

The Concept of Knowledge According to al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1021)

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I. Introduction

The concept of knowledge is one of the best known and most debated topics in religion and other fields of human enquiry. Its prime importance lies in the fact that a clear understanding of a system of thought depends on a clear understanding of its concept of knowledge. The concept of knowledge has a particular relationship with Ismailism as one of the appellations given to Ismailis is *Ta'limiyya* or *Aṣḥāb al-ta'lim*. Contradictory views have been expressed by critics about the Ismaili concept of knowledge, mainly based on non Ismaili hostile sources. This article is an attempt to present the Ismaili concept of knowledge based on Ismaili sources. To this end, we will focus on Ḥāmid al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Kirmānī, as an outstanding Ismaili *dā'ī* and thinker who lived in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries, a period extremely important for both philosophical and *da'wa* activities, and whose important works are available, and in doing so it is hoped that it will be helpful in understanding an essential concept of Ismailism. This article mainly concentrates on the nature and source of knowledge according to al-Kirmānī, its relationship to the intellect and to authority.

In order to place al-Kirmānī's position into a proper perspective, it would be helpful to examine the classification of Muslim schools of thought by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), a renowned figure in the history of Islamic thought, who claimed to have thoroughly studied all Islamic schools of thought, including Ismailism. Al-Ghazālī divided Muslims into five categories with respect to their attainment of true knowledge or truth: the *Muqallidūn*, the *Mutakallimūn*, the *Bāṭiniyya* or *Ta'limiyya*, i.e., *Ismā'iliyya*, the *Falāsifa* and the *Ṣūfiyya*. Al-Ghazālī did not include the *Muqallidūn* among the seekers of knowledge but considered

them servile conformists. He said: 'A prerequisite to being a *Muqallid* is that one does not know himself to be such.'¹

Thus al-Ghazālī confined seekers of truth or knowledge to the remaining four categories:

1. The *Mutakallimūn* or Theologians who claim that they are the people of opinion (*ra'y*) and speculation (*naẓar*) and who attain true knowledge through such enquiry;
2. The *Baṭiniyya* or Esotericists who allege that they are the people of Teaching (*aṣḥāb al-ta'lim*) and that they acquire truth only from the infallible Imam;
3. The *Falāsifa* or Philosophers who allege that they are the people of logic (*manṭiq*) and demonstration (*burhān*) and who can reach true knowledge through this;
4. The *Ṣūfiyya* or Mystics who claim to be the privileged ones of the Divine presence and people of vision (*mushāhada*) and unveiling (*mukāshafa*) and thereby they can attain true knowledge through a beatific vision and unveiling.²

The key points of the schools that al-Ghazālī has described enable us to assess the Ismaili point of view in juxtaposition to the others.

Quite often, Ismailism is described by its critics in contradictory terms, as an anti-authoritarian philosophical movement, or an anti-rationalistic authoritarian movement.³ Al-Ghazālī accuses them of the latter and says that the basis of their *madhhab* is the invalidation of the exercise of intellect and opinion because of their invitation to the *ta'lim* of the infallible Imam.⁴

Because al-Ghazālī occupies an important place among the critics of Ismailism and as he claimed to have a thorough knowledge of their doctrine, it is relevant to discuss his criticism of the doctrine of *ta'lim* for this enables us to assess the Ismaili point of view and the reliability of al-Ghazālī's information on Ismailism. Al-Ghazālī in his *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* says regarding the Ismaili doctrine of *ta'lim*:

There is no substance to their views and no force in their argument. Indeed, had it not been for the maladroit defence put forward by the ignorant friend of the truth, that innovation, given its weakness, would never have attained its present position. But intense fanaticism led the defenders of the truth to prolong the debate with them over the premises of their argument and to contradict them in everything they said. Thus they fought the Ta'limites (*Ta'limiyya*) over their claim that there must be authoritative teaching (*ta'lim*) and an authoritative teacher (*mu'allim*) and also their claim that not every teacher is suitable and that there must be an infallible teacher (*mu'allim ma'ṣūm*). Their argument proving the need for authoritative teaching and an authoritative teacher was lucid and clear and the counter arguments of their opponents were weak. Because of that, many were seduced into thinking that it was due to the strength of the Ta'limites' doctrine and the weakness of their opponents doctrine, not understanding that it was

really due to the dim-wittedness of the defender of the truth and his ignorance of how to go about it. In fact, the right way to proceed is to acknowledge the need for an authoritative teacher who must also be infallible. But our infallible teacher is Muḥammad – God’s blessing and peace be upon him! If they say: ‘Our teacher has indeed taught his emissaries and scattered them throughout the countries and he expects them to return to consult him if they disagree on some point or encounter some difficulty’, we say: ‘Our teacher has taught his emissaries and scattered them through the countries, and he has perfected this teaching, since God Most High said: “Today I have perfected for you your religion and have accorded you My full favour” (Qur’an 5:3). And once the teaching has been perfected, the death of the teacher works no harm, just as his hiding works no harm.’⁵

