his analyses at their broadest is even more uncommon. His social and political interests illustrate what we might call the

“worldliness” of Wali Allah’s religious thought, and that goes some way toward explaining the appeal he has in particular modern circles. Yet how that worldliness functions in his writings turns out to be quite different, and revealingly so, than how it has tended to feature in much modernist and Islamist thought.³²

A third argument relates to the contestations that have centered on Wali Allah’s thought and on that of his successors and how they have shaped both the landscape of South Asian Islam *and* his family’s legacy. Some of those contestations had to do with Wali Allah’s anti-Shi‘i views and the responses they provoked already within a few years of his death. Others, including some of the loudest, concerned devotional practices—for example, ritualized commemoration of the memory of the Prophet Muhammad and of holy women and men—that were a well-established part of this family’s understanding of Islam, but were the subject of searing criticism by Wali Allah’s grandson, Isma‘il, among others. Such contestations have come to typify some major fault lines in South Asian Islam, from the eighteenth century to our own day. Other disagreements were considerably more muted, notably between Shah ‘Abd al-‘Aziz and his late father; those, too, represent significant differences in conceptions of Islam, especially on matters relating to the sacred law. Part of what makes them interesting is precisely their muted character, so much so, in fact, that they have tended to be ignored in much of the scholarship on Wali Allah. What makes them more intriguing is that, in hindsight, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz can be seen as playing a major role in the consolidation of his father’s legacy. Contestation and consolidation went hand in hand, with the seeds of the legacy’s fragmentation already sowed in the process.

Finally, I argue that Islam in South Asia has undergone fundamental transformations over the past century and a half or more, making some of the ways in which Wali Allah understood it almost incommensurable with how many people have viewed and practiced it since the late nineteenth century. Yet, the manner in which Wali Allah and his successors not only brought together various strands of Islam but also foregrounded some in comparison with others was unusual for their times, and that, paradoxically, has served to make him and other members of his family relatable and influential figures in contemporary Islam. One eminent scholar has gone so far as to say that though “Islam is free from the problem of national churches,” the closest approximation to what “may almost be called ‘the national church’ of Muslims in this subcontinent was laid by Shah Waliullah.”³³

The Structure of This Book

The three chapters that follow, comprising part 1 of the book, examine the historical, intellectual, and social landscape of northern India from the time of Wali Allah’s father, active in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries,

to the decades immediately following the death of Wali Allah's grandson in 1831. Chapter 1 provides a panoramic view of key developments during this period, both to serve as the context in terms of which to make sense of later discussions and as a preliminary account of the history of Wali Allah's own family. I aim here to tell the story of this family in a way that is connected to broader developments in their time, in India and beyond. Among the topics in this chapter are the intellectual significance of Wali Allah's sojourn in Mecca and Medina in 1731–32; his contacts, as well as those of his sons, with members of Delhi's political elite; the family's tribulations at moments of extraordinary political turmoil; the passing of Delhi under British control and what that meant for Wali Allah's sons and others; and some barely concealed tensions among leading members of the family. I will also introduce here some of those who were significant members of Wali Allah's circle, all of whom, and many others besides, will figure in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the family's intellectual milieu and especially with the kind of education that Wali Allah, his associates, and his descendants received in becoming *ʿulama*. It elucidates not only what an intellectual tradition, as they experienced it, looked like but also how they understood the growth and evolution—that is, the history—of that tradition. I also try to make sense of an apparent paradox: Precolonial India was home to wide-ranging and highly sophisticated traditions of Islamic scholarship, yet few institutions of higher Islamic learning—madrasas—appear to have existed as named, discrete, formal entities before the late nineteenth century. This contrasts strikingly with some other Muslim societies, notably the Ottoman empire, with its numerous and well-endowed madrasas. I argue here that the scholarly culture in the age of Wali Allah and in that of earlier Indian *ʿulama*, as well as of his immediate successors, is best understood with reference not to such formal institutions of learning, but rather to a set of practices that combined pedagogy, moral cultivation, scholarship, Sufism, and political patronage. That culture could have some significant variations from one region or cluster of scholars to another. In this family's instance, it tended to foreground the Qur'an, hadith, law, and Sufism, though individual members of the family were known for their interest in a number of other areas, too, from theology and philosophy to music and medicine. That scholarly culture would undergo major transformations from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, with madrasas emerging on a vast scale for the first time in the history of South Asian Islam. I end this chapter with an examination of how the practices informing those *new* bastions of "tradition" compare with those of an earlier era.

