

SOCIOLOGISTS AND SUFIS: A REASSESSMENT OF SAINTHOOD IN EARLY SUFISM  
IN LIGHT OF NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN SOCIOLOGY

by

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(Under the Direction of Alan Godlas)

ABSTRACT

Western sociologists have often viewed Sufi saints and Islamic mysticism in general through lenses that obscure the vibrant and multi-faceted sociological role long played by Sufi saints in Islamic societies. The reasons for this are many, complex, and open to debate, some responsibility must be assigned to the great Max Weber (d. 1920) and his disciples, especially Ernest Gellner (d. 1995 CE) and Clifford Geertz (d. 2006 CE), whose ideas have despite the best of intentions often reinforced important misconceptions. A review of the core tenets of Sufism on sainthood through the prism of the great medieval mystics Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 910 CE) and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1320 CE) reveals stark limitations to Weberian categories vis-à-vis Islamic mysticism. Such an analysis highlights the need for more holistic and less implicitly Eurocentric approaches to sociological studies of Islam and Sufism.

INDEX WORDS: Sufism, Islam, Sainthood, Sanctity, Saints, Walī, Awlīyā‘, Abdāl, Maraboutism, Mystics, Mysticism, Ibn ‘Arabī, Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, Seal of Saints, Prophetic Inheritance, Sociology of Religion, Sociology of Islam, Sociology of Sufism, Muslims, Max Weber, Ernest Gellner, Clifford Geertz, Protestant Work Ethic, Orientalism, Eurocentrism

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## DEDICATION

*In the name of God, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful.*

To the men and women, past and present, who inspire us to become complete human beings, and to my Raihana, who was born only a few months before all this began.

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## INTRODUCTION

“[Saints] excite only the contempt and pity of a philosopher.... Extravagant tales [concerning them]...have seriously affected the reason, the faith, and the morals of the Christians. Their credulity debased and vitiated the faculties of the mind: they corrupted the evidence of history; and superstition gradually extinguished the hostile light of philosophy and science. Every mode of religious worship which had been practised by the saints, every mysterious doctrine they believed, was fortified by the sanction of divine revelation, and all the manly virtues were oppressed by the service and pusillanimous reign of the monks.”

Edward Gibbon on medieval Christianity<sup>1</sup>

“One suspects that the author of this last comment has let his imagination and his rhetoric, not to say his prejudices, roam at will, untethered from sources or facts. It represents only passing acquaintance with early Christian literature and little knowledge of the dialogue between Christianity and Greek and Roman thinkers that lasted for six centuries.”

Historian Robert Louis Wilken in response to Gibbon<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Dutton, 1925) 543.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (2003) 163-164.

## CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS SAINTHOOD?

### Past and present attitudes toward saints

During the modern era, Sufism (that is, Islamic mysticism<sup>3</sup>) and the concept of sainthood that stands at its core have frequently been the object of grave misunderstandings, withering skepticism, and in some cases outright scorn. During modern times, a rarely noticed anti-mystical sensibility whose adherents cut across scholarly disciplines, ideological commitments and confessional lines has treated Sufi ideals of sainthood as deviation inimical to true faith—be that faith in the rather “Protestant” God of the Muslim modernists, or contemporary notions of reason and progress that Western orientalist often have held sacred—during modern times, and have thus been united in questioning the legitimacy of Sufism, often casting its attachment to holy men as an archaic holdover from the benighted, premodern past.<sup>4</sup>

Social scientists have by and large been no less prone to such dismissive—and, we will see, mistaken—presuppositions regarding the place of Sufism and saints in Islam. This fact has been exacerbated by a recurring pattern of scholarly neglect that entrenches inherited opinion and stifles new thinking concerning Sufism; over the last 2 centuries as Western powers examined the religious traditions of the (in many cases, Muslim-majority) cultures of

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<sup>3</sup> The two terms are used interchangeably here.

<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the rather pointed observations mentioned above by famed 18th century English historian Edward Gibbon describe attitudes towards Muslim saints, in his day as well as ours. Likewise, Wilken’s criticisms of the same could be applied to much Western commentary on Sufism, substituting *shari’ah*-observant Islamic Orthodoxy for Greco-Roman culture.

Africa, the Levant and Asia that came under European influence with Colonialism, Sufism was often given scant consideration by scholars who assumed it to be a debased “popular” form of Islam lacking historical roots or global relevance. For all the epistemic ruptures, postmodern turns, repudiations of Colonialism and Orientalism, and even rejections of the Enlightenment heritage, the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw marked philosophical continuity on this matter—among Muslims and non-Muslims alike—with many of these 19<sup>th</sup> Century attitudes remaining operative in superficially modified form well into the present.

At the same time, great strides have been made over the last few decades in the disciplines of history and religious studies that move the scholarly community much closer to a historically informed and holistic grasp of the challenging complexities of the veneration<sup>5</sup> of holy men and women that has characterized Muslim culture almost since the dawn of Islam. Thus, Sufism has begun to receive new, far more nuanced, attention. To some extent in parallel with these developments, the social sciences have begun to reassess many of the tacit assumptions and questionable methodological choices that have consistently impaired analyses of Sufism and Islamic sainthood.

These are highly salutary developments in my estimation, but much work will need to be done for these very welcome trends to yield fruit widely. Serious conceptual impasses and factual pitfalls remain widely current in the field of Sociology of Religion. It is my contention

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the phrase “saint worship” is semantically misleading, since in all but the most extreme of cases saints are the object of *petitions* rather than worship per se. Ultimately, this turn of phrase is more a partisan label than an objective description of saint veneration and, thus, biases the discussion from the outset. That it is so widespread in scholarly writings betokens, I believe, a widespread unconscious epistemological bias in modern Western intellectual life against Sufism and mysticism in general.

that for the discipline to transcend these longstanding handicaps and philosophical blinders, new theoretical approaches and fresh evaluations of the historical record are required.

This thesis attempts the following, albeit in an inevitably cursory manner: to highlight the essential assumptions informing many classic sociological studies of Islam and/or Sufism; to assess these assumptions' grounding in historical fact; to provide a short overview of core classical Sufi doctrines relevant to sociology; and, finally, to present examples of approaches that avoid the pitfalls under discussion and call attention to some neglected sociological dimensions of Sufi beliefs.

To assess the findings of sociology, I sketch out a high-level overview of sainthood as it is found across the Abrahamic traditions, paying of course special attention to Islamic beliefs; I critically examine the ideas of several influential sociological theorists—the founding father Max Weber (d. 1920) and his two most notable disciples, Ernest Gellner (d. 1995) and Clifford Geertz (d. 2006)—whose conceptual frameworks and terminology continue have a direct impact on discussions of Sufism today. This done, I then proceed to summarize the influential ideas of the great early Islamic mystic theologians Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 905-910 CE<sup>6</sup>) and Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), who are by far the most important contributors to the vision of sainthood that dominates the Islamic imagination to this day. Once this groundwork has been laid, I attempt to distill some new, inter-disciplinary insights out of the convergence of these two literatures.

#### What is sainthood ?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary provides the following definition for the saint:

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<sup>6</sup> All dates are in the Common Era unless otherwise noted.

- 1: one officially recognized especially through canonization as preeminent for holiness
- 2 **a**: one of the spirits of the departed in heaven **b**: ANGEL 1a
- 3 **a**: one of God's chosen and usually Christian people **b** *capitalized*: a member of any of various Christian bodies; specifically: latter-day saint
- 4: one eminent for piety or virtue
- 5: an illustrious predecessor<sup>7</sup>

While all of these definitions are relevant in various respects, it is definition 3a—minus the customary Christian-oriented theological framework, of course—that is most fruitful one for the topic at hand, since this topic preeminently concerns the relationship of highly spiritual men and women with God and all that their *closeness* to him<sup>8</sup> entails in the social sphere.

However, the most theologically important—not to mention intellectually challenging and often politically sensitive—aspect of sainthood for these purposes is left completely unstated in this otherwise able definition: The crux of sainthood as employed in this paper are the notions of *intercession* (or mediation) with God and the reintroduction of mystery and the sacred into an otherwise thoroughly “disenchanted” world by these figures.<sup>9</sup>

### **Sainthood in Christianity and Judaism**

The notion of intercession is to be found across the spectrum of monotheistic traditions, even if there the notion is not universally accepted in any of them and if each religion approaches it in its own way. In the case of Catholicism, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1910 explains, “In ecclesiastical usage both words are taken in the sense of the intervention primarily of Christ, and secondarily of the Blessed Virgin and the angels and saints, on behalf

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<sup>7</sup> “Saint.” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, (2008). 4 April. 2008 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com>>.

<sup>8</sup> I have no theological or ideological objections to the use of the female pronoun for the Divine—who is by definition beyond gender and whose attributes and relation to Creation are no less “maternal” than “paternal”—but I prefer the male pronoun, mainly for reasons of literary resonance.

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion below of Weber for an explanation of his use of “disenchantment.”

of men”<sup>10</sup> Orthodox Christians have a very similar view, directing yet more adoration towards Mary as the *Theokotos* or “Bearer of God.”

The picture is quite different in the world of Protestantism, however, where it must be said that the saints have fared rather poorly<sup>11</sup> since the Reformation four centuries ago. Against the more individualistic and mechanistic cosmology of most Protestant denominations today,<sup>12</sup> a saint-centered worldview appears quite alien, “unscriptural” and “irrational.”

In a number of respects, the case of Judaism is the inverse of that of Christianity concerning mysticism and saintly intercession. Whereas saint veneration appears to have been near-ubiquitous and consistently deemed normative in premodern, pre-Reformation Christianity, mysticism based on saintly intercession did not emerge in a potentially normative form within *Jewish* culture<sup>13</sup> until modern times. Moreover, mysticism faces formidable doctrinal barriers since—as Cohn demonstrates in great and fascinating detail—classical, Rabbinical

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Scannell, “Intercession (Mediation),” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 8. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910) 4 April 2008 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08070a.htm>>. The doctrine was explicitly reaffirmed only a generation ago during Vatican II, as well (John Stratton Hawley, ed., *Saints and Virtues*, Vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) xii).

<sup>11</sup> Mecklin discusses the disastrous consequences of the Protestant Reformation for sainthood in Christendom. For a few generations, a measured form of respect (*sans* veneration) for saints remained based on their being ethical exemplars, but even this soon withered away against the Protestant spirit of individualism. Mecklin compares the once universal beliefs in and attachments to saints to dry bones of long-since extinct dinosaurs baking in the sun (“The Passing of the Saint,” *The American Journal of Sociology* LX.6 (1955): 34-53).

<sup>12</sup> “High Church” (i.e., Catholic-influenced) Anglicans are an intriguing but ambiguous exception, as they affirm a role for saints in personal devotions with the proviso that this reverence to saints—Mary included—may not replace the adoration of Jesus Christ. “Low Church” Anglicans, to the contrary, do not differ significantly from other Protestants concerning saints.

<sup>13</sup> Sephardic Jews in the Middle East and especially Morocco, it must be conceded, had revered saints for centuries before the emergence of Hasidism far to the north, sometimes even sharing holy men with their Muslim neighbors (for example, Ben-Ami documents 126 shared saints in contemporary Morocco). See Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Issachar Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration among the Jews in Morocco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998) and Robert L. Cohn, “Sainthood on the Periphery: The Case of Judaism.” Hawley.

Judaism is remarkably inhospitable soil for the models of sainthood shared to a great extent by Islam and Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Cohn's arguments are numerous, but many center around Judaism's strong sense of collectivism, which robs even the most revered of Jewish holy men a salvific role.