Due to the inaccessibility of Ismaili literature, it has for a long time been extremely difficult for students of Ismailism to verify what has been said about it by its critics – al-Ghazālī and others like him. As a result, whatever has been said by them has been accepted at face value. However, the recent discovery and publication of Ismaili literature shows that – although there are particles of truth in what has been said – because it is not usual for polemicists to present their opponent’s views accurately such views are presented in a way that makes them vulnerable to attack. Thus the way rationalism or authoritarianism is attributed to them shows that reason and authority are mutually exclusive and contradictory to each other. On the contrary, according to Ismailism, reason and authority together are necessary otherwise they are not useful. One of the eminent *dā’īs*, al-Mu’ayyad (d. 470/1078) says:

The Prophet is the lamp of insights (*baṣā’ir*) through which they understand, just as the sun is the lamp of eyesight(s) (*abṣār*) through which they see. The lamp is useless to the blind who has lost his eyesight and similarly the guidance of prophethood is useless to the one who is blind of intellect and insight. And just as the eye can see through the collectivity of the lamp and the sound eye, the intellect understands through the collectivity of the prophethood and the sound intellect.⁶

Further, the very necessity of an authority is based on the testimony of the intellect. As al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971) says: ‘The intellect attests to the existence of the most excellent and the best from every species according to its excellence and nobility.’⁷ Thus in Ismailism, there is no incompatibility or mutual exclusiveness between authority and reason. In fact, the perfection of the intellect lies in following and obeying the authority, the latter being the actual and perfect Intellect and the former being the potential or imperfect intellect.⁸

As for al-Ghazālī’s criticism that the basis of the *madhhab* of the *Ta’limiyya* is the invalidation of the exercise of intellect and opinion, it is true that they reject the exercise of personal opinion in matters of religion, on the basis of several Qur’anic

verses such as: ‘And who is more astray than one who follows his desire without guidance from God’ (Qur’an 28:50) and ‘They follow but a guess, and indeed, a guess never takes the place of the truth’ (Qur’an 53:28).⁹ However, as is clear from the above, to accuse them of not exercising the intellect does not accord with the way in which they view the intellect. It appears that al-Ghazālī attempts to depict Ismailis as *muqallids* or servile conformists, whom he treats with great contempt.

Al-Ghazālī’s information about Ismaili belief in an infallible Imam is basically true but in order to attack this, he has added certain accretions, such as the notion of the hidden Imam, which bears no relation to the Ismaili doctrine of Imamate. Because the Ismaili concept of knowledge depends on the *ta’lim* of the infallible Imam or Teacher, it is pertinent to provide a summary of their arguments on the necessity for an infallible Imam. Numerous works on the necessity of Imamate written by Ismaili *dā’īs* are now available. A detailed description of the necessity for the continuity of Imamate after the Prophet and thereby to continue his mission to guide people according to God’s command, is given in the *Kitāb al-wilāya/walāya* of the *Da’ā’im al-Islām* by al-Qāḍī al-Nu’mān. Al-Kirmānī himself has written an entire book on the establishment, necessity, infallibility and other aspects of Imamate, called *al-Maṣābih fī ithbāt al-imāma*. Some of the arguments from *al-Iftikhār* of al-Sijistānī and from *al-Maṣābih* of al-Kirmānī are offered here. Al-Sijistānī in his *al-Iftikhār*, referring to the Qur’anic verses: ‘One day We shall summon all people with their Imam’ (Qur’an 17:71), ‘You are a warner only, and for every people is a guide’ (Qur’an 13:7), ‘And We appointed them Imams who guide by Our command’ (Qur’an 21:73), says that by these verses, God makes it clear that there is an Imam in every age, who guides by the command of God, to His religion and to His straight path. Therefore, it is necessary for there to be a guiding and guided Imam for people in every age, and the world is never devoid of such a guide. And the matter is not as ordinary people think, that God has neglected His creatures and left them without someone to invite, guide and command them.¹⁰

Al-Sijistānī further argues:

By God sending Messengers to people and neglecting them after their departure without appointing ... an Imam lies the main part of corruption which leads to disorder and perdition. The proof of this is the differences which appeared in the *umma* which led to the shedding of blood ... and accusing each other of infidelity. The cause of this was nothing but diverting the Imamate from the one to whom God had granted it ... When God has sent a learned and wise Messenger to unite the people by the purity of his soul and the subtlety of his mind with the power of revelation conferred upon him, (and) a noble *sharī’a* and a sound and perfect Book (*tanzīl*) and then He does not appoint someone to guard and protect them in the ages (to come), it would be a mockery, futility and weakness from Him, but He is free from and above such things.¹¹

Al-Kirmānī in his *al-Maṣābiḥ* gives fourteen arguments on the establishment and necessity of an Imam after the Prophet, of which some are given here:

