

Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani – Ismaili Thought in the Age of al-Hakim

by Paul E. Walker (I.B. Tauris London and New York, in association with Islamic Publications Ltd. 1999).

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In writing this book, Paul E. Walker aims to introduce to English readers Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (died after 411/1020-1 C.E.), a major Ismaili *da'i*,¹ scholar and writer from the time of the Fatimid Caliph-Imam, al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (386/996-411/1021 C.E.). The book contains a brief but helpful preface, six chapters and four appendices and these need to be read sequentially, since they build upon each other. This is especially true for the more general reader for whom this may be an introduction to the figure of al-Kirmani.

Walker's book constitutes a most significant contribution to the study of Ismaili thinkers in history. The author does not presume the reader to have a background knowledge of al-Kirmani. Since very little has been written on al-Kirmani and all the information which we now have about him comes from his own works, Walker's book is based mainly on primary sources, although he does acknowledge De Smet as a source of many details and references which support this book.² Walker's book is comprehensive and thorough. It fulfils the specialist's expectations in being insightful and critical and yet it is accessible to the general reader who may have no prior knowledge of the work of al-Kirmani.³

Who was Al-Kirmani?

The Fatimid period has been represented by some historians as the 'golden age' of Ismailism⁴ and according to Daftary, al-Kirmani was "...perhaps, the most learned and talented Ismaili theologian and author of the Fatimid period."⁵ Al-Kirmani was ascribed the honorific title *Hujjat al-Iraqayn* meaning "the chief *da'i* of both Iraqs". This implies

¹ *Da'i* literally means one who invites. In this context it means "one who teaches or invites to the religion of God".

² See Daniel de Smet's *La Quiétude de L'intellect: Neoplatonisme et gnose ismaélienne dans l'oeuvre de Hamid ad Dîn al-Kirmânî (Xe/XIes)*, Louvain, 1995. Walker says of De Smet's study on al-Kirmani's *Rahat al-'aql*: "This book constituted, at last, a truly impressive contribution to the scholarly understanding of al-Kirmani, one he had deserved but had not received." Walker, p. xii.

³ It is heartening that although Walker immediately begins to use terms such as *da'i*, *da'wa*, and *Majalis al-Hikma*, he does not presume the reader to be familiar with these terms and offers an introduction to them. These terms are defined in this paper for the more general reader, in order to assist in reading the book.

⁴ Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis : Their History and Doctrines*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 144.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 193.

that the *jazira* or district in which he was active, included Iraq and parts of Iran known as “*Iraq-al-Ajami*”.⁶

It may be helpful at this point to provide a description of what was a *da`i*. Professor Azim Nanji and Dr. Aziz Esmail have succinctly done this as follows:

“The ideal *da`i* ... was expected not only to lead an ethically exemplary life, but also to be in possession of a keen knowledge of the highest intellectual sciences of the day. Logic, rhetoric, jurisprudence were all numbered amongst his intellectual accomplishments which combined with a knowledge of diplomacy and public relations, constituted the personality of the *da`i*. Thus equipped, the *da`i* went out not only to summon the people to allegiance to the rightful Imam, but also to promote the social, moral and spiritual welfare of the Imam’s followers. Ultimately, the *da`is* were charged with hastening not only the establishment of the Ismaili state but also articulating the fundamental doctrinal and moral ends that the state was meant to serve.”⁷

Daftary has provided definitions of the terms *da`wa* and *hujja* which the reader may find helpful.⁸

“[the *da`wa* was a] mission or propoganda; in the religio-political sense, *da`wa* is the invitation or call to adopt the cause of an individual or family claiming the right to the *imamate*; it also refers to the entire hierarchy of ranks, sometimes called *hudud* – within the particular religious organization developed for this purpose – [this movement was] often referred to – simply as *al-da`wa*, or more formally as *al-da`wa al-hidaya*, ‘the rightly-guiding mission’.”

“The *hujja* was – a high rank in the *da`wa* – hierarchy of the Fatimid Ismailis; there were twelve such *hujja*, each one in charge of a separate *da`wa* region called *jazira*.”

Al-Kirmanī was one of the first eastern Iranian *da`is* to live in the Fatimid capital of Cairo coming there on the Imam’s invitation. Once in Cairo, al-Kirmanī faced an enormous challenge in addressing issues, of interpretation of the faith, within the *da`wa*. He worked as an advocate for Imam al-Hakim. The Imam had temporarily stopped the *majalis al-hikma*⁹ due to a concern with the instruction which certain *da`is* were giving. Al-Kirmanī described the climate in Cairo upon his arrival there:

⁶ Ibid, p. 193. It is possible that this title was ascribed to al-Kirmanī at a later date since it is not mentioned in any of his own works. Faquir Muhammad Hunzai, *The Concept of Tawhid in the Thought of Hamid al-Din al-Kirmanī*, PhD thesis, Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, 1986. Hamid Haji also states this in his *A Distinguished Da`i Under The Shade Of The Fatimids: Hamid Al-Din Al-Kirmanī (d. circa 411/1020) And His Epistles*, London, 1998, p. 10.

