

The collected letters of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī

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Writing letters has always been a fairly common practice among Sufis all over the Islamic world. Through this medium many a shaykh has communicated his ideas on the mystical path and a wide range of other topics to his fellow shaykhs, his disciples or novices, and to laymen. These letters (*maktūbāt*) therefore constitute an important source for the study of Islamic mysticism¹.

The letters written by the well-known Indian shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564-1624), the renewer of the second millennium' (*mujaddid-i alf-i thānī*), as he is commonly called, and the founding father of the Mujaddidī branch of the Naqshbandī order, consist of three volumes, often collectively referred to as the *Maktūbāt-i Imām-i Rabbānī*². The process of collecting and editing these letters started already during his lifetime. Four of his disciples successively acted as editors and performed this task in constant consultation with their master and spiritual guide and under his surveillance. They numbered the letters and wrote a foreword both for each single letter and for the volume as a whole³. In the foreword for each letter the editor mentions the name of the addressee and gives a short summary of the contents of the letter. In the foreword of each of the three volumes the name of the editor is given, the year in which the volumes were compiled and the number of the letters included in the respective volume. The first volume which was edited by Yār Muḥammad al-Jadīd al-Badakhshānī al-Ṭāliqānī, contains 313 letters, this number being chosen by Sirhindī since it corresponds with the number of the prophets and with the number of those who fought alongside of the prophet Muḥammad during the battle of Badr⁴. These letters are written between 1008/1599 and 1025/1616-17, the former date being the year in which Sirhindī met the Naqshbandī shaykh Muḥammad Bāqī bi'llāh (d. 1603) who initiated him in this mystical brotherhood, and the latter date the year in which this volume was compiled and divulged under the chronogrammatic title *Durr al-ma'rifat*. The editor of the second volume was 'Abd al-Ḥayy b. Khwāja Cākar Ḥiṣārī. It contains 99 letters, a number corresponding with the number of God's Most Beautiful Names, and was published in the year 1028 / 1618-19. The work of collecting and editing the third volume was begun by Muḥammad al-Nu'mān b. Shams al-Dīn Yaḥyā and completed by Muḥammad Hāshim Kishmī in the year

1031 / 1521-22. This volume contains 114 letters, a number corresponding with the number of the chapters (*sūras*) of the *Qur'ān*. According to the oldest biography of Sirhindī, *Zubdat al-Maqāmāt*, written by the same Muḥammad Hāshim Kishmī, another volume was to appear, volume four, containing letters written after the conclusion of the third volume. This plan, however, was thwarted by the death of Sirhindī. Therefore, these letters — 'whose number had not yet reached fourteen', as the biographer puts it — were added to the third volume⁵.

The interest of people, especially of course the members of the Mujaddidī branch of the Naqshbandī order, in the ideas of Aḥmad Sirhindī led to a fairly continuous production of copies of his collected letters starting quite soon after his death in 1624. The manuscripts so far available date from the middle of the 17th century and from 18th and 19th centuries, and printed editions were published from the last quarter of the 19th century onwards. The manuscripts quite often comprise only one or two volumes of the collected letters whereas the printed editions mostly have all three of them. The oldest manuscript — containing only the first two volumes — is found in the library of the Iran-Pakistan Institute of Persian Studies in Islamabad. It is dated 14 Muḥarram 1056 / 16 November 1654, that is twenty years after the death of Sirhindī⁶. This library possesses another manuscript of the first two volumes dated 7 Ramaḍān 1100 / 25 June 1689⁷. The library of the Muslim University of Aligarh has a manuscript of the second and third volumes dated 16 Muḥarram 1098 / 12 December 1686. Preserved in the library of the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies in New Delhi is a manuscript of volume I, dating from the year 1121/1709-10. The library of Cambridge University possesses a manuscript of only volume III, dated Muḥarram 1150 / May 1738⁸. Ten years younger — dating from 1160/1747 — is a manuscript in the library of Dacca University. This manuscript also comprises only volume III⁹. In the library of the India Office a copy of volume I is kept, which is dated 29 Dhū l-Ḥijja 1188 / 2 March 1775¹⁰. Dating from the 18th century is a manuscript in the Oriental Public Library of Bankipore, which comprises only the second volume. Another manuscript of the second volume in the same library dates from the 19th century¹¹. Dating from the 18th century is a manuscript