The correlation between the Jewish emphasis on nationhood and the dearth of saint veneration emerges most clearly in the two matchless indices to Jewish piety, the calendar and the prayerbook (*Siddur*). The main festivals of Judaism commemorate national events: the exodus, the giving of Torah, the wilderness wandering. Even minor holidays such as Purim and Hanukkah though they involve the praise of individuals, celebrate national salvation. [...] Similarly, the *Siddur* devotes no petitions to individuals and recalls no individual lives. Even [...] the martyrs of Judaism [...] are remembered] as a group rather than as individual saints. [...] [W]hen the individual Jew seeks atonement, he or she does so as part of a group—and directly, without saintly mediation.<sup>15</sup>

Against the backdrop of Islam and Christianity, it is quite telling that even Judaism's greatest martyrs, who continue to be honored in Jewish liturgy to this day—the Christian counterparts of whom served as the locus of Christian piety for centuries—are accorded an honored but fairly circumscribed role in sacred history.

Nonetheless, full-blown saint-based mysticism did eventually burst onto the scene of Jewish tradition in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the form of Hasidism.<sup>16</sup> Like Cohn, Idel cautions against drawing too many parallels, writing that (unlike in the case of Sufism) Hasidic expressions of ecstatic union with God “intense as they might have been...[should be]... understood as part of

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<sup>14</sup> Cohn, “Sainthood on the Periphery” 88-89.

<sup>15</sup> Cohn, “Sainthood on the Periphery” 90.

<sup>16</sup> Whose Chabad-Lubavitch branch today enjoys religious, political and cultural influence far in excess of its numbers, and not merely within the Jewish community. This group, Hasidism's most prominent modern representative, is seen by some in the Jewish community as the vanguard of Jewish spiritual renewal in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

a broader picture of the communal role of the *Zaddiq*<sup>17</sup> This is an interesting caveat that highlights theological differences that shouldn't be overlooked, but so many underlying values,<sup>18</sup> practices, discursive tropes and attitudes towards saints<sup>19</sup> are shared by Chassidism and Sufism that cross-cutting observations seem justified to this writer. The matter remains subject to heated dispute to this day, but the doctrine that the *tsaddikim*<sup>20</sup> intercede<sup>21</sup> with Hashem<sup>22</sup> is forcefully put forward by prominent segments of the Orthodox world, especially the Hasidism.

The idea of sacralizing the material world has strong support with the Abrahamic traditions. The fact that Rabbinic Judaism decentralized Jewish communal worship to

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<sup>17</sup> Mosheh Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1995) 223. *Zaddiq* (or *tsaddik*) is a Hebrew term for a righteous person or holy man.

<sup>18</sup> From the outset Hasidic discourse and spirituality has long been strikingly similar in tone and substance to Sufism. Bahya Ibn Pakuda (11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> centuries)'s *Duties of the Heart*, a medieval work of ethics still reverently invoked today by Orthodox and Hasidic Jews, drew heavily from Sufi writings, to the extent of reproducing *ahadith* almost verbatim, and this was not the only case of medieval Jewish spirituality drawing heavily from Sufi sources. Paul Fenton, "Judaism and Sufism," *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Frank and Oliver Leaman (Cambridge University Press, 2003) 204-206.

<sup>19</sup> Hasidic Judaism even posits a saintly institution strikingly akin to that of the *Diwan al-Awliya* (see below) in Sufism, known as the *Lamedvovniks*: "One of thirty-six righteous men who, according to legend, live in every generation and in whose merit the world continues to exist.... From the Yiddish, coined from *lamed-vov*, two letters of the Hebrew alphabet numerically equivalent to 'thirty-six' + the agent suffix *-nik*" (Sol Steinmetz, *The Dictionary of Jewish Usage: A Popular Guide to the use of Jewish Terms* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 2002) 61; emphasis added).

<sup>20</sup> Plural for *tsaddik*.

<sup>21</sup> This intercession occurs in this life, however. Unlike either Islam or Christianity, Hasidism' lacks a notion of *posthumous* veneration for saints, though this does not prevent tombs from being the site of pilgrimages. Also, this doctrinal distinction became blurred somewhat in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the Lubavitchers, some are accused by some other Orthodox Jews of violating this traditional Jewish prohibition by speaking of a continuing presence in the world of their deceased leader Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson (d. 1994). See David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London; Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> A Jewish title for God, meaning "the Name."

innumerable local community temples after the loss of the Temple in 70 C.E. is well known among scholars, but there is much less awareness of the parallel transition within Jewish tradition from geographically-based sanctity to holy man-based sanctity, even if it remains circumscribed per Cohn's caveats. Green makes a point about sanctity that applies abundantly to Islam and non-Protestant varieties of Christianity. With the the loss of direct access to the sacred through temple sacrifices, Jews

of necessity...[had to develop] various means of more ready access to the sacrality which its great shrine had once provided....One of the ways in which this was provided was by a transference of *axis mundi*<sup>23</sup> symbolism from a particular place to a particular person: the *zaddiq* or holy man as the center of the world.<sup>24</sup>

#### Saints in general

While neither Christianity or Islam have experienced a comparably catastrophic disruption to their religio-communal existence as that visited on 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews with the loss of the Second Temple,<sup>25</sup> Judaism's sister religions nonetheless also employ holy men as instruments of communion and sanctification, and often far more. Until the modern period, saints were in one form or another focal points of Christian and Muslim and (in more complex ways) Jewish moral life and social solidarity.

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<sup>23</sup> The *axis mundi* is a cosmological principle of Shamanic religion, a pole around which the world revolves and which connects the higher realm of the spirit to the material world. Eliade argued that the *axis mundi* was an essential aspect of traditional pre-monotheistic religion, providing early human both a means of remaining psychologically rooted in a sense of the sacred even as they moved about the profane world. Such sacred poles were portable—not unlike the Ark of the Covenant of the ancient Israelites—and mutually inclusive (meaning that each tribe did not consider all other tribal poles illegitimate (Dallen J. Timothy and Daniel H. Olsen, *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006) 31). The parallels with saint-based mysticism are unmistakable—Sufism even identifies its greatest saint as “the Pole.” See Daniel Pals, “Reductionism and Belief: An Appraisal of Recent Attacks on the Doctrine of Irreducible Religion,” *The Journal of Religion* 66.1 (1986): 18-36 for an extended discussion of Eliade.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Green, “The *Zaddiq* as *Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45.3 (1977): 329.

<sup>25</sup> I would contend that the dismantlement of the Islamic legal system during the Colonial era achieved a somewhat analogous calamity for Muslim religious life in the modern period.

While the term saint has roots in the Christian religious experience, today it is widely “used [by scholars of religion] to recognize individuals deemed to have lived lives of heroic virtue.”<sup>26</sup> Saints are paragons of moral perfection that serve as models and inspiration for others, unique individuals whose holiness confers on them “supernatural powers that devotees may call on in their own spiritual quests.”<sup>27</sup> While living saints can enjoy enormous influence in society, where it most visibly departs from other paradigms of religious leadership is in how sainthood is most often “a posthumous phenomenon.”<sup>28</sup>

Some scholars (such as Turner) consider the philosophical differences separating Jewish, Christian and Muslim conceptions of sanctity so great they deem overarching analyses futile, but I disagree. Like Cornell—who takes Turner to task for exaggerating the differences between Christian and Muslim saints—I find striking and essential parallels within the Abrahamic Tradition uniting the archetypes of the monotheistic traditions to justify resort to this abstract concept.<sup>29</sup>

Though it is the eldest of the Western monotheistic triad, Judaism’s tradition of saint-based mysticism—as opposed to more individualistic forms of mysticism, such as Kabbalah or Merkava—is the youngest, coming into being, as has been noted, with the emergence of

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<sup>26</sup> Robert L. Cohn, “Sainthood,” *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005) 8033.

<sup>27</sup> Cohn, “Sainthood” 8033

<sup>28</sup> Cohn, “Sainthood” 8033

<sup>29</sup> It should be noted, though, that there was considerably more continuity between pagan holy men of antiquity and those of early Christianity than is generally acknowledged and even other non-Western non-monotheistic religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism all have elaborate hierarchies of saints. See H. J. W. Drijvers, “The Saint as Symbol: Conceptions of the Person in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity,” *Concepts of Person in Religion and Thought*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg, Y. Kuiper, and Andy F. Sanders (Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990) on late antiquity, and Cohn, “Sainthood” on sainthood in non-monotheistic traditions. Sainthood in many of these senses is not an exclusively monotheistic phenomenon.

Hasidism only two centuries ago. Judaism has a rich mystical tradition, but it is an exceedingly unruly one composed of systems “so variant among themselves that no common characteristic marks them all,” much less links them to other religious traditions.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, modern Hasidic Judaism is strikingly similar to Sufism in how it approaches saints.<sup>31</sup>

There are notable differences.<sup>32</sup> For example, the leadership of early Hasidic mysticism did not spring from 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish society’s “higher social strata and leading intellectuals,” and one of its central goals of Hasidism was to help “lower social groups to actively participate and achieve a high position in Jewish religious practice.”<sup>33</sup> In contrast, early Sufi saints were often (though not always) elite, formally trained scholars, and normative Sufism has to my knowledge rarely if ever exhibited opposition to hierarchy based on either scholarly accomplishment or perceived sanctity. To the contrary, Sufis generally posit (and consider inescapable) a fundamental, natural divide between a mystically-inclined spiritual

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<sup>30</sup> The author continues on the “irreducible diversity” of Jewish mysticism, saying Gershom Scholem: “The closest he comes to a general characteristic is...[to] draw...attention to the persistent presence of eschatological traits in Jewish mysticism” (Louis Dupré, “Mysticism [First Edition].” Jones, *Encyclopedia of Religion* 6352). Islamic mysticism comes in various of forms and has its share of serious philosophical disagreements, but a similar observation would be impossible concerning Sufism.

<sup>31</sup> Green notes that 20<sup>th</sup> century studies of Judaism have tended to seriously underestimate the place of holy men in pre-modern Judaism (including even the pre-Hasidic Kabbalah era). The author clearly considers this at least partly due to the advent of political Zionism and its focus on concrete ties between Jews and the physical land of Israel, at the expense of other types of spiritual expression (327-47).

<sup>32</sup> One particularly striking, and saddening, difference concerns the imagined politico-social role of Jewish saints; whereas Muslim and Christian saints tend to simply operate as wonderworkers and symbols of virtue in hagiographical accounts, “the significance of the saint among Jews was related to Jewish lack of power; protection from the dangers of non-Jews was one of the major themes of the legends and tales of Jewish saints” (Stephen Sharot, *A Comparative Sociology of World Religions: Virtuosos, Priests, and Popular Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) 207).

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Dan, “Hasidism: An Overview.” Jones, *Encyclopedia of Religion* 3785.

elite (the *Khās*) and the Muslim masses (the *Awām*).<sup>34</sup> Early Hasidism, with its emphasis on the individual believer's emotional engagement in religious life and concomitant de-emphasis of traditional Torah study, was decidedly more populist-oriented—and ultimately destabilizing for the privileges of established religious institutions and scholarly classes—than Sufism ever has been. Perhaps, the most important difference is the absence of a Jewish analogue to Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), the great mystic theologian who was instrumental in legitimizing mainstream forms of Sufism in the eyes of the Sunni religious establishment.<sup>35</sup>

For Christianity's part, throughout ancient and medieval Christianity and even in a wide swath of Christendom today (i.e., Catholics, the Greek Orthodox and Catholic-influenced Anglicans) deep veneration is directed toward saints. Aside from underlying principles of epistemology and religious authority dividing Muslims from Protestants,<sup>36</sup> the most notable differences between Christian saints and their Muslim colleagues are the relative absence of saints from organized religious life in Christianity,<sup>37</sup> and the fact that the Catholic Church's

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<sup>34</sup> Though it must be kept in mind that Hasidism developed in modern times and, thus, might be expected to depart from a traditional religious worldview.

