




## Suhrawardī the Philosopher and the Reasons Behind His Death \*

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Research Article

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**Abstract:** Although the cause of Suhrawardī's death may have been his esoteric views, we can see that this was a political medium. Because the decision of Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī to execute Suhrawardī was political, especially because of the Crusades moving towards al-Quds at that time, where was taken by the Crusaders. There is a definite alliance upon that Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī ordered to kill Suhrawardī. Because the other issues Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī was dealing with prevented him from coming to Aleppo and examining this issue in detail. At the same time, Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī could not have time to discuss whether the decision to kill Suhrawardī for political reasons was a hasty one. Although the cause of Suhrawardī's death may have been his esoteric views, we can see that this was a political medium. As a result, the decision of Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī to execute Suhrawardī has based on political reasons. Some matters were mentioned in Suhrawardī's death fatwā, especially his suggestion of disbelief to the people and his disorderly conduct of al-Malik al-Zāhir were cited as the cause of death.

**Keywords:** Suhrawardī, Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī, esotericism, death fatwā, execution.

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## Introduction

Although it is said that Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī sometimes creates antipathy towards philosophers, this discrimination does not seem to be reflected in the field of the kalam. The establishment of several Muslim theological schools (madrasa) at that time, not only the Sunni madrasas but also Shiite madrasas in the activity, it is important to show that the exchange of information between Sunnis and Shiites. Here, Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī has an important initiative: Making Sunnism a state policy was a work done before, and during this period, the Shāfi‘ī-Ash‘arī belief theory of al-Ghazālī continued.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the years of the Ayyubids, there was a controversy between philosophers and religious scholars over the murder of Suhrawardī. We can see that this relationship between philosophers and theologians has become a matter of political interest.

Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl was born in north-west Iran,<sup>2</sup> found in various regions, traveled to many parts of Anatolia, then traveled to Konya, and eventually moved to Aleppo (Ḥalab). We can see in the sources that Suhrawardī was a Shāfi‘ī-Ash‘arī,<sup>3</sup> but we do not know this apparently. It is not very meaningful to say that philosophers are committed to any denomination in general, but they are known to have been brought up on Ash‘arism. All the cities he visited are the regions where the Shāfi‘ī-Ash‘arī belief is located. Especially in Konya, we see that he was given great care by al-Malik al-Zāhir, the son of Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī, during the Ayyubids period.<sup>4</sup> This has made the Muslim scholars (al-‘ulamā’)

<sup>1</sup> Roxanne D. Marcotte, “Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl, the Martyr of Aleppo,” *Al-Qantara: Revista de Estudios Arabes* 22, no. 1 (2001), 404-6.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (London and New York: Kegan Paul, 1993), 205.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-Āyān wa Anbā’ Abnā’ az-Zamān*, ed. İhsān ‘Abbās (Beirut: Dār Şādir, 1977), VI, 272; al-Asnawī, *Ṭabaqāt ash-Shāfi‘īyya*, ed. Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1987), II, 242; al-Şafadī, *al-Wāfi bi al-Wafayāt*, ed. Aḥmad al-Arnāwūt and Turkī Muştafā (Beirut: Dār İhyā’ at-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2000), II, 236.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Abī Uşaybi’a, *‘Uyūn al-Anbā’ fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā’*, ed. Nizār Riḍā (Beirut: Dār Maktaba al-Ḥayāt, 1965), 642.

uneasy because we can see that when the scholars decides to execute Suhrawardī, the statements in the explanation of the decision as to why he was executed do not actually reveal the truth. Because, as we said at the beginning, political debates are the most important factor that caused Suhrawardī's death. Of course, his philosophical and esoteric (bāṭinī) views, which are related to Sufism, were also influential in this. We can say that Suhrawardī, who will be killed for a political reason, was given a legal opinion (fatwā) for his death by spreading his esoteric and perverse views.<sup>5</sup>

### **Suhrawardī's Death Execution**

Therefore, although the cause of Suhrawardī's death may have been his esoteric views, we can clearly see that this was a political medium. Because we can see that the decision of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī to execute Suhrawardī was political, especially because of the border discussions between the Seljuks and the Ayyubids at that time, their battles with each other in places, their attempts to eliminate the pressures of the Abbasid Caliphate with a maneuver while declaring their allegiance to the Abbasids, and their relations with the Fatimids, the Crusades at that time were moving towards Jerusalem (al-Quds) in a big way and al-Quds was taken by the Crusaders. There is a definite alliance upon that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī ordered to kill Suhrawardī. Because the other issues Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī was dealing with prevented him from coming to Aleppo and examining this issue in detail. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī could not have time to discuss whether the decision to kill Suhrawardī for political reasons was a hasty one. At that time Suhrawardī was described as a Seljuk agent, because we understand from some works that al-Malik al-Ẓāhir was appointed as a close advisor and that the scholars around al-Malik al-Ẓāhir was excluded after the arrival

<sup>5</sup> Carl Brockelmann, *Gesichte der Arabischen Litteratur* (Weimar: Verlag von Emil Ferber, 1898), I, 437; Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *'Uyūn al-Anbā' fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā'*, 642.

of Suhrawardī, so there was jealousy in the scholars.<sup>6</sup> The fact that a philosopher who was seen as a Seljuk agent at the same time opened a door to the esoteric thought against Sunni, especially the Sunni formed by al-Ghazālī, caused the formation of a philosophical and religious basis for his murder.