The third chapter has two overlapping goals. One of them is to delineate the contours of the social world that Wali Allah and his descendants inhabited. What were the conceptions and norms of social hierarchy in that world, how did the

`ulama and others think about Muslims and non-Muslims as members of society and in relation to one another, and what did they say about ordinary people, including women? How did they treat the issue of slavery, which underwent significant change in the generations following Wali Allah's? How do animals figure as part of that social world? Rather than describe this north Indian social landscape in the abstract, the chapter explicates it where possible through the writings of Wali Allah and his successors. Doing so allows us to see it as members of this family and some of their associates did, and to understand the changes it was experiencing in their time. The second goal of this chapter is to elucidate how Wali Allah *theorized* about particular social and cultural institutions and practices, notably by way of his conception of the stages of civilizational development (*irtifāqāt*), and, more broadly, how his social thought is intertwined with his understanding of Islam at large.

Part 2 of this book comprises four chapters, and these deal with some major themes in Wali Allah's political, legal, and mystical thought as well as with his distinctive theory of how worship and ritual relate to society and politics. Chapter 4 examines his engagement not just with the immediately pressing issues posed by the chronic political instability of his age but also with larger questions of power and legitimacy. A surprising and hitherto little noticed argument he makes is about how power undergirds the moral force of religious norms and institutions and how it is part of what enables a religious tradition to evolve and change. Among other things, I explicate here the relationship between these views and his reading of early Islamic history and his polemics against the Shi'a. I also trace the further development of his political thought in some of the work of his grandson, Muhammad Isma'il, written at a time when Isma'il was engaged in what turned out to be an abortive effort to establish a polity on India's northwest frontier. I conclude this chapter by discussing how themes in Wali Allah's political thought as highlighted here compare with certain other formulations, from the early and the late nineteenth century and from the mid-twentieth century.

Chapter 5 moves from Wali Allah's theorization of the relationship between power and the religious tradition to his theory of ritual. In his best-known *Conclusive Argument*, he went farther than perhaps any other premodern scholar in demonstrating how core Islamic rituals (the daily prayers, fasting in Ramadan, zakat, hajj) serve human interests (*masālih*; singular: *maslaha*), and not just in individual but also in societal terms. As will be seen, Wali Allah's argument about the worldliness of rituals extended to their political symbolism, too—large congregational prayers as occasions for the display of power, throngs of people at the hajj as akin to the muster of troops, and so forth. This effort to highlight the rationale of rituals and what he called the “spirit” behind them has some parallel with arguments to similar effect by modernist Muslims. For their part, many `ulama have often been deeply uncomfortable with such rationalizations, which,

they have worried, could result in a privileging of the putative spirit over divinely mandated worship itself, with the latter left by the wayside as “mere” ritual. Yet if Wali Allah stands at some distance from the *ʿ*ulama in this respect, I argue that the modernists’ affinity with him may also be more apparent than real. At issue are quite different understandings of piety, practice, and, at its broadest, the religious tradition itself. Ritual, as I show here, is a useful window not only on an important dimension of Wali Allah’s thought but also on how it contrasts with understandings of those matters in more recent times.