1. Because the Prophet had brought from God profound wisdom, it was incumbent upon him to convey it to those who were in his time and also to those who were yet to come until the Day of Resurrection. But those who were in his time were not capable of accepting the entirety of wisdom all at once, nor was it possible for those to come in future to be there in his time, nor was it ordained for the Prophet to remain in this world until the end of all people and so convey to them the trust of God, so it became necessary for him to appoint a successor to take his place and convey this trust and for his successor at the time of his own demise to designate someone else to continue to convey the trust of God to people.¹²
2. The Prophet brought the *tanzīl* and the *sharī'a* in Arabic, a language in which a single word, by its being a parable or allegory can lead to diverse and manifold meanings. It is therefore possible to interpret every Qur'anic verse and every Prophetic Tradition according to the desire of the interpreter. But this possibility is rejected by the intellect and we see in the Islamic community that each sect argues for the validity of its own sect, interpreting a Qur'anic verse and a prophetic tradition, in a sense different from the senses held by the others. For example, in the verse: 'What hindered you from falling prostrate before that whom I have created with My two *yads*' (38:75), the Mu'tazila say that 'two *yads*' mean power (*qudra*) and strength (*quwwa*), others interpret them as bounty (*ni'ma*) and favour (*minna*), and the *Mubīra* interpret them as the two hands which form part of the body.

All these interpretations are correct and cannot be rejected, for the word '*yad*' contains all these meanings. Therefore, either all these meanings which are the esoteric aspects that the word conveys are correct and therefore it is incumbent to know them all; or, only one or two are correct in which case it is necessary to know which ones so as to avoid the others; or, the meaning is other than any of these and the word is used as a simile or parable in which case it is necessary to know the object (*mamthūl*). If all the meanings of the word are correct, then wisdom necessitates that there should be someone in the community who knows the form of wisdom in all of them so that one is not left with only one meaning to the exclusion of the others. All this is necessary so that unity prevails in the community in the worship of God and any differences of opinion are resolved. If, however, only one or two of the meanings are correct, then wisdom necessitates for there to be someone to make such meanings known so that there is guidance and to prevent people from mistaken belief, for without a teacher one cannot distinguish which meaning is most worthy of belief. This, so that controversy and hatred vanishes and unity prevails in the worship of God. And if the purpose of the word is other than the apparent meaning and the word is a simile or symbol, then again wisdom necessitates that someone

in the community explain the object (*mamthūl*) of it so that people do not go astray or believe in that which is not correct. Thus all three possibilities require the existence of someone in the community to guide and teach.¹³

3. God by the command 'If you have a dispute concerning any matter, refer it to God and the Messenger', (Qur'an 4:59) enjoins upon believers to have recourse to the Prophet in their disputes and indeed they did so on religious matters in his time. But as it was not possible nor was it ordained for the Prophet to remain in the midst of the community for all time so that people could continue to have recourse to him, it became necessary for someone to take his place to make such decisions so that the command of God would endure. He who stands in the place of the Prophet is the Imam.¹⁴
4. God by the command: 'O you who believe! Obey God, obey the Messenger and the *ūlū al-amr* from among you', (Qur'an 4:59) has enjoined upon believers in one verse three acts of obedience, each linked with one another. It is obvious that obedience to the *ūlū al-amr* is other than obedience to the Messenger and that obedience to the Messenger is other than obedience to God and that one is not accepted without the second nor the second without the third. The address in this verse is to the generality of believers, to those in the time of the Prophet and to those after him, without any distinction. It is absurd to believe that God would enjoin upon His servants obedience to someone whom He has joined in this verse with Him and the Prophet if He had not made him infallible like the Messenger. Thus, due to the fact that the address is to the generality of believers, the existence of someone to whom obedience is obligatory upon the community is necessary so that they may fulfil this duty.¹⁵

Keeping to the Ismaili argument of the necessity for an infallible Imam, it is interesting to juxtapose this to al-Ghazālī's argument. Al-Ghazālī, unlike his predecessors, realised the necessity for an infallible Imam and labelled his predecessors ignorant for their failure to realise this. However, his own arguments 'Our infallible teacher is Muḥammad(s)' or 'Your teacher is hidden (*ghā'ib*)' do not seem to refute in any way the necessity of the Imam. The Ismaili doctrine of the necessity of the Imam is based on the belief that the nature of human intellect is imperfect or potential and that it requires a perfect or actual Intellect to attain perfection or actuality. Further, al-Ghazālī cannot in any sense justify that Muḥammad(s) belongs only to him and his party, for the Ismailis too, as is clear from the above, claim that the perpetual necessity of an infallible Imam is to accomplish the Prophet's mission, which due to the spatial and temporal hindrances and limitations of human intellect, it was not possible to complete in the lifetime of the Prophet. Similarly, the concept of a hidden Imam is not an Ismaili concept, for as al-Sijistānī has pointed out, the Imam according to Ismailis is either manifest (*ẓāhir*) or is concealed (*mastūr*). However, *mastūr* does not mean that he is unavailable to his *dā'īs* but that

he is concealed only from his enemies and ordinary members of the community to whom the *dā'īs* convey the guidance of the living Imam.