⁷ A Esmail & A Nanji, “The Isma`ilis in History”, *Isma`ili Contributions to Islamic Culture*, ed. S. H. Nasr, Tehran, 1977, pp. 232-3.

⁸ For a glossary of terms see Daftary, pp. 558-567.

⁹ Walker, p. 4 ff. During the *majalis al-hikma* or “sessions of wisdom” the chief *da`i* would read lessons to the faithful. These were weekly sessions, which would attract large crowds, sometimes necessitating up to three sessions in one week. The place where such meetings were held was known as *dar al hikma* or *dar al ‘ulum* meaning “house of wisdom” or “house of sciences”.

“When as an immigrant [*muhajir*] I reached the Prophetic Presence, ... I beheld there a sky that had become dark with pervasive clouds, the people under the weight of a great tribulation, the observance of previous practices had been cancelled, and the faithful saints were kept from what they had earned.”¹⁰

Al-Kirmani's Work

Al-Kirmani was well read and he was literate in languages other than Arabic. He thus had access to a wide range of sources but cited the Imam as his ultimate authority. He was at the head of the *da`wa* and was regarded by many of his contemporary *da`is* as an authority to whom they could turn for clarification on certain issues.

Though he wrote many books on philosophy and religion and despite the contribution which he made to Islamic thought, we have very little information on him. One factor which makes it very difficult to establish the chronology of al-Kirmani's works is the fact that he often cross-references works with each other.¹¹ This shows that al-Kirmani may have revised many earlier works thus allowing for cross-referencing. With his later works, however, it is somewhat easier to establish a chronological order. In his appendix, Walker provides a survey of al-Kirmani's works, which aims to support his theory of the chronological order and authenticity of works.¹²

Al-Kirmani wrote prolifically and dealt with a wide range of critical issues. He was highly regarded by other members of the *da`wa* and moreover, was entrusted by the Imam of the time to address sensitive issues within the *da`wa*.

Walker describes the time at which al-Kirmani worked as “a time of great enthusiasm for the Ismaili understanding of Islam and for the *da`wa* that promoted it.” Al-Kirmani made a vital contribution, both to Islamic scholarship and to the work of the *da`wa*.

Walker writes:

“Al-Kirmani was a forceful, intellectually gifted apologist for al-Hakim, one who never failed to advocate and defend his imamate, In addition al-Kirmani[s], scholarly accomplishments and knowledge were a match for any of his contemporaries, including possibly the philosopher Ibn Sina”¹³

Although several works have been lost, we can still, with confidence, list them among al-Kirmani's works, since al-Kirmani has himself made cross-reference to them in works which have not been lost.

¹⁰ Walker, p. 17.

¹¹ Al-Kirmani would often cross-reference works with each other, making it difficult to establish their chronology. Works would sometimes reciprocally cite each other and this can be explained by al-Kirmani revisiting certain texts during his teaching career in Cairo, allowing him to add references to other works in order to support a certain point in the present work. One major advantage of this is that it helps to establish the authenticity of certain titles as Al-Kirmani's works since we learn from him what else he has written.

¹² According to some accounts, al-Kirmani died in Cairo. This seems unlikely, however, since his principal work *Rahat al-`aql* was composed in Iraq (as stated clearly in the text itself) and this text gives us the date 1020-1 or after, for his death.

¹³ Walker, p. 3.

Furthermore, the Tayyibi authorities collected and preserved many of the older Arabic works. In addition to the evidence from al-Kirmani's own works then, Idris (died 872/1468), the chief Tayyibi *da'i*, provided a vital list of al-Kirmani's works.

On the basis of this evidence, and Idris' list, Walker states that al-Kirmani wrote twenty-nine books and treatises. His most ambitious work is the *Rahat al-`aql* or "Comfort of Reason" and Walker dedicates an entire chapter to a discussion of this work alone. His other treatises include *the Kitab al-Riyad*, *Risalat al-nuzum*, and some smaller treatises including *al-Risala al-hawiya* and *al-Risala al-Lazima*.