Besides, Suhrawardī is a rough man who has become famous for his output and is someone who does not know the science of politics. It is said that his teacher al-Mārdinī warned him and said, “They will not keep this man alive very long.”<sup>7</sup> He was given great freedom in Anatolia, especially in Konya, where he took great care and even taught the children of the Sultan. As an indication of this, it is normal for him to be described as a Seljuk agent when he arrived in Aleppo because the majority of the cities he traveled to places under the Seljuk rule. It is also said that Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī since espionage were famous at the time, avoided being distracted by such espionage and esoteric thoughts at a time when he was dealing with the Crusaders and made this decision. In fact, al-Malik al-Zāhir did not immediately implement this decision. The scholars sent such a fatwā to Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī, but his son al-Malik al-Zāhir did not apply it, despite the order of Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī. Therefore, Şalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī sent word to his son to apply this punishment, otherwise, he would punish both. So Suhrawardī suggested to al-Malik al-Zāhir, saying, “Condemn me to hunger because you do not want to follow this fatwā, so that I may starve, and you will not be in this sin.”<sup>8</sup> Although there are rumors that he was thrown from the castle and killed, it is generally thought that Suhrawardī probably starved to death while in prison.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Hossein Ziai, “Al-Suhrawardī,” *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, eds. Clifford Edmund Bosworth and Others (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), IX, 782.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Shahrazūrī, *Nuzhat al-Arwāḥ wa Rawḍat al-Afrāḥ*, ed. Eşref Altaş (Istanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2015), 875.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-Udabāʾ: Irshād al-Arib ilā Maʿrifat al-Adīb*, ed. İhsān ‘Abbās (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993), VI, 2807.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Ziriklī, *al-Aʿlām: Qāmūs Tarājim Ashhur ar-Rijāl wa an-Nisāʾ* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm al-Malāyīn, 2002), VIII, 140; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-Ayān wa Anbāʾ Abnāʾ az-Zamān*, VI, 273; Ibn Abī Uşaybiʿa, *Uyūn al-Anbāʾ fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aʿtibāʾ*,

It is required to mention some of the beliefs that led the scholars to take this fatwā against Suhrawardī, who was killed for political reasons, and also the arguments between Suhrawardī as a philosopher and the law scholars (fuqahā') representing the religion.<sup>10</sup> Some matters were mentioned in Suhrawardī's death fatwā, especially his suggestion of disbelief to the people and his disorderly conduct of al-Malik al-Zāhir were cited as the cause of death.<sup>11</sup> We know that there were spies in Aleppo, a city that Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī cared about. There is a danger of Crusades at the time, but Aleppo is not fully Muslim, that is, there are people from different religions and sects. It is hard not to think that Suhrawardī's putting esotericism in the minds of the people in Aleppo would disrupt Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī's idea of establishing Islamic unity through Sunni thought. It is also said that Suhrawardī has Ismā'īlī and esoteric ideas, but this is an accusation attributed to all philosophers from time to time. Because, of course, there are places in Iran where Ismā'īlism is active, but not all of Iran was Shiite at the time, and Sunnism prevailed in certain areas.<sup>12</sup> People in these Sunni areas have also been accused of being Ismā'īlī and esoteric from time to time because of their different opinions. As a result of al-Ghazālī's work against esotericism,<sup>13</sup> we know that those who belong to these ideas, especially the Neo-Platonist philosophers or Sufis, are constantly under surveillance and subjected to oppression by statesmen for their alleged involvement in esoteric thought.

### **The Claim of Disbelief about Suhrawardī**

Otherwise, it is rumored that Suhrawardī belonged to the Mazdaism or Zoroastrian religion. Suhrawardī stated at the be-

644; al-Shahrazūrī, *Nuzhat al-Arwāḥ wa Rawḍat al-Afrāḥ*, 873.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Sīyar Alām an-Nubalā'*, ed. Bashshār 'Awwād Ma'rūf and Muḥyī Hilāl as-Sarḥān (Beirut: Muassasa ar-Risāla, 1984), XXI, 210.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-Udabā':Irshād al-Arib ilā Ma'rifa al-Adīb*, VI, 2807.