in the library of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, comprising only the third volume¹². The first lithographed edition of the *Maktūbāt* — containing all three volumes — was published in Delhi in 1288 /1871¹³. The well-known Nawal Kishur Press in Lucknow (established in 1858¹⁴) published the letters of Sirhindī at least six times between 1877 and 1913¹⁵. The Naqshbandī-Mujaddidī shaykh Nūr Aḥmad (died 13 Shaʿban 1348 / 14 January 1930) published an edition in Amritsar in nine fascicules, the first of which is dated Jumādā al-Ūlā 1327 / May-June 1909 and the last Jumādā al-Ūlā 1334 / March-April 1916. Afterwards, two reprints of this edition have been published; the first one in Lahore between 1964 and 1971¹⁶, and the second one, a photomechanical reprint, was published in Istanbul in 1977.

The textual tradition of the *Maktūbāt* shows a high degree of consistency. In all manuscripts and printed editions are found, as far as I have been able to ascertain, the same number of letters, at least for the first and second volumes as a whole and for the first 114 letters of the third volume¹⁷. The major inconsistency concerns those letters of Sirhindī that were added to the third volume after his death.

First of all, there is the problem of the exact number of these letters. If we are to take the above-quoted words of the biographer concerning the number of these later letters literally, namely that their number had not yet reached fourteen, it would mean that to the original 114 letters another thirteen were added, making a total of 127. However, the manuscript in the library of the Muslim University of Aligarh (dating from 1686) and the one in the library of Cambridge University, which dates from 1738, have only 123 letters¹⁸. Three more manuscripts of volume III, preserved in the library of the Muslim University of Aligarh and unfortunately not dated, also have 123 letters. The manuscript in the library of Dacca University, which dates from 1747, has 124 letters, but a marginal note, accompanying letter No. 124, and signed by a certain ʿAbdullāh, says on the authority of Muḥammad Hāshim Kishmī that this letter was not addressed to anyone in particular but was actually written by Muḥammad Maʿšūm, Sirhindī's son. It recorded, the note says, a mystical experience during Sirhindī's last illness which he could not write down and which he had therefore asked his son to record¹⁹.

Secondly, none of the nine letters which the two oldest manuscripts add to the original 114 of the third volume have a foreword and, therefore, no name of addressee of these letters is given. Thirdly, letter No. 115 is identical with letter No. 40 of the original volume III. Finally, there are three letters containing Sirhindī's commentary on certain passages from *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif*, the famous work on the theory and practice of Sufism by Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī. According to his biographers, Sirhindī was asked by some of his learned contemporaries to write a

commentary on this work²⁰. In compliance with this request he started to write his commentary, but never finished it. It is possible that the part he was able to finish has been preserved in the letters.

In the printed editions this major inconsistency in the textual tradition of the *Maktūbāt* is smoothed away, to some degree at least. In all editions an addressee is given to the letters added to the third volume after Sirhindī's death²¹. But they differ as far as the total number of letters in the third volume is concerned. Depending, obviously, on the manuscript(s) they are based upon, these editions have either 123 or 124 letters. The Lucknow edition of 1913 has 123 letters and the Amritsar edition of 1909-1916 has 124 letters. The editor of this last edition acknowledges that, according to Muḥammad Maʿšūm, letter No. 124 is not authentic, but, he adds, since the letter is found in some manuscripts, 'we have included it and made it the seal of the *Maktūbāt*'²².