Walker states:

"In that era of creative and profound contributions to Islamic thought, this one work [*Rahat al-`aql*] represents the intellectual high point and summit of Ismaili achievement."¹⁴

Al-Kirmani's Legacy

Al-Kirmani must be recognised for two reasons, of which the first was his contribution to the *da'wa*:

"... in the literature of thought and of the sciences of this period, no other figure in the *da'wa* came even remotely close to him [al-Kirmani]. It is thus certainly proper to regard him as its spokesman and his works as its finest achievements."¹⁵

Furthermore, "Much later Ismailis who looked back on that period tended to see it primarily in terms of al-Kirmani's contributions."¹⁶

Secondly, he must also be acknowledged as a scholar on a par with such contemporaries as Ibn Sina (Avicenna).¹⁷ Al-Kirmani had mastered the philosophical, scientific and theological discourse of his time and was able to translate it into a form which could be used in the work of the *da'wa* both for the benefit of scholars and members of the *Jamat*. As we have seen, Al-Kirmani wrote numerous treatises and books on a wide range of subjects and for a wide audience.

The Structure of the Book

In the opening chapter, Walker sets the scene for al-Kirmani's arrival in Cairo, having been invited by Imam al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah. He discusses the major issues which concerned the Imam and the atmosphere which awaited al-Kirmani in the capital. From this first chapter, the reader is made aware of some of the challenges which al-Kirmani faced and of the significance of his work.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 46.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. xii.

¹⁶ Walker, p. xi.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 3.

In chapter two of this book, Walker discusses the works of al-Kirmani and the difficulty in establishing both their authenticity and chronology. Walker also places al-Kirmani's works in their historical context, offering an explanation as to why, and for whom, they were written.

In the third chapter Walker discusses the structure or hierarchy of the *da'wa* and looks at al-Kirmani as a member of it. What were the relations between different *da'is* and what role did each of them play? Walker also aims to establish what were al-Kirmani's sources and to what extent was his philosophy different from, or similar to that of other *da'is* such as al-Sijistani.¹⁸

Chapter four is dedicated to a detailed discussion of al-Kirmani's doctrine of "double observance" which states that true faith is characterised by both works and knowledge.¹⁹ The fundamental question "What is faith?" thus presents itself again and given that this has constituted one of the major theological and philosophical questions throughout history, it is heartening that Walker takes time to guide the reader through al-Kirmani's doctrine in a detailed yet clear manner.

The principle of *Tawhid* (monotheism) lies at the heart of Islam and for al-Kirmani, faith must be based on an understanding of this principle. There are several other concepts or fundamental truths which must be grasped as a basis for faith and this knowledge must, as discussed in chapter four, be combined with works of faith or good deeds. It is to a discussion of this doctrine that Walker dedicates the fifth chapter.

In the final chapter, Walker looks at al-Kirmani's principal work, written towards the end of his career, the *Rahat al-'aql* or "Comfort of Reason".²⁰ It is in this major work that al-Kirmani aims to "... provide a complete guidebook that allows the reader to grasp and possibly understand exactly how to obtain that paradise of reason."²¹ The *Rahat al-'aql* is said to be "... the earliest attempt at a complete and systematic exposition of Ismaili philosophy."²²

Themes and Doctrines

One might well ask of what use are al-Kirmani's ideas to the contemporary reader? There are several perennial issues which he addresses which are relevant to anyone with an interest in Islamic philosophy or theology, and in particular regarding questions of faith, religious authority and metaphysics.

¹⁸ Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani. His date of death is uncertain although it is estimated that he died after 360/970. Walker has written an in-depth book on al-Sijistani entitled *Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani: Intellectual Missionary*, I.B. Tauris, 1996. Some have suggested that al-Kirmani may have studied under al-Sijistani but this is not very likely since al-Kirmani was almost 50 years his junior and there were significant discrepancies between their philosophies. Walker, p. 27, Hunzai, p. 9, and *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. V, J.T.P. De Bruijn, 1986, pp.166-7.

¹⁹ Walker, p. 67.

²⁰ There are several nuances in translations of this title. For a discussion of these see Walker, p. 104.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 105.

²² *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol V, pp. 166-7.

The first is the concept of “double observance”. Al-Kirmani states that true faith, according to the Ismaili doctrine, is a combination of knowledge and practice. It must be a balance between the *zahir* and the *batin*, outward observance of the *Shari`a* or Islamic law and *`ilm* or the inward knowledge of God. Faith cannot be characterised by works or ritual alone but must also contain an intellectual aspect. The performance of rituals and an observance of the *Shari`a* must be informed by an understanding of those laws and rituals.²³

The second theme, which al-Kirmani writes about at length and which is relevant to the contemporary Ismaili reader, is the role of the living Imam. Al-Kirmani states that believers are obliged to know and understand God. Knowledge of God must form a part of true religious faith.

This begs the question: are all believers intellectually capable of understanding God and accessing sources such as The Qur`an and various theological and philosophical texts? Does this not render faith, of necessity, something which only the intellectual can possess? If this were the case we may have found al-Kirmani needing to redefine faith in terms of a mere subjectivity which places all believers in a position to know God, since faith is not a privilege of the learned alone.²⁴

Instead, this provides the basis for al-Kirmani’s articulation of the idea that a living Imam is necessary as an interpreter and preserver of the sacred message, which was revealed to Prophet Muhammad. The *da`is* worked directly under the Imam’s direction in articulating to believers this message and the concepts therein, in an intellectually sincere yet accessible form. How then, is this knowledge transmitted from God, the All-knowing, whom believers cannot directly know or understand, to the believer whose religious obligation it is to understand the fundamental concepts of the faith?