<sup>35</sup> Mustansir Mir, "Kabbalah and Sufism: a comparative look at Jewish and Islamic Mysticism," *Jewish-Muslim Encounters: History, Philosophy, And Culture*, ed. Charles Selengut, 1st ed. (St. Paul, Minn.: Paragon House, 2001), 165–79. This might make mysticism more suspect in the eyes of the gatekeepers of orthodoxy in Jewish tradition, though I suspect the decentralization and marked secularization of Jewish religious culture in the 20th century might make that a moot point.

<sup>36</sup> Protestant scripturalism—with its exclusion of inherited church tradition and clerical consensus from divine revelation—runs as contrary to orthodox Islamic sensibilities as to those of Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox.

<sup>37</sup> Like Christianity, Sufism puts great stock in the spiritual powers of dead saints, but, unlike Christian mystical traditions, reserves a robust role for "ordinary", living saints (i.e., Sufi masters) in religious life.

institutionalized oversight of declarations<sup>38</sup> of sainthood since canonization<sup>39</sup> was regulated by Pope Innocent III (r. 1198-1216), but has never been regulated in Islam.

### Sainthood in Islam

Before moving on to the substance of Islamic traditions of sanctity, we should first make some notes on terminology. According one succinct introduction, the terms corresponding to saint and sainthood cluster around the ideas of *proximity* (to Allah),<sup>40</sup> *power* (granted by Allah to those near him) and *protection* (of others through intercession before Allah).

*Wali*, the word roughly defined as “saint,” which is derived from the Arabic root *w-l-y* and has a root meaning of proximity, generally is found in the construct of *walī Allah*, that is, someone who is close to or intimate with God....In English *wali* is translated variously as protégé, intimate, friend of God, or “saint.” A *wali* who has power over others has *walaya* (being a protector or intercessor) while a *wali* with *walaya* focuses on the closeness or nearness to God (being a friend of God). Except for hairsplitting grammatical discussions, popular usage conflates these meanings since one close to God has power to protect and intercede and vice versa.<sup>41</sup>

*Walī* (pl. *awliyā*) thus is the closest analogue in Islamic tradition to the Christian notion of saint, and sainthood is—depending on the linguistic camp one belongs to—referred to as either

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<sup>38</sup> Canonization is merely a recognition of a saint’s preexisting spiritual status. Theologically speaking, it does not make people saints.

<sup>39</sup> Orthodox Christianity has a system that is kindred in spirit but quite different in practice. The “Glorification” of saints is determined not by a central body but by regional gatherings, bishop synods, and thus varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Hence the far greater prominence of the *Skepê/Pokrov* (the names in Greek and Slavonic, respectively, for “veil”)—an important feast on the Orthodox calendar thanking Mary the Theokotos, or “Mother of God”, for her protection (i.e., intercession on behalf) of all Christians—in Russia and Ukrainian tradition than elsewhere in the world of Orthodox Christianity.

<sup>40</sup> I consider “God” and “Allah” interchangeable, but employ the latter when discussing Islamic beliefs in keeping with the conventions of Islamic discourse.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur F. Buehler, “Saint,” *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, ed. Richard C. Martin (New York: Macmillan Reference USA: Thomson/Gale, 2004) 604.

*walāya* or *wilāya*.<sup>42</sup> All of these terms simultaneously connote closeness to God, authority (on God's behalf), and the ability to provide protection (via intercession) on the part of the *walī*.

Buehler's summary and gloss on sanctity in Islam are excellent, but a deeper taste of the idea's powerful associations for Muslims is provided in the short formulation of sainthood provided by the early Sufi Quranic commentator Najm al-Dīn Rāzī Dāya (d. 1254):

The *awlīā'* are the lovers of God and the enemies of their souls. For *welāya* is the knowledge of one's own soul; knowledge of God means looking upon Him with gaze of love, and knowledge of the soul means looking upon it with the gaze of enmity, once the veils constituted by the states and attributes of the soul are removed.<sup>43</sup>

Al-Dāya thus highlights several crucial aspects of *wilāya*: First, he demonstrates the importance of inspired, esoteric knowledge (*ma'rifa*, or gnosis, as opposed to conventional, textual, exoterically-derived knowledge, *ilm*).<sup>44</sup> The role of love on the part of the worshipper is underlined by Dāya's saying. Moreover, the relationship is mutual, as God is assumed to reciprocate feelings of love towards those he favors.<sup>45</sup> Second, Dāya shows that this "knowledge" transcends the intellect, merging the heart and mind in love and adoration of God. Third, progress on this spiritual path entails the diminution of one's sense of self and a

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<sup>42</sup> I prefer *walāya* due to its similarity to *walī* and because of the political connotations of *wilāya*, which can also mean a territory in modern Arabic.

<sup>43</sup> H. Algar, "Awlīā'," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater (London ; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) 7777.

<sup>44</sup> Renard explains the difference as being between "ordinary, traditional, discursive, acquired or 'scientific' knowledge (*ilm*) and more intimate, infused, experiential or 'mystical' knowing (*ma'rifa*), ...[with] the latter both presuppose[ing] the former and transcend[ing] it" (*Historical Dictionary of Sufism* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2005) 19).

<sup>45</sup> Explaining Tustari's understanding of the *Awliyā'*, Baldick writes, "They are different from the ordinary servants of God in that the elite are *desired by God*, while the common people desire his Face" (*Mystical Islam: An Introduction to Sufism* (New York: New York University Press, 1989) 39).

The idea of God reciprocating love was one of the earliest flash points of Islamic debate over mysticism. Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's own expressions of this ubiquitous Sufi precept appear to have stirred up such opposition early in his career that he had to flee his native city of Tirmidh for his own safety.

radical and ongoing re-orientation of one's consciousness towards God, until only consciousness of God remains.

While Sufis certainly draw a contrast between *‘ilm* and *ma‘rifa*, it is important not to make more out of this fact than it merits. Sufis consider *ma‘rifa* a complement rather than a challenge to conventional knowledge, and they argue that this emphasis is not a departure from the message Quran and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, properly considered.

“[T]rue Sufis always saw themselves as ‘inheritors’ of a knowledge that was realized in all its plenitude by the Prophet. To think otherwise is to attribute a false originality to those Sufis who first articulated aspects of this knowledge in terms of *ma‘rifa*; all they did was to give original expression to hitherto largely implicit concomitants of this knowledge, pathways to it, and conditions for it—bearing in mind that the knowledge in question remains inexpressible in its essence.”<sup>46</sup>

In other words, while Sufis concede that *explicit* sanction for their vision of saints and saintly inspiration is not found in Islam's foundational texts, they confidently contend that this vision is firmly grounded in these sources' spirit and hinted at by their often allusive nature. Elmore, who devotes a whole chapter to the matter, makes an insightful observation concerning the complexities surrounding the origins of Sufism and the role played by Ibn ‘Arabī in its development:

But while it is thus rooted in the deepest soil of Islam, the full-blown *Ṣūfī* doctrine of sainthood, as we will see, is manifestly a late upgrowth out of the earliest forms of Muslim intentionality and creative construction as reflected in the *Qur’ān* and its attendant legal tradition making up the *Sunnah*. Incubating in discrete seclusion over the ages like a pearl, it was left to Ibn ‘Arabī in the final decade of the 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century to revive the furtive thesis of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's *K. Khatm al-Awliyā’* (The Seal of the Saints), long dormant even in *Ṣūfī* circles...<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Reza Shah-Kazemi, “The Notion and Significance of *Ma‘rifa* in Sufism,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13.2 (2002): 156-7.

<sup>47</sup> Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time: Ibn al-‘Arabī's Book of the fabulous gryphon* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 111.

Much could be said here, but I confine myself to two points. One gets a sense of how the notion of sainthood in Islam as now widely understood is simultaneously deeply rooted in Islam's most foundational sources yet also results from an active and ongoing conversation among mystics over the ages. A significant and often unacknowledged role is played by *creative reinterpretation* of classical sources in the post-Prophetic era by mystics. With this in mind, one also realizes how integral the subjects of my next two chapters—Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and Ibn 'Arabī—are to an introduction to the substance and development of classical notions of sainthood.

At the same time, there is a striking degree of ambiguity to Islamic sainthood, at least on the semantic plane. In the introduction cited above, Buehler alluded to how the semantic debate as to which derivative of the root *w-l-y*—namely, *wilāya*, authority, vs. *walāya*, proximity—describes mystic holy men best remains unresolved to this day among Muslim scholars.<sup>48</sup> The many types of relationships and types of human beings that are linked with the term in one form or another in the Quran are especially interesting from a philosophical standpoint—the title *al-Walī* is one of the sacred Names of God, and *walī* and *awliyā'* are employed in a striking variety of relational senses. This concept is employed in the Quran to

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<sup>48</sup> There are even orthographic questions about key Qur'ānic passages involved. Most traditional reading styles of the Qur'ān (whose text is unvoiced in the earliest manuscripts, a fact that necessitates pronunciation decisions in cases where the consonantal outline allows more than one vocalization) render the key term in 8:72 and 18:44 as *wilāya*, but a minority pronounce it *walāya*. See Elmore 757; Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998) 398; and Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. Laidain Sherrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Soc, 1993).

describe the roles of protectors, advocates, authority figures and friends, and with associations of both goodness and evil, and the human as well as the divine.<sup>49</sup>

Getting back to intercession, this is no less central to Islamic sainthood than the other traditions mentioned.<sup>50</sup> According to Sufi doctrine, the greatest Muslim saints are “the instruments of God through whom God guides humanity to Himself and the springs with which He showers His mercy on His creatures,” says Karamustafa.<sup>51</sup> They are also “friends of His creation...because...[they] are the hinges that connect God to His creation.”<sup>52</sup>

At the same time and given the role played by saints in the world, there is an intriguing division of labor between saints who are no longer walk among us and those who remain in the world. Katz points out the fascinating irony of this arrangement:

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<sup>49</sup> Buehler succinctly sums the massive range of referents up as “God, angels, man (good and evil), and devils” (607-608).

<sup>50</sup> This is not to say that no debate exists regarding this among early Muslim scholars. Quite the contrary, there are vigorous debates among traditional scholars on a range of saint-related issues, from the permissibility and efficacy of intercession itself to narrower points such as the permissibility of combining one’s prayers like a traveler when journeying to a saint’s tomb for such a prayer. The Hanbali school in particular has produced a number of prominent critics of beliefs and practices associated with saintly intercession.

My goal, incidentally, in this paper is not to attempt to settle any such debates, but rather highlight the implications a particular strain of Islamic spirituality which—whatever one feels about its theological and metaphysical assumptions—has exerted a powerful pull on many Muslims, especially Sufis, since the earliest times. See Christopher Schurman Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt*, Vol. 22 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 1999) for an extended discussion of the arguments of the various protagonists in these long-running skirmishes. For a shorter overview, see Josef W. Meri, “The Etiquette of Devotion in the Islamic Cult of Saints,” *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. Paul Antony Hayward and J. D. Howard-Johnston (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 263-286.

I also take an “agnostic” position here with regard to the doctrinal foundations of the doctrine of the Muhammadan Reality (discussed below), which likewise has captivated the hearts and imaginations of Muslims for many centuries.