The Ismaili interpretation of the completion of religion also differs from al-Ghazālī's in the sense that this verse was revealed after the appointment of the successor or the *waṣī* or *asās*¹⁶ who through his progeny, continues the *ta'wīl* of the Qur'an by the command of God. If completion of religion is understood as the Prophet having completed the teaching of the Qur'an and the Sunna, then any attempt to solve problems using sources other than the Qur'an or Sunna would be futile and superfluous. Thus, according to Ismailis, religion is only complete with the Qur'an and the teacher of the Qur'an, the *ūlū al-amr* (Qur'an 4:59), who has to be as infallible as the Prophet by virtue of his being linked in obedience to God and the Prophet.

It is due to such interaction that the different schools of thought have developed and expounded most of their concepts. The study of the concept of knowledge propounded by al-Kirmānī, an eminent exponent of Ismailism, will be examined in the context of such interaction.

II. Definition of Knowledge and its Relation to Existence

Al-Kirmānī defined knowledge or *'ilm* in both concise and elaborate expressions. In his epistle *al-Hawīyya*, he defines *'ilm* as 'to find out things according to their form'.¹⁷ In his *Rāḥa* he defines it as 'the conception of the Divine signs, which is the comprehension of what has preceded the human soul in existence, such as the archetypes of the *ibdā'ī* and *inbi'āthi* intellects and the higher and lower bodies'.¹⁸ It is obvious from al-Kirmānī's definition that it is closely linked with forms, archetypes or realities of things or existents, therefore in order to have a clear concept of knowledge, it is necessary first to have a clear understanding of the concept of existence in al-Kirmānī's schema of the existents.

In al-Kirmānī's schema of existence, there are many grades from the First Intellect as the first end to mankind as the second end. But basically he divides it into two categories: the physical and the non-physical. By the physical, he means this world with its heaven, earth, planets, stars, elements and generated beings and by non-physical, intellects, souls, Paradise, Hell, resurrection, reward, punishment, reckoning, and so on. The essential difference between the two is that the former kind of existents are *zāhir*, or manifest, by their nature and are perceptible by the senses. In the perception of the perceptibles, there is no difference between participants with sound senses. That is to say that in the perception of such things there is no difference between a learned man and an illiterate person.¹⁹

The non-physical existents by their nature are *bāṭin*, or hidden, and they cannot be perceived by the senses, rather their knowledge is acquired through the intellect and therefore, they are intelligibles. Since their grasp or comprehension does

not depend on perception which is common among people, but on the intellectual capacity of people in which they differ according to their individual acquisition of knowledge, therefore, there is a difference between people in their grasp of knowledge. Al-Kirmānī thus stresses that in the comprehension of the physical or external things, people are equal in their means, but in non-physical or internal things, they differ according to their acquisition.²⁰

Al-Kirmānī, in order to illustrate this, uses the example of the utterance '*Bism Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*'. He says that when the uvulae and tongues are moved to pronounce it and the voice is raised, because the voice is perceptible, all those who have sound senses can participate equally in hearing it, but as for its meaning, i.e. the exegesis and *ta'wīl*, because it is imperceptible, it cannot be participated in equally by all those who have sound senses, since the comprehension of the meaning is the prerogative of those who have acquired knowledge or the hidden aspect of things.²¹

The preceding description of the nature of things leads to the conclusion that, just as there are two kinds of existents, with their distinctive characteristics of being *zāhir* and *bāṭin*, or perceptible and imperceptible, accordingly, there are two kinds of comprehension. Al-Kirmānī in keeping with the classification of existents, classifies knowledge into two kinds: the first knowledge and the second knowledge.

The first knowledge is related to the physical world and the world of nature and the protection of its bodies, which al-Kirmānī calls the first perfection. This kind of knowledge in nature can be seen in the mineral, vegetative and animal souls. An example of the knowledge of the mineral soul is that minerals mingle only with minerals which protect them and avoid those which harm them. For example, mercury mingles with gold but does not mingle with iron. An example of the knowledge of the vegetative soul is that roots of plants move in the direction of moisture, which protects them, but when they reach a stone or other obstruction, turn away. An example of the knowledge of the animal soul is that animals eat that which is useful for their bodies and avoid that which is harmful. Al-Kirmānī concludes that had this knowledge not been in minerals, plants and animals, they would not have been able to protect their bodies, and that therefore the Wise Creator has granted them the first knowledge to protect the first existence or the first perfection.

