

CILE Public Lecture Report: The ethical duties of *wilāya* in the Islamic Tradition

Prepared by Sara Abdelghany (CILE)

On Tuesday February 21, 2023, CILE held a public lecture titled “**The ethical duties of *wilāya* in the Islamic Tradition,**” as part of its **international research seminar** titled “**The Ethics of *Wilāya.*”** Panelists included **Dr. Yasmeen Daifallah (University of California, Santa Cruz), Dr. Aiyub Palmer (University of Kentucky), and Dr. Javad Fakhkhar (University of Toronto),** moderated by seminar convener **Dr. Mohammad Fadel (University of Toronto).**

The first speaker, **Dr. Yasmeen Daifallah,** examined “**The Ethical Turn in Politics and Islamic Conceptions of *Wilāya.*”** She considered the relationship between politics and ethics in Islamic philosopher Taha Abdurrahman’s political thought and understanding of human nature to explain how his theories can be applied to politics and ethics. She began by maintaining that contemporary politics are not always tied to ethics, because the personal morals of a politician are often disregarded and *presenting* oneself as ethical is favored over *embodying* ethics. *Wilāya*, a relational, moral, and complementary tie to different relationships (God and believer, family members, between believers, governance etc.), she argued, cultivates a political ethic and polity that deserves to govern. To cultivate oneself as a practitioner of this concept, **Dr. Daifallah** drew upon Abdurrahman’s understanding of humans as “two-dimensional” and inhabiting two worlds: the material world (*‘ālam al-shāhāda*), physically inhabited, and the spiritual world (*‘ālam al-ghayb*) accessed spiritually and intellectually. **Dr. Daifallah** further explained that these two dimensions are what cause people to be political or religious actors, one is a political agent (*fā‘il siyāsī*) when material desires are their ethical starting point, and a religious agent (*fā‘il dīnī*) when one acts from the realm of the spiritual world. She then explained Abdurrahman’s collective conception of politics through the “sovereignty of Allah” (*taḥkīm Allah*), which enables the *umma* to manage its political affairs through self-cultivation and self discipline, and by limiting human tyranny. **Dr. Daifallah** also discussed Abdurrahman’s conception of an individual conception of governance through the idea of the Jurist’s Guardianship (*wilāyat al-faqīh*). She concluded that Abdurrahman’s thought offers a resource to connect *wilāya*, an Islamic concept, to contemporary politics.

The second presenter, **Dr. Aiyub Palmer,** examined “**Islamicate Authority and al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī’s Ethical Basis for Sufi *wilāya.*”** This presentation focused on Sufi ethics and understandings of power and authority, as conceptualized by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī. **Dr. Palmer** began by explaining that *wilāya* serves as a “cultural mirror” to understanding Western liberal states of authority, and explained “power” and “authority” as concepts in philosophy. He especially relied on Alexandre Kojève’s theory of authority, comparing it with al-Tirmidhī’s conception of *wilāya*. Kojève’s theory proposes that all forms of authority are combined versions

of: the relationship between father and child, master and slave, chief and group, and the judge, the latter whose authority is a combination of the previous three. **Dr. Palmer** also pointed out areas of dissimilarity between these concepts, Kojève's theory does not require reciprocal and mutual care between the authority figure and those under them, while *wilāya* requires mutual care where the *walī* provides protections to the *mowla* (ward) with support and authority *given* to them by the *mowla*. Under *wilāya*, he argued, is an ethical requirement that enables "a moral and ethical space." For al-Tirmidhī, there are two important aspects of *wilāya*. The first is that the "friends of God" (*awliyā' Allah*) have divinely gifted knowledge (*ma'rifa*), and the second is to have good characters and ethics (*akhlāq*). **Dr. Palmer** then offered examples from al-Tirmidhī, explaining that a good *walī* has good ethics, obtained through self-cultivation and self-discipline. This cultivation is achieved through a cleansing process undergone by the *walī*, whereby they are divinely tested and God presents the *walī* as an ideal ethical person. Thus, **Dr. Palmer** concluded by explaining that in the Sufi conception of *wilāya*, particularly al-Tirmidhī's, the *walī* is, indeed, connected to ethics and ethical conduct.

The final discussion by **Javad Fakhkhar** was titled "**The Ethicality of *Wālī* and *Wilāya* and the Mechanisms Provided in Jurisprudence to Ensure the Observance of Ethics in *Wilāya*."** He focused on the relationship between *wilāya* and Islamic ethics in political science, examining *wilāya* ethics from the view of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). **Dr. Toosi** explained that jurists define a just person (*rajul 'ādil*) as an ethical person. This is a person who embodies justice (*'adala*) and performs the duties of a *wālī* that fall under Islamic ethics and Sharia, with performance of justice depending on what the role they occupy requires (seller, contract witness, governor, etc). Politically, an ethical and just ruler is one that performs their political obligations correctly - acting in accordance with their subjects' interests, and offering protection and security to their subjects. **Dr. Toosi** differentiated between individual and governmental justice, here, to note that a good political leader, *wālī*, is someone who has governmental justice. This is because a person may embody qualities of personal justice, like piety, but when placed in a political position may lose these qualities and become unjust. To prove his point, he described a *ḥadīth* on the potential *wilāya* of Abu Dhar, where the Prophet (PBUH) explains that not all individuals, even good individuals, have the capacity to be a *wālī*. *Wilāya*, **Dr. Toosi** explained, is a role that must be performed by a worthy and capable person. He concluded by considering the jurists' mechanisms of verifying a ruler's ethicality and capability of *wilāya*, including criticizing authority figures, civil disobedience towards non-ethical behavior, and "enjoining the good and forbidding the bad" (*al-amr bi-l ma'rūf wa-l nahī 'an al-munkar*).