The Amritsar edition of the *Maktūbāt* is interesting since it provides us with some information about the way in which the editor, Nūr Aḥmad, acquitted himself of his editorial duties. He began, we are told, by collecting as many manuscripts of the *Maktūbāt* as he could. An Arabic translation was sent to him from Mecca and he went to Delhi and to Sirhind in order to consult the manuscripts available there²³. Nūr Aḥmad himself states that the text has been collated from many manuscripts, some of which date back to the time of Sirhindī, and that in cases of discrepancy no manuscript has been neglected. It is very unfortunate, however, that he does not give more detailed information on the manuscripts he collected. Nor does he specify which manuscript he followed in cases of diverging variant readings. He does state explicitly, however, that only in a very few cases emendations proved to be indispensable. His remark therefore that the existing copies of the *Maktūbāt* are unreliable because of the pitiful lack of knowledgeability of the copyists, 'who do not even know the difference between the Arabic prepositions *min* and *ilā*', would seem to be an exaggeration²⁴. With this I do not contend that the Lucknow (Nawal Kishur) edition could not be improved. But as far as I have been able to ascertain by comparing the manuscripts in the library of Aligarh University and those in the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies in Delhi with the Nawal Kishur edition, the situation is not as disquieting as Nūr Aḥmad's remark would suggest. Most of the irregularities are of the nature of a slip of the pen, a lapse that can be recognized and corrected quite easily. In other respects, however, Nūr Aḥmad's edition is little short of an edition we would call critical. The text is amply provided with notes. They identify verses from the *Qurʾān* and quotations from the *ḥadīth* and translate them into Persian, they elucidate difficult terms or passages, they identify names given in the text and supply biographical information about the persons involved. When a

letter in whole or in part is written in Arabic, the Persian translation is given concurrently with the original text. Finally, in an index at the end of each fascicule a short summary of the contents of each letter is given²⁵.

Aḥmad Sirhindī has always been — from his lifetime till today — a rather controversial figure, albeit that the controversy centered in different times around different aspects of his personality and ideas²⁶. It seems, however — perhaps in a way against all expectations — that this has not affected the textual tradition of his letters, at least not of the original Persian text. There exists an Arabic translation of some of his most controversial letters, which was made in the seventeenth century by one Muḥammad Beg al-Uzbakī, who tried to show that the *fatāwā* issued against Sirhindī by *‘ulamā* in the Hijāz at the request of some of their Indian colleagues, were based on a faulty translation of his *Maktūbāt* into Arabic. According to Y. Friedmann, however, this translation is linguistically rather strained²⁷. As far as the original text is concerned I have so far come across only one example of a passage being adjusted for hagiographical reasons. In one of his letters Sirhindī calls his stay with the imperial army of the Mughal emperor Jahāngīr (a stay subsequent to his imprisonment) compulsory and enforced²⁸. In the foreword to another letter, however, the editor says, at least according to the Nawal Kishur edition, that Sirhindī accompanied the imperial army out of his own free will. In the edition of Nūr Aḥmad this adjustment of the text has again been reversed²⁹.

The question whether all letters written by Sirhindī have been preserved is not just an academical one. Sirhindī himself tells us that in one of his letters to his spiritual guide he has included a quite bold and presumptuous quatrain, written, as he says, in a state of mystical ecstasy. In it he declares that on his mystical path there is no fundamental difference between belief and unbelief³⁰. None of the manuscripts and printed editions available to us, however, comprise such a letter. Y. Friedmann has argued that Sirhindī 'could never have written verses containing such rank heresy during a period in which he repeatedly affirmed the complete harmony between his spiritual experiences and the *sharī‘ah* and in which the whole tenor of his writing makes heretical ideas of this kind sound dissonant and unlikely'³¹. This interpretation is disputable in the opinion of the present writer, since it misjudges the character of the letters Sirhindī wrote to Muḥammad Bāqī bi'llāh and of the ideas he expressed in them. These are not the letters of an expert in Muslim theology and jurisprudence, they are the letters of a Sufi who considers orthodoxy and orthopraxy to be of the utmost importance for a mystic, but who, at the same time, clearly states that there are different levels of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The quatrain under consideration should not be labeled 'rank heresy' but should be classified under the category of the so-called

paradoxical or theopathic statements (*shatḥiyyāt*). Making such statements forms in the eyes of Sirhindī an integral part of the Sufi path. The evidence that Sirhindī could not have written this quatrain is therefore not convincing. Since none of the letters that have been preserved give the impression that a passage has been left out, we have to assume that the letter under consideration has not been preserved. But, in any case, the uniformity and consistency of all the manuscripts and printed editions available so far remains unimpaired.