The second knowledge, according to al-Kirmānī, is the second perfection, of which the soul is initially devoid. Al-Kirmānī basing his argument on the verse: 'Surely, God brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew nothing' (Qur'an 16:78), says that in this verse by 'you knew nothing' is meant the second perfection which is the second knowledge, which is related to religions and beliefs by which the soul becomes perfect and turns into an intellect. Al-Kirmānī says that the nature of these two kinds of knowledge is different. The first is given to every soul innately and for this it does not require a teacher, while the second which is related to religions and beliefs can be obtained only from a teacher.²²

It is obvious that since the first kind of knowledge is given to every soul innately, it is not necessary to seek this kind of knowledge. What is useful now is to investigate what al-Kirmānī says about the necessity of the second knowledge and its source, upon which depends the second perfection of the soul. We have seen al-Kirmānī's division of the existents into *zāhir* and *bāṭin* and how the second knowledge is related to the *bāṭin*. The establishment of the *bāṭin* and belief in it has been one of the most essential and important issues in Ismailism. We have also seen in al-Ghazālī's classification of Muslim schools of thought that one of the names given to Ismailis by their opponents is the Bāṭiniyya, due to their belief in the *bāṭin* of the Book and the *sharī'a*. In fact, in al-Kirmānī's own time, Ismailis were attacked by the Zaydī Imam, who was asked for a *fatwā* about their belief in the *bāṭin* vis-à-vis the *zāhir* of all religious practices, such as *ṣalāt*, *zakāt*, etc. and about their belief that the *zāhir* cannot be complete without the knowledge of the *bāṭin*. Al-Kirmānī wrote his epistle *al-Kāfiyya* in response to the Zaydī Imam on the establishment of the *bāṭin*. In addition, al-Kirmānī deals with the necessity of *bāṭin* or *ta'wīl* in *al-Maṣābiḥ*, *al-Wāḍi'a fī ma'ālim al-dīn*, *Tanbīh al-hādī wa'l-mustahdī* and particularly in the *Rāḥa*. He produced numerous proofs on the necessity of the *bāṭin* or *ta'wīl* some of which are presented here. Al-Kirmānī uses the words *bāṭin*, *ta'wīl*, *bayān*, *tafsīr*, *sharḥ*, *ma'nā*, and *'ilm* interchangeably.

1. Intellects and souls have no way to recognise the Return (*ma'ād*) and that which is invisible to the senses, except through perceptible examples drawn by the Messengers and the practices laid down by them. The Prophet taught perceptible examples, which are profound wisdom, and it became necessary that in order to accept these examples, wisdom should be implied in them. But the *zāhir* or exoteric aspect of the Qur'an and the *sharī'a*, which the Prophet brought, conflicts with the rules of the intellect, such as the verse 'And when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, (saying): Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes verily' (Qur'an 7:172). The impossibility of bringing forth the children of Adam as particles and to take covenant of His Lordship from them, has created difficulties in explanation of this for the people of the *zāhir*²³ for elsewhere He commands that one cannot accept the testimony of children, let alone babies or seed, because they are not yet of an age where they are obliged to observe the requirements of religion. Similarly, there is the Prophetic Tradition: 'Between my grave and my pulpit there is a garden from among the gardens of Paradise'. The absurdity of the exoteric aspect of this Tradition lies in the fact that at that particular place there is nothing that can remotely be described as a garden. But as the Prophet is a sage and free from ignorance, it becomes necessary to look beyond the exoteric aspect of what the Prophet has brought so that it is not devoid of meanings with which the intellect can agree and the revelation can be established as true and full of wisdom. These meanings are called *ta'wīl*.²⁴

2. According to the Divine command 'Invite unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and good exhortation' (Qur'an 16:125), the Prophet invited people unto God with wisdom, and whoever does not believe this is an unbeliever. But according to the *zāhir*, he invited the people unto God and His worship with certain actions, which if they are repeated by a human being at a place other than where they have been commanded, would be considered mad or a joke, such as the strange actions and rites of pilgrimage. No wisdom is attached to the *zāhir* of such acts, such as conversations with stones, walking fast on tiptoe, abstinence from paring nails and shaving the hair on the head and pelting the *Jamras* with pebbles. However, because the Prophet invited with wisdom, it is necessary for these actions not to be devoid of the meanings with which wisdom agrees and the intellect accepts as knowledge, for salvation lies in such behaviour. Those meanings are called the *ta'wīl*.²⁵
3. According to Divine justice nobody will be punished for the sins of others, as God says: 'No bearer of burden bears the burden of another' (Qur'an 6:164). But it is in the law of the Prophet to punish the uncle for the sin of the nephew, when he kills someone by mistake. That is against God's justice and what He has commanded, and it is inconceivable that the Prophet can do something against His justice and mercy, or that he commands something which is contradictory to His command. It is therefore necessary that this and commands like this have certain meanings and wisdom compatible with His justice and mercy and which can be understood by the intellect. That meaning which is compatible with God's justice and mercy and understood as such by the intellect is the *ta'wīl*.²⁶
4. It is absurd for a wise human being, let alone God, to talk to an inanimate thing which has no life, no reward, no punishment, nor is it possible for an organ to accept a command or prohibition and to respond to it. But the Prophet, by the verse 'Then He turned to the heaven when it was smoke and said unto it and the earth: Come both of you, willingly or unwillingly. They said: We come, obedient'. Qur'an 41:11 informs us that He spoke to the heaven and the earth, which are both inanimate and have no intellect, nor do they have any organs of speech. The absurdity of this conversation of God, the Wise, with the inanimate necessitates that His conversation with heaven and earth and their response, have a meaning which establishes the speech of God to be true and which the intellect accepts. That meaning is called *ta'wīl*.²⁷
5. God says: 'When He made the slumber fall upon you as a reassurance from Him and sent down water from the sky upon you, and thereby He might purify you and remove from you the dirt of Satan, and make stronger your hearts and firm your feet thereby' (Qur'an 8:11). It is known that the dirt of Satan is disbelief, doubt, confusion, hypocrisy, ignorance, deviation, etc. which is in hearts, intellects and souls and as such it is unimaginable that they can be purified by the water which comes from the visible sky. Had the water mentioned in the verse