<sup>51</sup> Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 69.

<sup>52</sup> Karamustafa 69.

This suggests a paradoxical development, that living saints provide services in the next world—offering salvation to their followers in the hereafter—whereas dead saints typically function in this world—performing the mundane miracles of healing, provisioning, and so on.<sup>53</sup>

In Islamic mystical practice, it is customary to address one's prayers and requests to the dead *awliyā'*, whose sanctity seems to build over time, resulting in more potent miracles as the years pass.<sup>54</sup> Thus, the miracles of the long dead *awliyā'* are believed stronger than those of living *shuyukh*. Here we have an example of the inversion of conventional reasoning: The dead and physically absent are deemed of more practical use to petitioners than the living and present.

### The Men of the Unseen

No overview of sainthood in Islam would be complete with an acknowledgement of the doctrine of the *Dīwān al-Awliyā'* (Assembly of Saints) or *Rijāl al-Ghayb* ("Men of the Unseen"). In Sufi cosmology, both terms refer to a hidden spiritual hierarchy and vast institution that plays an essential part in God's involvement in Creation. These are "human beings who live

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<sup>53</sup> Karamustafa 88

<sup>54</sup> An example of the distinction made between miracles of saints and those of prophets: "The miracle of the saint consists in an answer to prayer, or the completion of a spiritual state, or the granting of power to perform an act, or the supplying of the means of subsistence requisite and due to them, in a manner extraordinary: whereas the marvels accorded to prophets consist either of producing something from nothing, or of changing the essential nature of an object" (Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Kalābādhī, *The Doctrine of the Ṣūfīs (Kitāb al-ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf)*, trans. A. J. Arberry (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 50).

The practical difference between the two types is not always evident, but the underlying purpose is. A contemporary scholar explains: "The *karamat* of the saints correspond to the *mu'jizat* of the prophets insofar as they imply deviation from the ordinary course of events, but they are not meant to silence opponents. Rather, they are a sign of the grace of God toward the saint through whom they are manifested. *Karama*, the miracle as a sign of God's favor rather than as a conclusive point of debate, is one of the two major distinguishing features of Islamic saints" (William M. Brinner, "Prophet and Saint: The Two Examples of Islam." Hawley 46).

consciously in the spiritual world while governing the visible world as God's representatives."<sup>55</sup> De Vaux explains:

The saints have been classified in a hierarchy according to a system that is found in much the same form in different authors. There are always saints on the earth; but their sanctity is not always apparent; they are not always visible. It is sufficient that their hierarchy goes on and that they are replaced on their death so that their number is always complete. 4,000 live hidden in the world are themselves unconscious of their state. Others know one another and act together. These are in ascending order of merit: the *akhyār*, to the number of 300; the *abd'āl*, 40; the *abrār*, 7; the *awtād*, 4; the *nukabā'*, 3; and the Pole [i.e., the *Qutb*; sw] who is unique.<sup>56</sup>

Formulations of these beliefs during the early period of Islamic history are, Chodkiewicz, "difficult to interpret: the terminology is fluid, and the early sources vary and contradict each other as to the number of holders of each 'grade' and the nature of their function."<sup>57</sup> Chittick points out that while it is not clear how literally all this is to be taken, the categories in themselves "speak eloquently of the intimate relationship that the intellectual tradition saw between cosmos and soul."<sup>58</sup> As we will see, these figures embody divine traits in human affairs, providing yet another link between Earth and Heaven.

One consistent aspect to all such accounts is the notion of their being at least two grades of saints. The Men of the Unseen are also referred to the *Rijāl al-ʿAdad* or Men of Number, since their total number is fixed. They have loftier characteristics, as explained earlier, but their more heterogeneous and much more numerous lessers in sainthood—who,

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<sup>55</sup> William C. Chittick, *Science of the cosmos, science of the soul: the pertinence of Islamic cosmology in the modern world* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007) 75.

<sup>56</sup> B. Carra de Vaux, "Walī," *The Encyclopaedia of Islām*, ed. M. T. Houtsma, et al., 1st ed. (Leyden; E. J. Brill ltd., 1938) 777.

<sup>57</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Seal* 91.

<sup>58</sup> Chittick *Science*, 77

unlike the Men of the Unseen, are visible in the world—also fulfill a role in this spiritual economy, even if their cosmological contribution is more nebulous.

At times, saints may critique excessive legalism with ironic provocations and cryptic sayings, but there is ultimately no conflict between their spiritual teachings and the normative principles of Islamic orthodoxy. In fact, Ibn ‘Arabī wrote, “Everything commanded is a station to be gained,” meaning that the observance of every detail of Islamic law is in itself a means to spiritual advancement for the saint no less than for the rank and file believer.<sup>59</sup> Saints may occasionally seem to challenge received orthodoxy, but they are never truly antinomian, as their obedience to Islamic law is integral to their claim to sainthood. Thus, even when Ibn ‘Arabī lampoons the foibles of jurists in his day, he does not denigrate the primacy of Islamic law or even “the duty of vigilance incumbent upon the fuqaha” to repudiate sayings by Sufis that could lead the simple minded astray, provided they do not attack things beyond their understanding.<sup>60</sup>

The *awliyā’* are by their very existence a reminder of God on earth<sup>61</sup> and thus remind the people of transcendent values at all times.<sup>62</sup> One way this manifests itself is the repudiation or inversion of traditional values in their behavior, whether because saints are indifferent to

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<sup>59</sup> Souad Hakim, “The way of walāya (sainthood or friendship of God):” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 18 (1995): 30.

<sup>60</sup> Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn ‘Arabī, the Book, and the Law* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993) 21.

<sup>61</sup> According to a famous hadith in the collection of Ibn Majah often cited by Sufis, the best Muslims are “those who, when they are seen, God is remembered.”

<sup>62</sup> “Implicit in the notion of the sufi Shaykh,” writes Katz in language I find reminiscent of Mircea Eliade, “is nostalgia, a longing to return to the sacred or golden time when the living Prophet was actively in the midst of his followers” (Jonathan Glustrom Katz, *Dreams, Sufism, and Sainthood: the Visionary Career of Muhammad al-Zawāwī* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996) 88).

normal ways and expectations due to their all-consuming focus on God, or because they wish to provide their observers moral instruction about the deeper meaning of religion. The most famous example of the latter pattern is surely the famous encounter described in the Quran between the Prophet Moses and the mysterious super-saint Khidr.<sup>63</sup> Khidr's actions seem to dramatically violate conventional morality and logic, and have been interpreted by Sufis not as infractions but the fruit higher esoteric knowledge (*ma'rifa*) that transcends normal categories of logic or right and wrong.<sup>64</sup>

As regards the former paradigm—that is, challenging convention—a hadith of the Prophet establishes the spiritual superiority of one type of nonconformist: “Many a man with unkempt hair, whose possessions amount to no more than a couple of dates, whom no one wants to look at, may, if he adjures God, have his prayers answered.”<sup>65</sup> The annals of Sufi history abound with eccentric holy men whose behavior—whether intentionally or unconsciously—scandalized or

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<sup>63</sup> The *Encyclopædia Britannica* summarizes the cryptic Quranic account as follows: “The cycle of myths and stories surrounding al-Khidr originated in a vague narrative in the Qur’an (18:60–82) that describes the long and arduous journey of Musa (Moses) and his servant to the “meeting of the two seas.” In the course of their travels, they lose a fish they had taken with them; a man of God appears, offering to help them in their search for the fish but performs seemingly senseless deeds along the way—he sinks a boat, kills a young man, then restores a wall in a city hostile to them. Musa questions what the man has done and receives a satisfactory explanation for everything; but by questioning, Musa forfeits the man’s patronage. Arab commentators elaborated and embellished the Qur’anic story and named the ‘man of God’ Khidr, [a contraction of al-Khadr, “the Green One”] claiming that he turned Green as he dived into the spring of life, though variant interpretations identify Khidr with the vegetable world” (“*al-Khidr*”, 2008, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 4/4 2008 <<http://www.britannica.com/bps/topic/316616/al-Khidr>>).

Sufi traditions often mention this enigmatic figure as the leader of the Men of the Unseen, the greatest Sufi master after Muhammad, whose direct tutelage is reserved for the most exceptional of the *awliyā*.

<sup>64</sup> If one assumes Khidr not to have been a prophet—as most traditional scholars have—one possible interpretation of this perplexing account is that a non-prophet possessed divinely inspired knowledge that even one of Allah’s greatest prophets lacked.

<sup>65</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Seal* 36.

confused the masses.<sup>66</sup> The Yemeni hermit Uways al-Qarani was so distracted from the world by contemplation of God that he was known for smiling when others wept, and vice versa,<sup>67</sup> and the famed former bandit Fudayl ibn Iyad (d. 803) was a “weeper”<sup>68</sup> known for a demeanor so grim and disruptive to normal social mores that legend has it that his contemporaries only saw him smile once in the span of forty years, and that was at the death of his son!<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

To compare the mystical traditions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam is to embark on three challenging journeys which often share a common track and seek more or less the same destination, but which each have their own distinctive landmarks, challenges and unique terrain while en route. It is difficult when studying these mystical traditions not to be struck by how they often seem to speak not different languages but simply distinct dialects of a shared spiritual discourse. Still, a Sufi may instantly grasp the lesson of humility and spirituality of a Hasidic acolyte’s declaration that he seeks out his master not “to learn Torah from him but to watch him tie his boot laces,”<sup>70</sup> but significant differences in doctrine and practice should not be trivialized. Nor should it be assumed that each brand of mysticism enjoys the same normative status or historical relationship with orthodox opinion merely by virtue of this family resemblance, as for all that they share beneath the surface, each mystical

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<sup>66</sup> See Abdellah Hammoudi, “The path of sainthood: structure and danger,” *Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies* 3 (1994): 71-88 for a discussion of the numerous ways that the lifestyles of *murids* (disciples) of Sufis masters violate or reorder conventional morals. Of particular interest is the idea of the “feminization” of the *murid* through chores not customarily performed by men.

<sup>67</sup> Elmore 46.

<sup>68</sup> A pious person given to weeping in fear of God’s punishment for the world’s wickedness.

<sup>69</sup> Knysh 23.

<sup>70</sup> Cohn, “Sainthood on the Periphery” 100.

outlook is the product of a completely unique matrix of doctrinal, historical and cultural factors springing from each faith tradition. As we have seen, this distinctiveness of origination is especially salient for Judaism, whose encounter with mysticism and saint veneration has in many respects run the reverse course of its sister Abrahamic traditions.

## **CHAPTER 2: SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION ON ISLAM AND SAINTHOOD**

In recent years, there has been a marked revival interest in and adherence to or Sufism in many Muslim societies, and these trends have been matched to a significant extent elsewhere with increased popular and scholarly interest in Sufism among non-Muslims, its history and its place in Islamic tradition. Understanding of this phenomenon is often hampered, however, by a variety of misconceptions in Western popular culture and academia alike. These misconceptions result in widespread myths or oversimplifications regarding Islamic history, Sufism's place within Islamic tradition and the role of Islamic mystics in Islamic civilization, past as well as present.

To lay out these trends, I will note in broad strokes what I see to be the key claims or insights within sociology of religion that relate to Sufism. Second, I will attempt to explain these conceptual shortcomings and sketch out some tentative strategies for bringing these insights more fruitfully to bear on Sufism. Due to space constraints, I limit myself to the pioneer Max Weber and two subsequent figures who carried on his tradition in important respects.