As the premodern jurists conceived of it, ritual is part of the law, and books on substantive law tended to begin with a discussion of ritual. Wali Allah did not write a systematic work on the full range of topics found in the legal compendia, yet legal thought comprises a large part of his corpus of writing. Chapter 6 is a study of his effort to rethink facets of the legal tradition and of how he recounts the history of that tradition. Here I examine his views on *ijtihād*, the articulation of new legal rulings in light of the foundational texts on matters on which those texts provide no specific injunctions, as well as his discussion of the rigidity that the schools of law had come to be afflicted with over the centuries and how to mitigate it. Though an adherent, like most other Sunnis of India, of the Hanafi school of law, Wali Allah was keenly interested in exploring what the other schools of Sunni law had to offer on particular issues. As will be seen, this was part of an effort both to cut his fellow jurists’ claims to authority down to size and to promote his signature concern to make it easier for ordinary believers to live by the sacred law. That his own son, the distinguished scholar *ʿ*Abd al-*ʿ*Aziz, did not warm to such initiatives is as good an indication as any of how controversial they were in that age. They would find wider acceptance later.

Chapter 7 introduces dimensions of Sufi thought and practice in Wali Allah’s household, the disputes about them across several generations, the relationship between Sufism and the law as members of the family understood it, and how that relationship could generate insight into legal matters. Ibn al-*ʿ*Arabi (d. 1240), among the most influential Sufis of all times, figures prominently in Wali Allah’s work, just as he does in that of his successors, and it is primarily with reference to him that I have approached the family’s Sufi thought. This chapter then proceeds to ask what the life of a Sufi master looked like in the eighteenth century—the kind of authority he laid claim to, the sort of guidance he provided to his disciples and others, and the range of practices he engaged in. Here I focus in particular on the practice of devotional offerings in the name of holy personages and other deceased people, a matter of debate and controversy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries just as it is today across South Asia. Those who accepted such practices, as Wali Allah and his sons did, viewed them, with some qualifications, as sanctioned by authoritative texts and precedents; those who rejected them, as did his grandson Isma^ʿil, saw them as giving holy men and women a share in divinity and thus as

idolatrous. Wali Allah's great-grandson, Muhammad Ishaq, would continue to weigh in on these controversies until not long before his emigration to Mecca in 1842. Among his opponents, they had come by then to fuel accusations of "Wahhabi" leanings, a misnomer even when applied to Isma'il but a damning accusation for which some of Ishaq's associates had to pay a price in Ottoman Hijaz.

The third and final part of this book comprises two chapters, followed by a conclusion. Chapter 8 focuses on the family's writings on the Qur'an and on how hadith—a major intellectual preoccupation of Wali Allah and 'Abd al-'Aziz—was crucial to its claims to religious authority. A discussion of the Islamic foundational texts might be thought, in terms of the sequence of topics, to belong to an earlier part of the book, for an engagement with them occurs in and informs all areas of Wali Allah's and his descendants' work. It is best reserved till later in the book, however, because it helps bring together themes broached throughout the preceding chapters. Some of the transformations that Islam has undergone in South Asia and in the wider world also stand out especially clearly in this discussion. Part of my concern in this chapter is to elucidate the social history, as it were, of the family's engagement with the foundational texts. Besides articulations of authority, I attend here to the audiences that members of the family had sought to address in particular works, not least in sermons that were later put down in writing; the style of the works in question; and the ways in which those works, while in conversation with long-standing traditions of transregional Islamic scholarship, are also in tune with the Indian context in which they were produced. My other key concern in this chapter is to explicate particular family members' understandings of prophecy and the idea of revelation. Some of the ways in which Wali Allah viewed the workings of revelation look unconventional or worse from the perspective of many Muslims since the late nineteenth century. I bring this out both in its own terms as well as in comparison with the ideas of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908), whose understanding of revelation (and concomitant claims to being a prophet) have led in recent times to an almost universal anathematization of the community of his followers, the Ahmadis.

Chapter 9 examines aspects of Wali Allah's legacy from the late nineteenth century onward, explicating how it has been curated by people belonging to some quite varied circles. Several of those people would be familiar from the preceding chapters, but many others will be encountered for the first time. What brings them all together is more, however, than their engagement with Wali Allah's thought. It is also the continuing development at their hands of some of the key ideas discussed in the previous chapters. The latter vantage allows us to see how Wali Allah's legacy, more than that of his successors—more, indeed, than practically anyone else's in early modern India—has been both cultivated and fragmented since the late nineteenth century and how engagements with it provide us a remarkably broad view of Islamic thought in modern and contemporary South Asia.

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