We may conclude that the text of Sirhindī's collected letters has stood the wear and tear of time. Whatever dispute may have revolved around them, the text available at the time does not seem to have been questioned by either side. What at times made feelings run high is the interpretation thereof. The position of Sirhindī's defendants, mostly members of the Mujaddidī-Naqshbandī brotherhood, has been stated quite clearly by Nūr Aḥmad. Mystical experiences, given by God as they are, are in point of fact past expression. Whatever words the mystic uses to convey his experiences, they always fall short. Therefore, the intentions of the mystic are much more important than his words³². The fact that in the eyes of the Naqshbandī-Mujaddidī community the interpretation of Sirhindī's letters appears to have been much more important than the actual text, is perhaps, in a rather curious way, a kind of guarantee that this text has been handed down to us (a task largely performed by this community) in a quite careful and reliable way.

NOTES

¹ A short survey of this tradition is given by B.B. Lawrence in his foreword to P. Jackson (transl.), *Sharafuddin Maneri. The Hundred Letters*, New York 1980, pp. xv-xix.

² Besides this collection of letters the literary legacy of Sirhindī comprises seven rather small treatises (*rasā'il*). For biographical and bibliographical information on Aḥmad Sirhindī see e.g. Y. Friedmann, *Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī. An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity*, Montreal/London 1971, and S.A.A. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, vol. II, New Delhi 1983, pp. 196ff.

³ Internal evidence makes it probable that the letters were numbered according to the date they were written.

⁴ The number of those who fought alongside of the Prophet Muḥammad during the battle of Badr is according to some sources 314, cf. A. Guillaume (transl.), *The Life of the Prophet Muḥammad*, Karachi 1968, p. 336. Other counts exist as well, however. As for the number of the prophets see A.J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, Cambridge 1932, p. 267.

⁵ Muḥammad Hāshim Kishmī, *Zubdat al-Maqāmāt*, Cawnpore 1890, p. 241. For this biography see C.A. Storey, *Persian Literature*, vol. I pt. 2, London 1953, pp. 987-990.

⁶ A. Monzavi, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Persian and Arabic Manuscripts in Ketabkhane-i Ganjbakhsh*, vol. II (Islamabad 1979), p. 860. The possibility that older manuscripts, or even autographs, will be discovered cannot be

excluded. The existence of a photograph of one of Sirhindī's letters, written — according to a note — by 'his (own) blessed hand' (cf. Nizām al-Dīn Aḥmad Kāzemī (ed.), *Tarfāniyyāt-i Bāqī*, Delhi 1970) is a point in case.

⁷ A. Monzavi, *o.c.*, p. 821. This catalogue describes several other manuscripts from the 11-12th and from the 12-13th centuries containing one or more volumes of the collected letters of Sirhindī.

⁸ A.J. Arberry, *A Second Supplementary Hand-list of the Muhammedan Manuscripts in the University and Colleges of Cambridge*, Cambridge 1952, p. 18.

⁹ A.B.M. Habibullah, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Persian, Urdu and Arabic Manuscripts in the Dacca University Library*, vol. I, Dacca 1966, p. 293.

¹⁰ H. Ethé, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office*, vol. I, Oxford 1903, cols. 1050-1052.

¹¹ *Catalogue of the Arabic and Persian Manuscripts in the Oriental Public Library at Bankipore*, vol. XVI, Patna 1929, pp. 70-71.