### **Max Weber**

The shadow of German sociologist of Max Weber (d. 1920) looms large within the field of sociology of religion. In fact, it can be argued that Weber for all practical purposes almost single-handedly launched this discipline. Staughton goes so far as to declare, "The way in which Weber affirmed 'religion' in modernity remains largely decisive for all modern self-

understanding.”<sup>71</sup> Others have argued that interdisciplinary studies—a key characteristic of much modern scholarship, especially in the humanities—was invented by Weber.

Weber remains best known of course for his novel theory of the Protestant ethic to explain why modern capitalism arose in northern Europe and nowhere else. This proposition has had enormous influence within the social sciences and remains hotly debated to this day. In a nutshell, Weber contended that Protestant theology—more specifically, the Calvinist belief in Predestination—induced widespread unconscious anxieties among northern Europeans that set in motion lifestyle patterns that allowed modern capitalism to emerge. “Protestantism in its Calvinist, pietistic or puritan form provided an inner-worldly asceticism that promoted the salvation of humankind on earth through hard work deferring instantaneous gratification.”<sup>72</sup> Anxious to demonstrate to themselves and their peers that they were among the elect—i.e., people selected before birth by God for salvation, whose spiritual distinction, it was assumed, would be reflected in righteous, sober living and, critically, the visible worldly success—people in northern Europe embraced the kind of frugality, asceticism, planning, attention to this-worldly affairs that permitted for the first time in human history the accumulation of capital surpluses large enough to finance the emergence of modern corporations and markets. “With this new mindset—exemplified for Weber by American aphorist Benjamin Franklin, despite the latter’s Deist leanings<sup>73</sup>—was born “rationality” itself.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Georg Stauth, “Muslim Saints and Modernity,” *On Archaeology of Sainthood and Local Spirituality in Islam: Past and Present Crossroads of Events and Ideas*, ed. Georg Stauth (Bielefeld; Piscataway, NJ: Transcript; distributed in North America by Transaction Publishers, 2004) 8.

<sup>72</sup> Ernest Wolf-Gazo, “Weber and Islam,” *ISIM Review* 16 (2005): 44.

<sup>73</sup> Sukidi, “Max Weber’s Remarks on Islam: The Protestant Ethic among Muslim Puritans,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17.2 (2006): 196.

For Weber, this rationality is a defining trait of modernity (and indeed Western civilization) that grew out of the rejection of magic, superstition and other premodern forms of religion unleashed centuries earlier by the Protestant Reformation that culminated in modern secularization.<sup>75</sup> This new outlook, dubbed the “Disenchantment of the World” by Weber, had far-reaching consequences for religious belief, as now “[t]he world of fairy tales, myths and sagas had to give way to scientific realism,” and stage was finally set for what Weber calls “world-mastery” to take place.<sup>76</sup>

This sweeping explanation has not gone unchallenged, and for some it still symbolizes the problematically ethnocentric cognitive blinders that have often informed Western views of the outside world. Still, it must be conceded that Weber was committed to fairness and rigor. Salvatore laments the influence of not Weber so much as “Weberism”—“a trivialized version of the Weberian heritage that is...[deployed to justify] every Western...cognitive undertaking” and demonstrate the superiority of Western culture<sup>77</sup>—in Western intellectual life. While

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<sup>74</sup> “By rationalization Weber was referring to an ongoing process of in which social interaction and institutions were increasingly governed by methodological procedures and calculable rules. Thus, in steering the course of societal development, values, traditions and emotions were being displaced in favor of formal and impersonal practices. While such practices may breed greater efficiency in obtaining designated ends, they also lead to the ‘disenchantment of the world’ where ‘there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather than one can, in principle, master all things by calculation’” (Laura Desfor Edles and Scott Appelrouth, *Sociological Theory in the Classical Era: Text and Readings* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge Press, 2005) 142).

<sup>75</sup> The assumption made by Weber—who even coined the term secularization—and many observers of modern religious life that present day secularism and disbelief represent a radical break with a civilization that had always been overwhelmingly based on religious values has been challenged. Some refer to it as Durkheimian “dogma” unsupported by empirical evidence. See William H. Swatos Jr. and Kevin J. Christiano, “Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept.” *Sociology of Religion* 60.3 (1999): 209-28.

<sup>76</sup> I define “world-mastery” as the subjection of (and psychological willingness to, as needed, radically alter) the material world to meet human needs unfettered by religious or sentimental inhibitions.

<sup>77</sup> Armando Salvatore, “Beyond Orientalism? Max Weber and the Displacements of ‘Essentialism’ in the Study of Islam,” *Defining Islam: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Rippin (London ; Oakville, CT: Equinox Pub., 2007) 148-72.

Weber's explanation for the rise of capitalism and modernity lends itself easily to Western triumphalism, there is a tone of sadness to Weber's analysis (e.g., the very phrase "the Disenchantment of the World") that hints at his ambivalence over these cultural developments. While he was, in his famous phrase, "unmusical" as regards religion, he had mixed feelings regarding the loss of faith and resulting psychological rootedness that his theories sought to explain. Moreover, as Seidman points out, he "repudiated the notion, prominently featured in German idealism, of modernity as a realization, in a transfigured form, of Christianity," and deemed modern European civilization as firmly post-Christian.<sup>78</sup>

Weber opposed the reductionism and cultural chauvinism that so many social scientists in his day resorted to when dealing the "exotic" Orient, and he embraced complexity in a way few scholars have before or since, embarking on extremely ambitious cross-civilizational comparative studies. His work, says Nafissi, "undermine[s]... [chauvinistic explanations for Western material success] by presenting the diversity of conditions [needed for these developments to occur]."<sup>79</sup> Moreover, Weber repudiated the essentialism so often imputed to him, as when he noted for the record that "to assume that the Hindu, Chinese or Muslim merchants, trader, artisan, or coolies was animated by a weaker 'acquisitive drive' than the ascetic Protestant is to fly in the face of facts."<sup>80</sup>

Weber was no cultural chauvinist, but he did unconsciously impose ethnocentric Christian and Western views on the history of non-Western societies, especially in the Muslim

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<sup>78</sup> Steven Seidman, "Modernity and the Problem of Meaning: The Durkheimian Tradition," *Sociological Analysis* 46.2 (1985) 110.

<sup>79</sup> Mohammad R. Nafissi, "Reframing Orientalism: Weber and Islam," *Islam: Critical Concepts* 12 *Islam: Critical Concepts in Sociology*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003) 12.

<sup>80</sup> Qtd. in Nafissi 12.

world. However good his intentions were, he often reproduced problematic Orientalist underlying assumptions and values in his scholarship. Thus, one scholar describes Weber as the “most influential modern theorist” of cultural essentialism.<sup>81</sup> The highly speculative quality of his theoretical approach is stimulating and fertile, but can be its undoing, since his analyses can also be innocent of the ethnographic standards that scholars have rightfully come to expect in the analysis other societies.<sup>82</sup> And, despite his own intentions, Weberian theory ultimately establishes a hierarchy of cultures, “an accounting system...in which the Orient simply lacks the positive ingredients of western rationality [and is]...defined as a system of absences.”<sup>83</sup>

Islamic civilization, like societies, never made the transition to modernity as defined by Weber, and this needed to be explained.<sup>84</sup> In light of Weber’s theologically-determined explanation for the emergence of the Protestant ethic, this presents a conundrum, since all the Abrahamic faiths exhibit, in Turner’s words, “very strong sociological continuities” and “a high god, scriptural tradition, prophetic revelation, and Salvationism.”<sup>85</sup> In order to explain these diverging trajectories, Weber places Islam (and Judaism) in essential philosophical and socio-cultural opposition to Christianity. To wit, Weber posited that though

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<sup>81</sup> Afshin Matin-Asgari, “Islamic Studies and the Spirit of Max Weber: A Critique of Cultural Essentialism,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 13.3 (2004): 310.

<sup>82</sup> Charles F. Keyes, “Weber and Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 234.

<sup>83</sup> Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (London ; Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1991) 22-23.

<sup>84</sup> Turner, *Religion* 27. It could of course be argued that Turner's assertion that Islamic civilization, like most, never made the transition to modernity (according to Weber's criteria), should be revised to state that Islamic civilization, like most, is still involved in the process of sifting through and digesting various aspects of modernity.

<sup>85</sup> Turner, *Religion* 7.

Muhammad's initial message was one of ascetic self-control...the social carriers of Islam were Arab warriors who transformed the original salvation doctrine into a quest for land. Hence, the inner angst of Calvinism was never fully present in Islam.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, according to Bryan Turner's reading of Weber, Islamic civilization's preoccupation with war and conquest overrode the ascetic leanings of its formal doctrines that might otherwise have led to modernity.

Levtzion observes that Weber at times seems "haunted" by images of Islam being spread by the sword and consequently greatly overemphasizes the role of warriors in Islamic civilization, which by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century of its history was dominated by a very different social actor, the scribe. Contrary to Weber's impression, "Islam as we know it is a religion developed by scholars, jurists, theologians and mystics, without virtually any input of those in political authority or those who held military power."<sup>87</sup>

As brilliant as Weber's model undoubtedly was, it was produced by a scholar who relied of necessity on a large number of secondary sources—sources produced during and often colored by the attitudes of the Colonialism era—and who knew little about Sufism, which he dismissively referred as "the dervish religion...with its essentially irrational and extraordinary character."<sup>88</sup> It thus comes as little surprise that Weber's comparisons between Islamic civilization and Western/Christian history are sometimes marred by a mix of the era's prejudices and ethnocentrism, and historical fallacies.

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<sup>86</sup> Turner, *Religion* 21-22.

<sup>87</sup> Nehemia Levtzion, "Aspects of Islamization: Weber's Observations on Islam Reconsidered," *Max Weber & Islam*, ed. Toby E. Huff and Wolfgang Schluchter (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1999) 158.

<sup>88</sup> Levtzion 156.

Getting back to mysticism, Weber's influential theory of charisma and its "routinization" has important implications for interpreting Sufi piety and practice. According to this schema, all religions begin as cults based on the authority of "a charismatic person who is perceived as extraordinary and set apart from the rest of humanity."<sup>89</sup> Echoing our discussion of saints as links to God and the sacred, Schmidt explains that "Charisma is *in* but not *of* this world."<sup>90</sup>

Charisma is inherently unstable due to its reliance on the presence of the founder.

Writes Cornell:

To preserve their position in a competitive world, these second- and third-generation charismatic leaders rely on the artificial proof of miracle working and magic to attract clientele. Since pure charisma can no longer be maintained, hereditary authority instead becomes dependent on social-structure and economic criteria.<sup>91</sup>

Upon the death or departure of the cult founder, that charisma must be institutionalized and regulated for the community to survive, but this adaptation strategy calls forth new issues, around which sociological analyses of Sufism have revolved ever since Weber's time.

Even if a successor is successfully installed without fracturing the community, he is unlikely to command his predecessor's effortless moral authority and thus

Some of the awe and respect will have been transferred to the teachings and to the continuing organization itself. The rules and values of the group must be attributed with transcendent importance in and of themselves. Commitment is now to the organization and to the ideology of the movement, and the authority of the *new* leader(s) may be restrained by these stabilizing forces. No longer are the sayings of the

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<sup>89</sup> Keith A. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1990) 147.

<sup>90</sup> Garbi Schmidt, "Sufi Charisma on the Internet," *Sufism in Europe and North America*, ed. David Westerlund (London ; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004) 110.