been natural water than everyone, whether believer or unbeliever, would have been purified and accordingly it is necessary for water to have a different meaning without which it would have been absurd for God to say this. That meaning we call *ta'wīl*.²⁸

6. God by his command says: 'He it is Who has revealed unto you (Muḥammad) the Book wherein are clear verses. They are the foundation of the Book and others are allegorical. But those in whose heart is perversity, pursue the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its *ta'wīl*, but no one knows its *ta'wīl* except Allāh and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge (*al-rāsikhūn fī'l-ʿilm*) saying: 'We believe in it (Book); the whole is from our Lord; but only men of understanding really heed.' (Qur'an 3:7). This verse has made the *ta'wīl* of what the Prophet has brought necessary. If someone raises an objection and says that the *ta'wīl* of it no one knows except God, and that *rāsikhūn fī'l-ʿilm* is the subject, not the predicate of the preceding sentence, his objection is absurd in the context of many examples in the Arabic idiom of brevity. For instance, '*Lā yusallimu ʿalayka fulānūn wa-fulānūn yaʿtadhīr* (No one sends you greetings except so and so, and so and so apologies)'. That is, both of them send greetings and one of them apologises. Thus in addition to God the *rāsikhūn fī'l-ʿilm* also know the *ta'wīl* and hence it is necessary.²⁹
7. It is not possible to recognise the invisible and imperceptible things except by designating them by visible and perceptible things. Therefore the Prophet has informed us about the invisible things, such as Allāh, Paradise and its felicity, Hell and its torture, through visible and perceptible things. He informed us about Paradise, which is the next world and is invisible and imperceptible, by using such descriptions as gardens, trees, fruits and all kinds of physical bounties etc., and Hell by the fire and all kinds of physical tortures. Therefore it is necessary for whatever the Prophet has said, done and invited us to, about the life hereafter, to be like symbols and allegories (*amthāl*) of their true realities (*mumaththalāt*). The symbolised realities are called *ta'wīl*. Thus it is necessary for there to be the *ta'wīl* of what the Prophet has brought from God and what he has invited us to, such as the Book and the *sharīʿa*.³⁰

Al-Kirmānī in his *al-Kāfiyya* cites as evidence and asserts that, not only do the allegorical teachings of the Prophets have *ta'wīl*, but also that everything that they have brought and that everything that they have commanded us to do has a *ta'wīl* and a knowledge which is other than the apparent and perceptible.³¹ The core of his argument is that the purpose of religion cannot be achieved without the *ta'wīl*, which enables the human soul to attain the second perfection, become an intellect and return to its original abode, the world of intellects.

III Source of Knowledge

The question of knowledge or *ta'wīl*, which is imperceptible, leads to the question of its source and whether it is available to all humans equally or whether it is a prerogative of a particular group. We have already seen that al-Kirmānī differentiates between perceptible cognisance and imperceptible knowledge, the former being related to those things which are perceptible by their nature and the latter to the things that are imperceptible by their nature. Al-Kirmānī emphasises the point that, with respect to the former, there is no distinction between human beings, but with respect to the latter, there are grades and differences among them. This means that true knowledge or *ta'wīl* is not equally available to or attainable by people, and accordingly there are different views about the possibility and attainability of it.

As far as these views are concerned, we have noticed in the sixth argument of al-Kirmānī the necessity of *ta'wīl* in Qur'an 3:7, and that there is a difference in the reading and punctuation of this verse. Those who maintain that the *ta'wīl* of the Qur'an and the *sharī'a* is not possible, place a full stop (or *waqf lāzīm*) after 'Allāh' and confine the knowledge of *ta'wīl* to Allāh only and consider *al-rāsikhūn fī'l-ilm* a new subject. These are the Literalists or *ahl al-zāhir* who do not seek deeper meanings beyond the apparent wording of the parables and allegories of the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions.