Following these presentations, discussions and questions began between the panelists who considered various understandings of *wilāya* in the Qur'an. The panelists then took questions from the audience, which encompassed a multitude of topics related to *wilāya*.

One question was on the representation of *wilāya* and interfaith relations in Surah al Maida (Q. 5.51). **Dr. Fadel** explained that this verse refers to Muslim political solidarity in the Hejaz during the Prophet's time, as Muslims should not have had political solidarity with an external political party that privileged non-Muslim actors over Muslim actors. He further added that the verse might not apply to modern international relations between Muslim and non-Muslim states.

Another question was directed to **Dr. Toosi** regarding the relationship between individual and governmental ethics, and why the status of one's individual ethics is not applicable when considering governmental capability. He explained that this view is his interpretation of the Islamic juristic theory, which offers reasons to deny an individual governance. **Dr. Toosi** maintained that there are qualities related to governmental (*walā'li*) justice that are unrelated to personal justice (*imāma*). In the juristic sources, *wilāya* is more closely related to governmental justice and governance, where the *wālī* manages the affairs of the people and state, while *imāma* guides spirituality and personal ethics.

The audience's questions also included one on elitism in understandings of *wilāya*, specifically in Shia and Sufi thought, and whether this view is problematic and should be resolved in contemporary Muslim discourses. **Dr. Daifallah** answered from the perspective of Taha Abdurrahman, who proposes a democratic conception of *wilāya* regarding the juristic perspective and discusses the Shia *wilāyat al-faqīh* concept, by contrasting it with the living (*ḥayy*) *faqīh*. Each person, he believes, should embody the role of the living *faqīh* in their personal matters. The *ulema's* role is to offer public education and guidance to enable and cultivate this living *faqīh* in everyday individuals.

Dr. Palmer offered a Sufi perspective on the above question, explaining that the relationship of *wilāya* to autonomy is that there is no autonomy. Instead, individuals exist in a socially autonomous society. Further, Sufis understood souls as hierarchical - Prophets' souls hold a different category than the *awliyā' Allah*, than individuals, and people have different capabilities to understanding and relating to God. *Wilāya*, he continued, is a concept where people with specific characteristics aid others who do not hold these characteristics to become more ethical and noble. The question, in **Dr. Palmer's** opinion, of whether *wilāya* should or will address elitism, is a liberal assumption that *wilāya* exists outside the sphere of.

Another question revolved around the relationship between *wilāya* and Muslim authorities today, examining if under the responsibilities of *wilāya* Muslim authorities have obligations towards Muslims outside of their nations, and if the concept of *wilāya* can be reconciled with the nation-state. Here, **Dr. Palmer** discussed al-Tirmidhī's distinction between authority (*wilāya*) and power (*sulṭa*), where the ability to exercise power is related to and justified by justice (*'adl*). *Wilāya* is developed socially through a bottom-up model of ethical conduct, and *sulṭa* is

developed politically through a top-down model. *ʿAdl* plays a special role between the two that establishes balance and legitimizes power authorities

Dr. Fadel contributed his thoughts to the above question by quoting a verse from the Qur'an. This verse addresses Muslims who lived outside of Medina and obligated that the Muslims in Medina help those outside of it, with the exception of if there were a political treaty between the Muslim and non-Muslim authorities. From an Islamic law perspective, although Muslim authorities in Muslim-majority states should be concerned about the situations of Muslims in non-Muslim states, they must express their concerns through mechanisms of international law.

Dr. Toosi added that while in the past political understandings of *dār al-ḥarb* and *dār al-islām* may have applied to international relations between Muslim and non-Muslim states, today, this concept might no longer apply to modern international relations.

The final question was directed to **Dr. Toosi**, further elaborating discussions centered on *wilāya*, capability, and justice, as relating to individual and governmental justice. **Dr. Toosi** maintained the position that a governor may be pious, just, and moral in the individual sphere, but in the political sphere, the individual may be an immoral and unjust governor who improperly manages and conducts internal and external affairs. He explained that there is a personal ethicality and a governmental ethicality, and in the conflict between personal moral values and the ability to rule the two ethnicities are separate.

Finally, **Dr. Fadel** added that the notion of competence (*kifāyā*) plays an important role here. An individual who is competent has the capability to be just (*ʿādil*), and this is related to virtue and the ability to be virtuous and maintain a stable polity.