<sup>91</sup> Cornell xxviii.

leader taken as true simply because that person said them. They must be evaluated in light of what the original leaders said and did.<sup>92</sup>

In short, to survive the cult adopts reforms that in the long run undermine its *raison d'être* by progressively transforming it from a community based on charismatic authority into an increasingly bureaucratic institution governed by rules and logic. Sufi orders, with the priority they assign to religious leaders and inherited spiritual teachings, cannot be any exception to the iron law, thought Weber.

The conception of charisma contained within it the seeds of another powerful theoretical construct that was to dominate the sociology of religion in various forms, the Church/Sect dichotomy. In order be able to make scientifically meaningful comparisons between religious institutions, Weber grouped religious institutions based on membership criteria. Older, larger groups into which members are born he called “churches”, while younger, smaller ones whose membership is based on personal choice were “sects.” Churches represent more “evolved” religious bodies with a greater degree of routinization of charisma.

A student of Weber's, Ernst Troeltsch (d. 1923), re-oriented this construct to explain organizational behavior,<sup>93</sup> and added a third type of religious organization (or lack thereof), the “mystic.” For him, mysticism represented personalized religious experience of “loosely associated individuals who emphasize nonrational personal experience as the corner stone of religion.”<sup>94</sup> Troeltsch's formulation of the Church/Sect theory was popularized in the English-

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<sup>92</sup> Roberts, 152

<sup>93</sup> Churches, having to cater to a larger, more heterogeneous clientele, tend towards being inclusive and compromising; sects are groups whose membership is self-selected can have more elitist expectations and be more dogmatic.

<sup>94</sup> Roberts 183.

speaking world by American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr (d. 1962), though *sans* Troeltsch's third mystical religious archetype, which Niebuhr summarily dropped without explanation.<sup>95</sup>

The omission of the Mystic from Niebuhr's English translations of Troeltsch and the passing of the baton of post-World War II political and economic power across the Atlantic has meant that Troeltsch's 3<sup>rd</sup> archetype has received little attention among leading sociologists of religion over the last half century.<sup>96</sup> As a result, lamented a scholar writing during the mid 1970s, "the hapless career of Troeltsch's third type can best be described as languishing in wholesale neglect."<sup>97</sup>

Like Weber—whose ambivalence about secularization has already been noted—Troeltsch also regretted many aspects of the emergence of modernity in European life. His nostalgia for the High Tradition of the Christian Middle Ages is unmistakable, and this leads him to a negative view of mysticism, as Troeltsch felt that Christian mysticism reorients religious life toward the individual at the cost of his connection with the broader religious tradition and faith. From Troeltsch's frame of reference, mysticism represents "a move away from the basic ethical-religious concerns" of Christianity and "leads to forms of organization

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<sup>95</sup> Or "ideal type" in Weberian parlance.

<sup>96</sup> The decisive role played by Protestant forms of Christianity (especially Calvinism) might also have played a role in retarding this concept's adoption within North American academy. "[S]ubsequent theorizing and empirical research on church-sect theory largely based on Niebuhr's popularization of Troeltsch has largely ignored mysticism. The reasons for this are in dispute, but it is clear that neither Niebuhr nor Troeltsch thought fondly of mysticism, nor did either see it as characteristic of the American religious landscape" (Jacob Belzenand Antoon Geels, *Mysticism: A Variety of Psychological Perspectives* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2003) 35). Niebuhr, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most prominent Protestant theologians, was certainly not unusual in considering mysticism alien to the American religious experience.

<sup>97</sup> William R. Garrett, "Maligned Mysticism: The Maledicted Career of Troeltsch's Third Type," *Sociological Analysis* 36.3 (1975): 213.

that are ‘loose and provisional,’” neglects “doctrine or formal liturgy,” and is generally ill suited to the masses. In short, mysticism represents “a weakened form of religious life.”<sup>98</sup>

These assumptions were to become axiomatic for sociologists of religion: yet, as we will see, none of these suspicions, whether concerning praxis or doctrinal attachment, have been demonstrated to apply to Sufism in Islamic history.

### **Ernest Gellner**

Undoubtedly, Weber’s most influential disciple within the sub-discipline of sociology of religion is Ernest Gellner (d. 1995). A general review of Gellner’s ideas—which span multiple disciplines—is impossible here so I will instead highlight a few of his key concepts with relevance to Islam and/or Sufism.

Drawing from Weber as well as the 14<sup>th</sup> century Islamic pioneer of sociology Ibn Khaldun, Gellner presents a number of dichotomies as central to Islamic civilization, foremost among them the constant tensions between elite urban *fuqaha* (jurists) and rural *marabouts* (North African holy men). Commenting critically, Cornell writes:

The concept of maraboutism was well-suited for creating an artificial dichotomy [in Morocco] between the supposedly “natural” religious syncretism of the Berbers and an “Arab” Islamic orthodoxy. [...] Ernest Gellner exemplifies this approach. Gellner sees maraboutism as one side of a dichotomy between urban and rural types of religious expression.<sup>99</sup>

This scheme corresponds neatly to another prominent dichotomy in his and many other sociologists’ frameworks for the Muslim world: the presumed conflict between sober,

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<sup>98</sup> Steeman 198-199, 201

<sup>99</sup> Cornell xxvii.

legalistic, scripturally oriented high Islam and orgiastic, emotional and charisma-based popular Islam.

Weber, Gellner and many other sociologists assume an essential and irreconcilable gap between the “popular Islam” of the countryside and the high, formal Islam of urban life, and tend to neglect Islamic mysticism as a marginal, inauthentic phenomenon. Others assume all mysticism to be acutely inherently individualistic and “governed by neo-solipsistic ideas.”<sup>100</sup> Yet others treat it as synonymous with asceticism based on the confluence of the two in northern European religious history (which is assumed a universal pattern).

Most importantly, many assume mysticism to be inherently antinomian and centrifugal, undermining established religious institutions and orthodoxy.<sup>101</sup> Collin, for example, states: “Wherever mysticism coexisted with more centrally organized Islam... it was treated as heretical,”<sup>102</sup> and Turner declared during the 1970s, “On both accounts, orthodoxy and orthopraxy, Islamic maraboutism has been formally and practically heretical.”<sup>103</sup> As a

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<sup>100</sup> Roland Robertson, “On the Analysis of Mysticism: Pre-Weberian, Weberian and Post-Weberian Perspectives,” *Sociological Analysis* 36.3 (1975): 256.

This is, it should be noted, a particularly curious conclusion in the case of Sufism given its consuming focus on reducing one’s self-centeredness.

<sup>101</sup> Criticisms of Weber’s assumptions about other religious traditions are hardly a recent development. Catholics have long objected to their treatment at his hands, as the following passage, written in 1968, illustrates: “The treatment which he metes out to Roman Catholicism...shows us Weber in the grip of prejudice....His charges are essentially two, both of them utterly absurd: firstly, that Catholicism is a form of polytheism, and secondly, that it is shot through by magical conceptions and thus an incarnation of a very primitive and irrational worldview.” Werner Stark, “The Place of Catholicism in Max Weber’s Sociology of Religion,” *Sociological Analysis* 29.4 (1968): 2.

The parallels between what I would call Weber’s Vulgar Protestant (a la “Vulgar Marxism”) reading of Catholic spirituality and the hermeneutic stance of Wahhabism on Sufism are illustrative, in my view, of how hostility to mysticism cuts across confessional lines. And even secular/religious ones, given Weber’s own lack of religious faith.

<sup>102</sup> Randall Collins, *Weberian Sociological Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 234.

<sup>103</sup> Bryan S. Turner, “Islam, Capitalism and the Weber Theses,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 25.2 (Jun., 1974): 62.

consequence of the bifurcation of Islam into formal, legalistic Islam and popular, mystical Islam an implicit evolutionary model is introduced whereby it is assumed that Islamic culture is collectively evolving away from one model to the other.<sup>104</sup>

Before continuing, a cursory review of cross-cutting concerns about the discipline in general is order. Though the discipline was launched by ambitious, comparative work of scholars such as Weber and French sociologist Emile Durkheim (d. 1917) and despite the fact that concerns on this question have been voiced for decades, the field of sociology of religion remains in practice “an adjunct to the study of Christian religion.”<sup>105</sup> Turner laments the field’s predictability and “endless discussions of secularization” which have, in his view, led to “an analytical cul-de-sac.”<sup>106</sup> Davis, like Turner, takes the discipline to task for not having made an appreciable contribution to the broader discussions of either religion or sociology outside the work of a few well known scholars.<sup>107</sup>

Gellner mistakes a discourse of scripturalist revivalism that is in critical respects unique to contemporary times for the normative ideal of Islam. Cornell and Zubaida ably and exhaustively lay out important fallacies underlying Gellner’s readings of Islamic history and culture. On Gellner’s essentializing and in critical respects ahistorical approach to Islamic tradition, Zubaida writes: “It is this...Islam of the modern reformers, looking at their religion

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<sup>104</sup> Turner, *Islam: Critical Concepts* 124. Whether this evolution is a positive development depends on the observer’s sympathies. Romantics might lament a move towards a more scientific outlook that modernists would consider the hallmark of progress. In both cases, an evolutionary and essentializing model of Islamic history is assumed.

<sup>105</sup> Winston Davis, “Sociology: Sociology and Religion [First Edition].” Jones, *Encyclopedia of Religion* 8496.

<sup>106</sup> Turner, *Religion* 3-5.

<sup>107</sup> Davis 8496; Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study*, (London ; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 264.

and society through critical European eyes, which Gellner has taken up and generalized to the whole of urban Islam throughout its history.”<sup>108</sup>

In much the same way, the urban/rural divide has been greatly exaggerated in sociological literature. Contrary to Gellner’s division of Islamic society, Tayob points out that the “political contest in postcolonial Islam, therefore, is not between a mystical, illiterate, and rural *islam* and an urban *islam* with opposite characteristics, but between competing interpretations of *urban* Islam.”<sup>109</sup> Cornell explores this and a cluster of related fallacies in considerable detail, breaking down the conventional wisdom among sociologists and showing how Sufi religious leadership in Morocco, like that of other types of religious authority in Islam, had its roots in urban society. “Sufi doctrine is defined in terms of an urban-oriented ‘symbolic universe’... [transmitted by] an urban-educated intellectual who translated the norms of ‘orthodox’ Islam into terms that his pastoralists clients could understand and accept.” Even in the most rural areas, the prevailing discourse of Moroccan Sufism was imbued with an unmistakably urban ethos.<sup>110</sup>

The categorical distinctions between high and low religion, or “philosophical” and “popular” Sufism also present problems. Cornell argues from a number of perspectives against the cogency of these labels. While he concedes that popular/formal dichotomy might “be of some use in contrasting different conceptions of mysticism within a single, mass-based Sufi

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<sup>108</sup> Zubaida’s article is a succinct summary of the most salient issues with the Gellner’s categories (urban/rural, High Culture/Low Culture, Exoteric/Esoteric, ...) that inform his discussions of Islamic societies. A particularly intriguing observation: For Gellner, urban religion is Weberian (textual and puritanical), while tribal religion is Durkheimian” (Sami Zubaida, “Is There a Muslim Society? Ernest Gellner’s Sociology of Islam.” Turner, *Islam: Critical Concepts* 35,54).

<sup>109</sup> Abdulkader I. Tayob, “Defining Islam in the throes of modernity.” Rippin 388.