There are others, such as Ibn Qutayba (213–276/828–889),³² who argue that since God has mentioned the *rāsikhūn fī'l-ilm* in an honorific and distinctive sense, this honour lies in their knowledge of *ta'wīl* and in the light of this knowledge they say: 'We believe in it; the whole is from our Lord'. Had this knowledge not been possessed by them, then as Ibn Qutayba says: 'They would have no superiority over the learners, or over all ignorant Muslims. For all of them say: "We believe in it; the whole is from our Lord."' Those who maintain that the *rāsikhūn fī'l-ilm* know the *ta'wīl* are also divided into two groups: those who allege to reach the truth by opinion and speculation, logic and demonstration or vision and unveiling. For them the status of the *rāsikhūn fī'l-ilm* is open to anyone who struggles through these means. For those who claim to attain the truth or *ta'wīl* from the infallible Imam or Teacher, for them the *rāsikhūn fī'l-ilm* are only the rightful Imams from the *ahl al-bayt* of the Prophet, i.e. Imām 'Alī and his designated descendants to the office of Imamate. The former group includes the *Falāsifa*, the *Šūfiyya* and the *Mutakallimūn* as a whole, the latter group comprises Shī'i Islam in general and Ismailis in particular who are known as the *Ta'limiyya*. Al-Kirmānī obviously belongs to the latter group and firmly adheres to the Ismaili doctrine of the source of *ta'lim* and *ta'wīl*.

According to the Ismailis, *ta'wīl* and *tanzīl* are correlative. Thus they argue that just as the *tanzīl* cannot be attained by effort, neither can the *ta'wīl* which is the hidden meaning of *tanzīl*. They argue that as God had chosen the Prophets to convey the *tanzīl*, so He has appointed the Imams to impart the *ta'wīl* of it after

the Prophets. Al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān says: ‘God ... has made the *ẓāhir* (= *tanzīl*) of the Book, the miracle of the Prophet; and the *bāṭin* (= *ta’wīl*), the miracle of the Imams from his *ahl al-bayt* ... As nobody except Muḥammad, the Messenger of God, can bring the *ẓāhir* of the Book, so also, nobody except the Imams from his progeny, can bring the *bāṭin* of it.’

Al-Kirmānī, following the same line, asserts in his *al-Waḍī‘a*, that it has been a Divine *Sunna* (law) to appoint an *asās* with every *nāṭiq*. Al-Kirmānī says that it has been a Divine *Sunna* to assign the *tanzīl* to the *nāṭiqs* and the *ta’wīl* to their *asāsāt* who continue the mission through their descendants. According to this *sunna*, Ādam, Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Mūsā and ‘Īsā appointed as their *asāsāt* or *waṣīs*, Shīth, Sām, Ismā‘īl, Hārūn and Sham‘ūn al-Ṣafā’, respectively and that the Prophet received a Divine command to reveal the position of his *asās*: ‘O Messenger! Convey that which has been revealed unto you from your Lord. If you did not, you would not have conveyed His message.’ (Qur’an 5:67) As a result of this the Prophet appointed Imām ‘Alī to continue the *ta’wīl* or *al-‘ibāda al-‘ilmiyya*. Al-Kirmānī commenting on ‘If you did not, you would not have conveyed His message’, says that by this God means that had there not been the one who establishes the *ta’wīl* or *al-‘ibādat al-‘ilmiyya* then *al-‘ibāda al-‘amaliyya* would have been useless and futile. For one *‘ibāda* cannot be acceptable and complete without the other, and the form of the *‘ibāda* and the attainment of bliss is impossible except by knowledge and action, i.e. *ta’wīl* and *tanzīl* together. Thus, according to Ismailis the *rāsikhūn fi’l-‘ilm* are the Prophet, his *asās* and the Imams from their progeny and hence that the *ta’wīl* is confined only to them. They further substantiate this doctrine by citing the Prophetic Tradition that records: ‘*Anā ṣāhib al-tanzīl wa-‘Aliyyun ṣāhib al-ta’wīl*’ (‘I am the master of the *tanzīl* and ‘Alī is the Master of the *ta’wīl*’).

Having established, according to al-Kirmānī, that true knowledge is the *ta’wīl* and its source is the *asās* of the *nāṭiq* and after him, the Imam of the time in his respective age, the question arises: What is the nature of the *ta’wīl* and how can it be obtained?

From al-Kirmānī’s works and also from other Ismaili sources, it appears that the *ta’wīl* in the case of the Prophets and Imams, is not something acquired but is given or taught by God Himself. Hence this is perfect and complete knowledge, which comprises the knowledge of those that have passed away and of those who are to come or the events that have already taken place and those that are to take place in the future (*‘ilm al-awwalīn wa’l-ākhirīn*). However, since people do not have the capacity to accept this knowledge, it gradually continues to be revealed through the chain of Imams, until the Day of Resurrection. It is because of this perfect and firm knowledge, that the Prophet and the Imams are called the *rāsikhūn fi’l-‘ilm*. In Qur’anic language this is called the *ta’yīd bi’l-ruḥ al-quḍus* or Divine help with the Holy Spirit. The Prophets and Imams – ‘*mu’ayyad*’ or ‘assisted souls’ – in the

physical world are the actual Intellects, who make souls or the potential intellects actual.