<sup>12</sup> Marcotte, "Suhrawardī al-Maqtūl, the Martyr of Aleppo," 405.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Faḍāih al-Bāṭiniyya*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī (Cairo: Dār al-Qawmiyya, 1964).

ginning of his work *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* that he was not a member of the old Zoroastrian religion, but rather a member of Islam.<sup>14</sup> It is necessary to mention that Suhrawardī was a Zoroastrian. Suhrawardī's idea of the light (nūr) describes the Light of lights (Nūr al-anwār) and other lights that open from it.<sup>15</sup> His philosophy based on the conflict of two opposing entities, the light (nūr) on the one hand and the darkness (ẓulumāt) on the other, may have led people to believe that Suhrawardī was a Zoroastrian. The fact that he opposes God and devil, the Light and the dark, as in Zoroastrianism, reinforces the possibility that he is a Zoroastrian in the eyes of people.<sup>16</sup> Even though he said he did not have such an opinion, the scholars, citing some of his thoughts, accused him of many superficial statements. We can assume that he was influenced by the ancient Persian religion, so that is a possibility. However, even if people are influenced by their own ancient culture, they can continue to do some extent. In my opinion, Suhrawardī took certain concepts from Zoroastrianism, but since he had a Platonist understanding, we can see that he adapted Plato's concepts of the sun and the darkness here. We can assume that he also acted from the expressions of light and darkness in the Qur'an, in fact he attempted to create a Qur'anic epistemology, by combining ancient cultures with the concepts of light and darkness in the Qur'an. Because in Plato's allegory of the cave, light represents the idea of good, namely knowledge and reality, as well as darkness represents evil, namely ignorance and the world of phenomena that are matter, we can see that Suhrawardī attributes the relationship between good and evil, namely knowledge and ignorance, to the relationship between light and darkness.

Whether Suhrawardī was a philosopher or a Sufi is a debate.

<sup>14</sup> Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, ed. Henry Corbin, *Majmū'a-yi Musannafāt-i Shaykh-i Ishrāq* (Tehran: Pajūgāh-i 'Ulūm-i Insānī wa Mutāla'āt-i Farhangī, 2001), II, 10-1.

<sup>15</sup> Suhrawardī, *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq*, 171-2.

<sup>16</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia*, ed. Mehdi Amin Razavi (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 138.

There are two Suhrawardī, both named after Shahāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī. We know that the works of the philosopher Suhrawardī and the Sufi Suhrawardī are sometimes confused and some of the works of Sufi Suhrawardī are thought to be the works of the philosopher Suhrawardī. Although their works are intermingled, we can see that the philosopher Suhrawardī was influenced by Sufi things and illuminationist (ishrāqī) thought in some places. We can say that the illuminationist idea here, the concept of light, is inspired by Plato's idea of Good. However, this does not mean that Suhrawardī was a mere Platonist and just acted from the idea of Good. He is also a representative of the Peripatetic (Mashshāī) school. Although he has criticized Avicenna, we see that he expressed such that as an extension of the idea of Eastern philosophy.<sup>17</sup>

### **Conclusion: Illuminationism as Platonism**

Because of his views on the theory of prophethood, Suhrawardī is thought to have strengthened the scholars' hand. During a discussion, it is also narrated that al-Malik al-Zāhir said, "Since you are against Suhrawardī, then let's prepare a discussion and put forward your ideas in this discussion." Suhrawardī seems to have given proper answers to the scholars' questions. However, we can say that he gave a deficit in one question: "Is prophethood continuous or not continuous, and will the prophet come after this?" Because the esoteric idea of prophethood was common at that time. According to Suhrawardī, although there will be no prophet after this, he has been asked such questions because he stated that some Sufis got a revelation (waḥy) from God in an esoteric way. Suhrawardī said in his reply that this might be possible. There is a discussion on the concepts of possibility and necessity. He stated that this was possible on a rational

<sup>17</sup> John Walbridge, *The Wisdom of the Mystic East: Suhrawardī and Platonic Orientalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). For the criticism of Avicenna's refutation the Platonic ideas, see Tahir Uluç, "Al-Suhrawardī's Critique of Ibn Sīnā's Refutation of the Platonic Forms," *Ilahiyat Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012), 8 ff.

basis as “God can send a prophet after this if he wants” because the power of God cannot be limited. However, since the scholars drew this from rational to action-based, they claimed that Suhrawardī implied that the prophet might come and that he was obsessed with the esoteric idea and was in a state of perversion. As a result of all this, we see that Suhrawardī was executed because of some beliefs and philosophical views.<sup>18</sup>

As to talk about the purging of the soul, there is the question of purifying the soul and being submerged at the basis of Sufism or illuminationism. In the theological thought, this was a superstition. There is an antipathy towards esotericism among scholars in the Sunni world as the issue of esoteric prophethood arose at that time. But we see that the situation here is derived from a kind of Pythagorean thought of purification of the soul and its influence on Platonism. It is also possible to say the influence of Aristotelian theories on Suhrawardī.

Also belonging to a Pythagorean tradition, Suhrawardī took certain things from Pythagoreanism, which had influenced Platonism in particular. It was here that the political thought in Pythagoreanism could also occur in Suhrawardī. Because of the idea that politically enlightened people should eventually take over, and therefore society could be enlightened in this way, passed from Pythagoras to Plato in the form of a “philosopher-king”. So, we know that the idea that rational philosophers should rule the state forms the basis of Plato’s idea of the state. The fact that both ideas were among Suhrawardī’s sources may also have led him to be accused of this.

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<sup>18</sup> Muḥammad ‘Alī Abū Rayyān, *Uṣūl al-Falsafa al-Ishrāqīyya* (Beirut: Dār aṭ-Ṭalaba al-‘Arab, 1969), 25-6.



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