<sup>110</sup> Cornell 93,197.

order,” he argues that to do so in other cases is to “reduce the entire phenomenon of Sufi populism to its lowest common denominator.”<sup>111</sup> A related misconception is the presumed opposition between Sufism and traditional religious authority. Explaining the findings of his ethnographic analysis of hagiographical accounts from medieval Morocco during the formative period of Sufism, Cornell writes:

The “orthodox” nature of Sufism and sainthood in premodern Morocco is confirmed by the finding that nearly 22% of the subjects of the anthologies...were *fuqaha`* [legal scholars]. [...] A closer examination of the biographies of these *fuqaha`* ... disproves Ernest Gellner’s thesis that the typical North African legist or “doctor” was hostile to the concept of sainthood.<sup>112</sup>

Elsewhere, Cornell finds that not only were most Moroccan saints to all appearances *shari‘a*-observant and doctrinally conventional. In fact, the definition of sainthood in Moroccan Islam itself makes the very idea of a religiously non-observant saint a contradiction in terms, as

To be accepted by the ulama, a potential saint had to be recognized as a faithful adherent of the Sunna. This mean that the theoretical “meaning” of sainthood could never stray far from the perspective of normative Islam: even miracles had to conform to juridical rules.<sup>113</sup>

Here, more than the saint is subordinated to religious law. His miracles—the very sources of his charismatic authority for the masses—are made to conform to Islamic law. No matter how charismatic or miraculous a claimant to sainthood may be, he is inexorably rejected *a priori* if he does not demonstrate public adherence to Islamic law.

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<sup>111</sup> Cornell 197.

<sup>112</sup> Cornell 106.

<sup>113</sup> Cornell 275.

An illustration of the limits of Weberian models of charismatic leadership is the fact that Sufis saints and the orders<sup>114</sup> they head do not follow Weber's seemingly ironclad rules. Most of the otherwise sacrosanct axioms of Weberian theory on charisma and religious leaders concerning charisma founder—or, to put it differently, are resolved—by the Sufi saint. Schmidt stresses that the “antithetical relationship between charisma and tradition (routinization) within Weberian terminology can be unified in the role and personality of the Sufi sheikh.”<sup>115</sup> Weber's assumption that charisma must be thoroughly routinized and translated into an impersonal set of rules after the death of a cult's founder does not hold up in the case of Sufism, as subsequent saintly leaders of Sufi orders have charisma in their own right.<sup>116</sup>

Another way in which Sufi organizational patterns do not fit neatly into Weberian categories is how successors to a cult's founder do not simply inherit the institutional leadership by virtue of their office. They must prove themselves, through their own manifestation of saintly blessings, which Pinto refers to as the “performative character of the *shaykh*'s authority.”<sup>117</sup>

Perhaps the most telling finding of Cornell's analysis of Moroccan sainthood concerns the prevalence of *sharifs*.<sup>118</sup> Due to the general esteem accorded to them in Moroccan society, it has been generally assumed by sociologists that Moroccan Sufism has always been dominated

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<sup>114</sup> The *Turūq* (pl. of *Tarīqah*, “way”) developed after time of Ibn ‘Arabī and, thus, fall outside the scope of this study.

<sup>115</sup> Schmidt 111.

<sup>116</sup> This assumes, of course, that the mantle of leadership has been successfully transferred to a successor.

<sup>117</sup> Paulo Pinto, “Performing Baraka: Sainthood and Power in Syrian Sufism.” Stauth 197.

<sup>118</sup> Descendents of the Prophet Muhammad, who have historically functioned as a quasi-nobility in Islamic societies, enjoying prestige and special legal status.

by *sharifs*. However, Cornell found that out of the 316 medieval saints whose hagiographical accounts he studied, only 0.6% were descended from Muhammad! Hence, Cornell laments the “tendency of many social scientists to essentialize Moroccan sainthood” and pointedly asks a question that resonates for many fields of study where epistemological assumptions sometimes seem more grounded in stereotypes than empirical evidence.

How can a paradigm of sainthood (such as that used by Gellner and Geertz) which is dependent on sharifian status have much heuristic value when descent from the Prophet is statistically insignificant in the very period in which the paradigms of Moroccan sainthood were formulated?<sup>119</sup>

This fascinating and eye-opening revelation highlights one example of how Islam and Sufism sometimes have been examined through the lens of essentializing clichés that are not merely unsupported by the historical record, but diametrically opposed to it.

A particularly troublesome hurdle to comprehension of Sufism is the gulf between the often mechanistic role often assigned to Sufi *shuyukh* as social actors by sociologists and their contribution to the community as perceived by Muslims in general, and especially their followers. For example, Turner reduces the *sheikh/murid* relationship to a simple economic exchange, writing “The saint/devotee relationship is both an exchange and ideally a means of economic redistribution.”<sup>120</sup> Reading the following the various truncated frameworks—tribal arbitration, alternative sources of medicine, charisma, and so on—through which sainthood is often viewed, I am reminded of a point made by a historian of Catholic sainthood concerning the new rationalized conceptions of sainthood that emerged after the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century:

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<sup>119</sup> Cornell 115.

<sup>120</sup> Turner, *Islam: Critical Concepts* 135.

The saint of Protestantism is a pale theological abstraction, the product of three metaphysical ideas, predestination, redemption, and sanctification. The mediaeval saint found his *raison d'être* in moral and spiritual endowments which enabled him to perform a most necessary rôle in the community.<sup>121</sup>

Compare these dry socio-economic mediators to the vigorous, dynamic social, religious and cultural actors described by Chih in her study of contemporary Sufism.

Saints are thus intermediaries between God and human beings. They are the instruments of God on earth, able to bend the laws of nature and change the course of normal affairs....For their disciples and the faithful, they become a source of grace, the object of all prayers and hopes, and a protection from this world for the hereafter.<sup>122</sup>

Regardless of one's own conclusion regarding their ultimate scientific merit, Sufi beliefs concerning the sacred and the paranormal status of their saints has always played a powerful sociological role among Muslims and continues to do so to this day.<sup>123</sup>

## Clifford Geertz

### Influence

Gellner is perhaps Weber's most influential heir in terms of methodology, but critical aspects of Weber's worldview were also disseminated by the groundbreaking anthropologist Clifford Geertz (d. 2006).<sup>124</sup> Geertz was no sociologist—though one can view his “program... [as] an effort to blend the sociological theory of Weber with the fieldwork of Evans-Pritchard”<sup>125</sup>—

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<sup>121</sup> Mecklin 51-52.

<sup>122</sup> Rachida Chih, “Sainteté, maîtrise spirituelle et patronage: le fondements de l'autorité dans le soufisme.” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 49.125 (2004): 83; my translation.

<sup>123</sup> Pnina Werbner, *Pilgrims of love: the anthropology of a global Sufi cult* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005) 348.

<sup>124</sup> Martin-Asgari, however, points out that while Geertz' methodology may have differed in important respects from that of Weber, its assumptions were highly Weberian, to the extent that “[i]t was largely through Geertz that Weber acquired a commanding influence first in anthropology” (310).

<sup>125</sup> Pals 283.

but he was a towering figure in anthropology, and his approach and assumptions have often framed studies of Islam and Muslims by social scientists since he published his seminal 1973 work, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.<sup>126</sup>

With Geertz, the gaze of the scholar began to move from societal *functions* to symbols and their complex interactions within cultures.<sup>127</sup> The specific was now privileged over the general, and overarching cross-cultural theories became *démodé*. “Geertz’s kind of anthropology...consists of specific research...in a specific context...in order to gain insight into a culture or a religion.”<sup>128</sup> This approach to ethnography and anthropology has been accepted throughout the social sciences, and has for the most part had a quite laudable impact by many accounts (including my own).

A widely acclaimed virtue to Geertz’s method is that it naturally steers clear of the excesses of functionalist reductionism and attempts to grasp the meanings attributed to beliefs or practices by adherents themselves as opposed to externally imposed meanings with little if any meaning to practitioners. “There is probably no American scholar who has done more

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<sup>126</sup> A review of anthropological and religious journals carried out by Frankenberry and Penner revealed that Geertz’ famous essay “Religion as a Cultural System” had been cited over 500 times between 1966 and 1999. More importantly, Frankenberry and Penner conclude that Geertz’ assumptions about the place of religion in the world were accepted in toto in the field in almost all cases (“Clifford Geertz’s Long-Lasting Moods, Motivations, and Metaphysical Conceptions.” *The Journal of Religion* 79.4 (1999): 618).

<sup>127</sup> Functionalism, a school in Anthropology, took as its guiding metaphor the body, understanding society as the body, people as the cells, and the practices and institutions of that society as the organs *functioning* to keep the society’s body alive. Hence “Functionalist analyses examine the social significance of phenomena, that is, the purpose they serve a particular society in maintaining the whole.” Jessica Edwards and Kimberly Neutzling, “Functionalism,” *Anthropological Theories*, ed. Dr. M. D. Murphy 7 December 2008 <<http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/function.htm>>. For Geertz on functionalism see Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 142.

<sup>128</sup> Yme B. Kuiper, “The Concept of Person in American Anthropology: The Cultural Perspective of Clifford Geertz.” *Concepts of person in religion and thought*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg, Y. Kuiper, and Andy F. Sanders (Berlin; New York: Monton de Gruyter, 1990) 20; emphasis in original.

than Geertz to show how valuable a well-crafted study of religion can be to an understanding of other aspects of human life and thought.”<sup>129</sup> Geertz legitimized the study of culture and religion as symbolic systems with their own internal rules and traditions. Like Weber, he brought theology into the social sciences, and also like Weber he was also a foe of reductionism in the study of religion and in the social sciences.

#### Geertz: A mixed benefits for understanding Islam & Muslims

Nonetheless, Geertz’ anti-reductionist bona fides have been questioned,<sup>130</sup> and not all that Geertz wrought has been conducive for establishing a nuanced, historically-grounded understanding of Islam and Muslims. Frankenberry and Penner concede that at the time of its publication Geertz’ famed essay may have struck a blow “against the ravages of positivism,” but worry that Geertz’ almost absolute theoretical domination since then has ironically contributed to a “diminution of critical reflection.”<sup>131</sup>

Despite his opposition to functionalism, Geertz reproduces many of the dubious functionalist categories and binary oppositions that bedevil the interpretations of Islamic history of Gellner and Weber. Most prominent among these issues are the exaggerated gulfs assumed between urban and rural society segments of Islamic societies and the supposed

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<sup>129</sup> Pals 261.

<sup>130</sup> Frankenberry and Penner contend that a closer examination shows his analysis to be based on a more abstracted, yet comparably functionalist reading. For Geertz religious beliefs do arise not out of political or economic needs as they do in the theories of many social scientists observing religious life, but they are nonetheless generated by a “need for meaning,” the equally inexorable psychological imperative “to reduce uncertainty, to order chaos.” While not so blatant, it is, they argue, “classic functionalism in a richly embroidered robe” (627).

<sup>131</sup> Frankenberry and Penner 618.

enmity between orthodox and mystically inclined Muslims. In my view, such missteps are doubly unfortunate, as they come from an observer whose methodology is widely (and rightly) associated with a more respectful and inclusive approach to the study of non-Western societies—with so seemingly cutting-edge and sympathetic a pedigree, Geertz' essentializing assumptions are considerably less likely to be critically examined by scholars who are otherwise vigilant about such biases.

Critiques of Geertz' assumptions about Muslim culture are not new. Some have been around for decades, but are only now getting the attention they warrant.<sup>132</sup> Hodgson astutely pointed out in the 1970s that Geertz mistakenly took 20<sup>th</sup> century Salafi & modernist-tinged revivalist thought to be historically normative, which led him ineluctably to the assumption that Sufism was heterodox.

