

Paul Walker. *Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani: Ismaili Thought in the Age of al-Hakim*. I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies. London, 1999. Hbk, xi-xiv + 168 pp.

This book introduces readers to the life and thought of a seminal Ismaili thinker, Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani. Al-Kirmani was one of the most influential Ismaili *da'is* because of his cogent defence of Ismaili doctrines on the one hand and his emphasis on the practical aspects of Ismaili religious life on the other. The information that we have concerning Kirmani is to be found exclusively through what he has to say about himself in his own writings. Paul Walker therefore sets out to present as coherent a picture as possible of the life and work of this Ismaili thinker by piecing together the disparate references Kirmani makes in his books to the dates a) of important political events, b) of his whereabouts in the Muslim world, and c) in which he completed or revised any of his given works. What emerges from Walker's synthesis of these piecemeal facts is a fairly coherent and believable account of Kirmani's intellectual and political contacts. His writings can therefore be divided into two phases: the earlier phase which consisted of his intellectual activities before being called to the Fatimid Caliphal centre at Cairo in 1015 CE and the later phase, which began from the time he arrived in Cairo to the time of his death, which occurred some time after 1036.

The reason Kirmani was called to Cairo was to assist the controversial Ismaili Imam, al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (r. 986 to 1021), in reasserting his authority and clarifying many points of Ismaili doctrine which had fallen into obscurity by the middle of the eleventh century. During the reign of al-Hakim there were internal problems within the *da'wa*. Why this was so is not all together clear. But Walker notes that some of the reasons for al-Hakim's dissatisfaction with the way the Ismaili *da'wa* was being

conducted can be gleaned from the scant information available in the annals of history. A number of important family members of those legal judges closely connected with the Ismaili *da'wa* had fallen out of favour and were killed at al-Hakim's orders. As a result of struggles for power, corruption was also at play on several fronts. The beginning of the internal decay may also have had to do with the fact that al-Hakim tried to make himself accessible to the masses beyond his capabilities, which in turn had a physical toll on him with respect to how he oversaw the administration of his office. It was to remedy this situation of confusion — both political and doctrinal — that Kirmani's help was sought. He would prove to be the right person for the job for he was also a staunch supporter of the Fatimid cause well before his being called to Cairo, that is, during the first phase of his intellectual career.

One of the important doctrines which Kirmani sought to set aright during the reign of al-Hakim was that of the nature of faith and religious works. The Ismailis would never be able to entirely free themselves from some of the negative implications behind their being portrayed as '*batinis*', that is, those who believed that the inner dimension of faith, once apprehended, precluded the necessity for outward observance of the law. Here too it is not clear as to what heights this problem reached during the reign of al-Hakim. But the misunderstanding probably intensified in such a way that it began to affect the legitimacy of the claims of the Fatimid Caliphs in the eyes of the masses. Thus Kirmani set out to clarify the issue in a manner akin to Ghazali's famous synthesis of Sunni theology and Sufi ethics a century later. The doctrine of the 'two aspects of worship' (*'ibadatayn*) would be expounded by Kirmani in his work *al-Risalat al-wadi'a fi ma'alim al-din*. In this book Kirmani makes it clear that both faith and works are required of every

pious Ismaili, and that those who emphasize one at the expense of the other are seriously mistaken. That such a reconciliation would take place in the figure of al-Kirmani (who was writing more than three centuries after the Ismaili *da'wa* had begun) naturally raises the following question: was the necessity of the double observance of faith and works being addressed for the first time, or was it being reemphasized? If it was the former, then how could so crucial a point have escaped the important *da'is* who preceded Kirmani? The answer would appear to be the latter since we know that Qadi Nu'man (writing a century before Kirmani and whom the latter held in high regard) helped codify Ismaili law, a good deal of which was concerned with 'actions'. In the figure of Kirmani what we therefore see is a timely synthesis and a reassertion of this all-important aspect of Ismaili teachings.

A key doctrinal issue which Kirmani sought to address during his stay in Cairo was the question of the eternity of al-Hakim himself, a belief upheld by a certain al-Akhram and his followers. The question of the importance of the law was also an issue with al-Akhram, and to both these ends Kirmani devoted a single treatise, *al-Risalat al-Wa'iza*.

In his final work in Cairo, *al-riyad*, later expanded into his masterpiece, *rahat al-'aql*, the contents of which are summarized in Appendix C of Walker's monograph, Kirmani sought to correct the expositions of some of the main teachings of Ismaili doctrines carried out by three of his illustrious predecessors: al-Nasafi, Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani and Abu Hatim al-Razi. An example of the nature of the disagreements Kirmani had with his predecessors can be seen in his correcting their view of God's command and will, a problem which also confronted the other Muslim theological schools in a serious

way. The problem detected by Kirmani was that although his predecessors had upheld God's absolute Unity — a 'radical monotheism' of some sorts in which no element of human comparison with God was considered meaningful or true and where God was completely dissociated from the universe — they nonetheless maintained some type of belief in an intermediary nature between God's creative will and command and the first being in creation.

With respect to his contribution to Ismaili cosmological doctrines, Walker rightly points out that Kirmani appears to have been much closer to Farabi and Ibn Sina than al-Sijistani, who was a thorough-going Neoplatonist whereas Farabi and Ibn Sina had combined important elements of Neoplatonism with Peripatetic philosophy. In Appendix A of this work subtitled, "Al-Kirmani and the Philosophers", Walker raises an interesting issue vis-à-vis the relationship between Kirmani and Ibn Sina. It is known that Ibn Sina's father was an Ismaili and that, according to his autobiography, Ibn Sina did not find Ismaili intellectual doctrines convincing. Walker hints at a possible influence of Ibn Sina's symbolic treatises — which would influence Ibn Tufayl, the Ghazali brothers and Suhrawardi — upon Kirmani's *rahat al-'aql*. The *rahat* is organized in 'symbolic' fashion: the book as a whole is 'the City of God' and each chapter is divided into 'walls' which themselves lead to 'pathways' (p. 105). The duty of the wayfarer is to enter this city of God, which will then allow him to comprehend the truth of the nature of reality.

This monograph on the life and work of Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani calls very little criticism upon itself. Walker writes in an eminently lucid style and his ability to synthesize and present information coherently is impressive. There are, however, only two minor points which need to be addressed. Walker indicates that Kirmani's major

achievement in correcting the theological and philosophical views of his predecessors would come to be incorporated into Ismaili teachings (pp. 89-90). He also mentions that Kirmani was a very influential figure for later Ismailism (p. xi). But the extent of his influence on later Ismailism is not documented in this work. How influential was Kirmani's *rahat al-'aql* upon subsequent Ismaili thought? Walker does not deal with these questions here, perhaps justifiably, because, as he notes (p. xiii), his purpose in writing this book was simply to bring to light a heretofore relatively unknown Ismaili thinker. Lastly, Walker says that in the cosmology espoused by Farabi and Ibn Sina, God is "...the first being, the first cause, the necessary cause of all causes; He is also the first intellect, the first of intellects" (p. 91). Although Farabi is somewhat ambiguous on the point, for Ibn Sina and every other Islamic philosopher God is not the 'first intellect.' God qua God as the first intellect would mean that He is within the emanative system, which would undermine the Muslim philosophers' concern with maintaining God's distance from the cosmos.

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