Walker explains al-Kirmani’s philosophy regarding the need for a living Imam:

“in the absence of either the last messenger or of the coming messiah, reason demands that human souls have access to the knowledge they require for that final perfection and salvation. If they cannot seek their own way to God because

²³ Walker, Chapter 4.

²⁴ This gives rise to an important philosophical question: Does al-Kirmani over-emphasise the cognitive or intellectual aspect of faith? What about the subjective or affective component of faith? It might be argued that a purely subjective knowledge of God is valid. What implications does al-Kirmani’s description of faith have for those who adopt a non-rational or mystical approach? Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1813) was an eminent philosopher among whose most famous works was the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In it he challenged the prevalent philosophy of the day. Kierkegaard defined truth and faith as “subjectivity”. Truth is something which must be appropriated, and since faith is a process of becoming, rather than of knowing objectively and conclusively, the truth is equally accessible to all. Truth can be found and made central to one’s existence regardless of whether one is learned or historically distanced from the person of Christ. It has been argued that what Kierkegaard advocated was a dismissal of objectivity and reason so that faith is mere subjectivity. Kierkegaard guarded against such an interpretation, however. Faith is not mere subjectivity, he argued, for that would be madness. Instead it is the certain appropriation of a paradox. A paradox cannot be understood through reason and so it must be embraced in faith. See *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Alasdair MacIntyre, Vol. 3 & 4, Paul Edwards, 1972.

the knowledge is not available to them by the very fact of being human, then it behoves God to appoint someone to guide them. 'It is necessary for Him, in so far as He is All-wise, that He appoint in this world someone whom He teaches, and by means of the emanation inspires and makes a teacher and guide for the soul to that which will yield its perfection.'²⁵

It is important, while recognising al-Kirmani as an accomplished scholar in his own right, to bear in mind that his work was inextricably linked with the Imamate of Imam Hakim bi-Amr Allah. Al-Kirmani was often writing, as commissioned by the Imam, to a specific audience or to address a specific issue. As Walker points out, al-Kirmani was not simply "an independent scholar indulging his personal inclinations for knowledge but rather a committed servant of an important cause ... serving a particular purpose, partly his own and partly that of the *da`wa* which he supported."²⁶ He was writing for the benefit of other *da`is*, sometimes to tackle issues of interpretation of the faith which arose particularly in the latter part of Imam al-Hakim's Imamate. His purpose in these writings was to ensure the correct interpretation of the faith. This is something with which al-Kirmani was deeply concerned. He was writing to remind the faithful of the need for balance and moderation between the *zahiri* and *batini* aspects of faith, when it appeared that an over-emphasis on one aspect or the other was becoming a threat. Some of his writings were specifically aimed at those who used this and began to characterise Ismailis as "extremists", accusing them of rejecting the *Shari`a* and practising a merely *batini* faith.

Above all, as a member of the *da`wa*, acting directly under the guidance of the Imam of the time, it was al-Kirmani's job to teach. He and his contemporary *da`is* were working towards educating the community in issues of intellectual importance. "By [al-Kirmani's] efforts, a considerable degree of unity prevailed and the solidarity of the *da`wa* was restored."²⁷ The Tayyibi *da`i* Idris says of him:

"He [al-Kirmani] came as an abundant rainfall to the pasture after its being barren. By his explanation the black and gloomy darkness vanished and by his clear knowledge and light of guidance the superiority of the Imams became evident."²⁸

This book constitutes an excellent resource for the reader who is looking for a clear overview of the climate in Cairo at the time of Imam al-Hakim, the work of the *da`wa* in general and al-Kirmani in particular. Al-Kirmani deals with many issues which are as relevant to the contemporary Ismaili reader as they were then: the issues of faith and "double observance", the need for a living Imam, the need for balance between the *zahiri* and *batini* aspects of life and the need to have an intellectual understanding of concepts central to the faith.

For teachers of religious education and for anyone wishing to reflect on questions as broad as the following, Walker's study of al-Kirmani is an invaluable text:

- Can human beings ever know God?

²⁵ Walker, p. 111.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 25.

²⁷ Hunzai, p. 15.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 15.

- What is the nature of faith?
- Who were the Fatimid *da`is* and what role, in particular, did al-Kirmani play in the work of the *da`wa*?
- What particular challenges did al-Kirmani face whilst working in the *da`wa*?
- How did al-Kirmani work to unify the *da`wa*?
- What is al-Kirmani's importance in Ismaili history?



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