¹² W. Ivanow, *Concise Descriptive Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts in the Collection of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Calcutta 1924, p. 610 (No. 1268).

¹³ A.J. Arberry, *Catalogue of the Library of the India Office*, vol. II, pt. VI, London 1937, p. 289.

¹⁴ Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: the Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, London 1975, pp. 107-108, 264 (note 382).

¹⁵ A.J. Arberry, *Catalogue of the Library of the India Office*, vol. II pt. VI, London 1937, p. 289, and C. Edwards, *A Catalogue of the Persian Printed Books in the British Museum*, London 1922, p. 83, mention the 1877 edition.

¹⁶ The first six fascicules were published by the Nūr Company. In the foreword of the first fascicules and at the end of the same fascicule the year 1384/1964-65 is mentioned. The last three fascicules were published by the *Maktaba-e Sa'īdiyāh* of Muḥammad Sa'īd Aḥmad Naqsh-bandī who at the end of the last fascicule gives the date Rabi' al-Awwal 1391 / April-May 1971.

¹⁷ An 18th-century manuscript of the second volume in the Oriental Public Library at Bankipore comprises, according to the catalogue, 121 letters, but a table of contents, occupying ff. 1b-5, enumerates only 99 letters' (*Catalogue of*

the Arabic and Persian Manuscripts in the Oriental Public Library at Bankipore, vol. XVI, Patna 1929, p. 71).

¹⁸ The two manuscripts in the library of the Iran-Pakistan Institute of Persian Studies containing the third volume are defective, cf. A. Monzavi, *o.c.*, p. 821.

¹⁹ A.B.M. Habibullah, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Persian, Urdu and Arabic Manuscripts in the Dacca University Library*, vol. I, Dacca 1966, p. 293.

²⁰ Muḥammad Hāshim Kishmī, *Zubdat al-Maqāmāt*, Cawnpore 1890, p. 234; Badr al-Dīn Sirhindī, *Ḥazarāt al-Quds*, Lahore 1971, p. 136. For the last-mentioned work, another biography of Aḥmad Sirhindī, see C.A. Storey, *Persian Literature*, vol. I, pt. 2, London 1953, pp. 1001-1002.

²¹ In the Lucknow edition of 1913 letter No. 121 has no addressee. In Nūr Aḥmad's edition the addressee is Ḥusām al-Dīn Aḥmad.

²² *Maktūbāt-i Imām-i Rabbānī*, (ed. Nūr Aḥmad), Lahore 1964-1971, p. 1584.

²³ Muḥammad Mūsā Amritsarī, *Sarguzasht-i Maktūbāt*, in: *Maktūbāt-i Imām-i Rabbānī*, (ed. Nūr Aḥmad), Lahore 1964-1971, p. 4.

²⁴ Nūr Aḥmad makes his statement in an announcement (*i'lān*) included at the end of each fascicule of his edition.

²⁵ An index of the names of the addressees and a summary of the contents of each letter is also to be found in the Lucknow edition of 1913.

²⁶ An extensive description of this controversy has been given by Y. Friedmann, *o.c.*, pp. 87 ff.

²⁷ Y. Friedmann, *o.c.*, pp. 99-100.

²⁸ *Maktūbāt-i Imām-i Rabbānī* (ed. Nūr Aḥmad), Lahore 1964-1971, vol. III, p. 1418 (letter No. 78).

²⁹ *Maktūbāt-i Imām-i Rabbānī* (ed. Nūr Aḥmad), Lahore 1964-1971, vol. III, p. 1435 (letter No. 83).

³⁰ *Maktūbāt-i Imām-i Rabbānī* (ed. Nūr Aḥmad), Lahore 1964-1971, vol. I, pp. 102 (letter No. 31) and 338-339 (letter No. 160).

³¹ Y. Friedmann, *o.c.*, p. 25.

³² Nūr Aḥmad makes this statement in a kind of Note to the Reader, included at the beginning of every fascicule of his edition.