As far as the non-*mu'ayyad* souls are concerned, they have to acquire this knowledge from the *mu'ayyad* souls or actual Intellects. As for its acquisition, it is not only through the speculative exercise of the mind, it also requires the element of action. That is to say, that in order to attain this kind of knowledge, one has to obey the Prophet and the Imams, leading to the attainment of *ta'wil*. In the case of the Prophets and Imams, because they are both in the position of the Single Soul (*nafs wāḥida*), it is the same thing. In the case of the *umma* or followers, because they have not attained the position of the Single Soul, their *ta'wil* is on different levels. In the case of both the *ifāda*, giving of knowledge by the Prophets and the Imams and *istifāda* or the receiving of it, it depends on the capacity and receptivity of the followers. Al-Kirmānī says: 'It is possible for one *ta'wil* to be clearer and more evident than another depending on the purity of the nature of the *mu'awwil* (one who does *ta'wil*) and his power in knowledge and in deduction.'

Al-Kirmānī also implies that the meanings of *ta'wil* cannot be confined to some expressions or words. They can be expressed in different words, provided that they do not elevate or degrade the position of the *ḥudūd*. Al-Kirmānī says: 'The words in conveying the meanings of the *ta'wil* are different, but their meanings, despite the difference in words, are in agreement. Every *ta'wil* is adequate and satisfactory so long as it does not raise a *ḥadd* above its limit or lower another below its rank.'

To sum up, knowledge according to al-Kirmānī, in its ultimate form is in the higher *ḥudūd* in the world of Intellect or in the First or Universal Intellect, which is reflected in the *nātiq, asās* and in the Imam of the time, in their respective ages and below them, through *Ḥujjas* and *dā'īs* until the *mustajibīn* for it descends through different stages and forms. It descends through the ladder of the *ḥudūd* and the *mustajibs* ascend gradually up this ladder, according to their acquisition of this knowledge. This knowledge is the spiritual life which is granted by the Prophets and Imams on acceptance of their *da'wa*.

IV Conclusion

Al-Kirmānī's concept of knowledge is in line with the Ismaili doctrine of *ta'līm* from the infallible Imam or Teacher, the pre-requisite for which is to obey his commands and follow his guidance. This, however, does not mean not exercising one's own rational faculties. In fact, the very concept of the infallible Imam is based on the sound intellect in the sense that in the physical world the intellects are in a potential state and cannot be actualised except by an actual Intellect, namely the Prophet or the Imam of the time. Thus al-Kirmānī's concept of knowledge presents a balanced approach to the realities of the world of the intellect and helps to identify oneself with them to attain eternal bliss.

Notes

1. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* ('Freedom and Fulfilment'), tr. into English by R. J. McCarthy (Boston, MA, 1980), p. 67.
2. Ibid.
3. cf. Muḥammad b. Ḥasam al-Daylamī, *Bayān madhhab al-bāṭiniyya*, ed. R. Strothmann (Istanbul, 1939), pp. 3–25.
4. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā'ih al-bāṭiniyya*, ed. A. R. Badawi (Cairo, 1964).
5. Al-Ghazālī *al-Munqidh*, pp. 83–84.
6. Al-Mu'ayyad fī'l-Dīn al-Shirāzī, *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya* (Beirut, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 226–227.
7. Abu Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī, *Ithbāt al-nubuwwa* (Beirut, 1982), p. 50.
8. Hāmid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'aql* (Cairo, 1952), p. 84.
9. Al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Ikhtilāf uṣūl al-madhāhib* (Beirut, 1973), p. 37.
10. Al-Sijistānī, *al-Iftikhār* (Beirut, 1980), p. 70.
11. Ibid., p. 71.
12. Hāmid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, *al-Maṣābiḥ fī ithbāt al-imāma* (Beirut, 1969), pp. 80–81.
13. Ibid., pp. 82–85.
14. Ibid., pp. 90–91.
15. Ibid., pp. 91–92.
16. Al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Da'ā'im al-Islām*, ed. A. A. A. Fyze (Cairo, 1969), vol. 1, p. 15.
17. Al-Kirmānī, *Majmū'at rasā'il al-Kirmānī*, ed. M. Ghālib (Beirut, 1983), p. 103.
18. Al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat*, p. 15.
19. Ibid., p. 39; al-Kirmānī, *Majmū'a*, pp. 151–152.
20. Al-Kirmānī, *Majmū'a*, pp. 152–153.
21. Al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat*, pp. 163–165.
22. Ibid., p. 165.
23. For the *zāhiri* interpretation, see: al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān* (Cairo, 1954), vol. 7, pp. 110–118.
24. Al-Kirmānī, *al-Maṣābiḥ*, pp. 66–68.
25. Ibid., pp. 68–69.
26. Ibid., p. 69.
27. Ibid., pp. 69–70.
28. Ibid., pp. 70–71.
29. Ibid., pp. 71–72.
30. Ibid., pp. 71–72.
31. Al-Kirmānī, *Majmū'a*, p. 157.
32. Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl mushkil al-Qur'ān*, ed. A. Saqr (Cairo, 1973), pp. 98–101.