[The] general high excellence [of Geertz's seminal 1960 study *The Religion of Java*] is marred by a major systematic error: influenced by the polemics of a certain school of modern Shari'ah-minded Muslims, Geertz identifies 'Islam' only with what that school of modernists happens to approve.... He identifies a long series of phenomena, virtually universal to Islam and sometimes found even in the Qur'an itself, as un-Islamic.<sup>133</sup>

This observation is strikingly similar to one made earlier by Zubaida concerning Gellner. It seems to illustrate how, despite their serious philosophical differences, Gellner and Geertz had

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<sup>132</sup> While the new interest in these opposing viewpoints is no doubt at partly due to a changed consensus within the discipline, I wonder if a less oft noted contributing factor is the declining economic and cultural influence of Wahhabis and kindred anti-mystical groups within the contemporary Muslim world. Today, outside observers are more likely to observe Sufi or Sufi-friendly discourse in mainstream Islamic media than has been the case over much of the last 3-4 decades since the advent of petrodollars in the Muslim world.

<sup>133</sup> Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 2.251.

internalized many of the same underlying orientalist assumptions about Islamic culture and history.

More recently, the anthropologist Mark Woodward built on Hodgson's critique and showed that Java's supposedly animist and Buddhist-tainted brand of Islam has a recognizably orthodox Sunni Islamic core. "In identifying mysticism... [and various Javanese religious practices] as invariably 'animist' or 'Hindu-Buddhist,'" writes Hefner, "Geertz ... unwittingly diminished the civilizational pluralism of historic Islam."<sup>134</sup> Woodward, in contrast, posits an "unbroken chain of symbolic interpretation...reaching from Medina and Mecca to the most remote Javanese village."<sup>135</sup>

Geertz focuses largely on the socio-cultural sphere, whereas Woodward expands his focus to include textual traditions as well as cultural symbols,<sup>136</sup> a fateful move that opens new vistas on the deep Islamic influences on Java. In a sense, Geertz focuses on where symbols operate in life, but Woodward explores both their realm of operation and their textual origins. In this his work reminds me of Cornell, who puts social phenomena into fruitful dialogue with the inherited literary and doctrinal patrimony.

## Conclusion

As has been seen, many of the key sociological categories for Islam in general and Sufism in particular inherited by sociologists of religion from the pioneer Max Weber and

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<sup>134</sup> Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvath, eds., *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: Univ of Hawai'i Pr, 1997) 16.

<sup>135</sup> Mark R. Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989) 245.

<sup>136</sup> Frederick Mathewson Denny, "Rev. of *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* by Mark R. Woodward." *History of Religions* 32.1 (1992): 79-81.

subsequently expanded or modified by influential figures such as Ernest Gellner and Clifford Geertz have not stood the test of time. Scholars in a variety of disciplines have begun to critically examine a cluster of axioms on world history, religious experience and socio-economic development long assumed to be universal and discovered them to be grounded in a set of cultural, religious and historical factors that are in important respects specific to a particular region and religious tradition (i.e., northern Europe and Protestantism).

Sufism and Sufi saints have turned out to be notable exceptions to a number of schematic rules that Weber and many later sociologists deemed to govern all religious life, regardless of culture or place. Some more general, quasi-orientalist errors not of Weber's making but nonetheless powerfully reinforced by his approach have long been commonplace in sociological studies of Islam, Muslims and Sufism. One is the exclusive focus on socio-economic functionalism as an explanatory model for religious phenomena—the over-reliance on such theories has slowed development of a holistic vision of saints and the role they play in Islamic societies. In a similar vein, various supposedly unbridgeable gaps within Islamic civilization—especially the ever-popular antinomian Sufi/orthodox jurist and the rural/urban binary oppositions—often invoked by Western sociologists and historians seem, upon closer examination, more the product of human ethnocentric foibles (i.e., the unconscious tendency to exoticize and essentialize the Other) than historical evidence.

In many cases, the best remedy for these problems seems, in a sense, to become more “Weberian” in our method, treating mono-causal explanations, overdrawn binary oppositions

and other forms of historical reductionism<sup>137</sup> with the utmost of suspicion if not outright scorn. To put this another way, sociologists of religion need to apply the proverbial Golden Rule to their work by vowing to discard any explanatory scheme or methodological stance for other cultures that they would find demeaning, simplistic or otherwise inadequate for explaining the development of their own.

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<sup>137</sup> All are intellectual ills against which it must be acknowledged Weber fought on every page he penned, however imperfectly.

### CHAPTER 3: AL-ḤAKĪM AL-TIRMIDHĪ, ISLAMIC SAINTHOOD'S FIRST SYSTEMATIZER

#### Introduction

The early 9<sup>th</sup> century mystic Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Ali al-Tirmidhī (d. 910 CE)—better known as al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī,<sup>138</sup> the Sage of Termez<sup>139</sup>—sketched out a theory of sainthood that was inspire some of the most important thinkers in Sufi tradition. While he has not always recognized by Sufi writers for his contributions,<sup>140</sup> Tirmidhī was one of the most prolific of early mystic authors and is best known for his influential works *Sirat al-Awliyya* (“Life of the Saints”) and his autobiography, *Bad’ al-sha’n*.

While Tirmidhī certainly had a significant influence direct affect on some of Sufism’s most important early figures,<sup>141</sup> his greatest claim to influence is arguably his contribution of several key ideas and tropes to the vocabulary of the 13th century giant Ibn ‘Arabī, whose own sometimes controversial ideas left an indelible mark on Sufism that continues to be debated to this day. Tirmidhī’s first pass at a systematic presentation of the still embryonic Sufi saintly

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<sup>138</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī is not to be confused with the famous hadith collector, Abu Isa al-Tirmidhī (d. 892 CE).

<sup>139</sup> The modern name for Tirmidh in southwestern Uzbekistan, near the Afghan border.

<sup>140</sup> Many early Sufis omitted Tirmidhī from their lists of Sufi thinkers. A notable exception to this trend is the 11<sup>th</sup> century shaykh, ‘Abul Ḥasan ‘Ali Hajwerī, author of the famed mystical treatise in Persian, the *Kashf al-Mahjūb*.

<sup>141</sup> See Muhammad Ibraheem El-Geyoushi, “Al-Tirmidhī’s Theory of Saints and Sainthood,” *The Islamic Quarterly* XIV.4 (1971): 159-201.

hierarchy and his signature teaching of the Seal of the Saints were his most important contributions to Ibn ‘Arabī’s lush and arresting expressions of Sufi teachings about sanctity.<sup>142</sup>

While a number of early Sufis had already made profound observations about the nature of sainthood, before al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī no systematic discussions had been produced of the critical notion of *wilaya*, or “friendship with God.” Tirmidhī’s observations on the *awliyā’* were “not only more systematic [than that of predecessors] but also clearly embedded in a highly-developed world-view composed of a distinct combination of anthropology and cosmology, in which the human being and the cosmos were seamlessly integrated into a single whole.”<sup>143</sup> Thus, Tirmidhī not only fleshed out the saintly typologies of early Sufism, but furthermore articulated a compelling worldview that united the material world and the world of the spirit through the medium of the saint.

In addition to systematizing or expanding Sufi beliefs in circulation in his day concerning sainthood, Tirmidhī introduced some original ideas which have proved not only enormously influential since but equally controversial, including among fellow Sufis.

### **General Categories**

In his *Sira*, Tirmidhī discusses prophets sparingly, and primarily as a point of reference for determining the status of saints. References to prophethood seem to assume a conventional paradigm in most respects. Aside from the repeated hints of parallels between the greatest saints and the prophets, one possibly unorthodox aspect to his discussion would

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<sup>142</sup> See Muhammad Ibraheem El-Geyoushi, “Al-Ḥakīm Al-Tirmidhī : His Works and Thoughts,” *The Islamic Quarterly* I.15 (1971): 17-61.

<sup>143</sup> Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 44.

seem to be his preoccupation with the prophets possessing carnal souls<sup>144</sup> (with the exception of the Prophet Muhammad, whose “Seal of the Prophets”<sup>145</sup> is interpreted by Tirmidhī to be a protection from the whisperings of the carnal soul rather than an end to prophethood).<sup>146</sup>

Tirmidhī speaks little about the average believer in the works under consideration, but a few broad characteristics can be laid out. Tirmidhī makes no bones about God’s special favor being reserved for the elect—or the subset of believers whom, in Sufism as well as Calvinism, are chosen by God during pre-eternity for spiritual distinction—so it is unsurprising that his definition of the lowly masses runs the gamut and leaves few unscathed. He speaks of “the generality of pious worshippers, ascetics, the God-fearing and those of true intentions” as falling under the same category, namely “Men of Earth”<sup>147</sup> who are “granted what God casts unto them in their earth” and who remain enthralled to their carnal souls.<sup>148</sup>

A point made repeatedly by Tirmidhī is the overwhelmingly decisive role played by the *nafs* in the masses’ spiritual development, or more often the lack thereof. “The generality of

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<sup>144</sup> Here I adopt Radtke’s rendering of the Islamic psychological term *nafs*, which literally means the “self” but which is usually equivalent to one’s ego or base inclinations.

<sup>145</sup> The *Khatm al-Nabiyyeen*. This belief is based on the Quranic passage, “Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but (he is) the Messenger of Allah, and the Seal of the Prophets: and Allah has full knowledge of all things.” (33:40), which Muslims have traditionally understood to denote an end to prophethood. After Muhammad, there can only be prophecy in the literal as opposed to legislative sense.

<sup>146</sup> “[F]or Tirmidhi the expression ‘Seal of the Prophets’ does not mean that Muhammad is the last prophet, but rather that the gift of prophecy granted to him is provided with a special seal, which protects him from the devil and the lower soul. In the same way, the ‘Seal of the Friends’ stands in a special position before the rest of the ‘friends of God’” (Karamustafa 45).

<sup>147</sup> Who, in contrast to the *awliyā*, are people of the Celestial Throne.

<sup>148</sup> Bernd Radtke, “The concept of Wilāya in early Sufism.” *Heritage of Sufism 1, Classical Persian Sufism from its origins to Rumi, 700-1300* (Oxford: Oneworld Pubns, 1999) 152.

men,” says Tirmidhī, “is in a state of adulteration because of the lusts and the inclination of the carnal soul.”<sup>149</sup>

Corrupted though the masses may be, they are not ignored by God, who sometimes speaks to them during their sleep, when “their spirit has been separated from the lusts and the carnal soul.”<sup>150</sup> So, even the masses are guided, but only when they are furthest removed from their normal state of consciousness. Most rank and file believers are *‘ummāl allāh* or “workers of God.” Workers of God worship God, but do so in a conditional, self-interested manner that ultimately belies their fidelity to Him. They “need a favorable period of time, prosperity and the dominion of that which is due because that is what gives them their support.” The workers of God “profess [God’s unicity] with their tongue and accept the status of being God’s bondsman...[but] [t]hen the lusts come and overpower their hearts.” Tirmidhī’s implication seems to be that the spiritual defectiveness of such people is manifested in the fact that they must work (and thus depend on external forces) to trust in God.<sup>151</sup>

#### A bifurcation of sainthood

When explaining sainthood in the *Sirat*, Tirmidhī establishes an interesting dichotomy between what he terms the Friend of God (*walī Allāh*) and the Friend of God’s Due (*walī Ḥaqq Allāh*) to refer to the great saints and the more “common” saints, as it were.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 236.

<sup>150</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 236.

<sup>151</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 199-200.

<sup>152</sup> In Tirmidhī’s classificatory system, there are additional subtypes or gradations of the Friend of God’s Due, but those do not add much to this discussion, so there are being omitted. See Karamustafa 45.

While the idea of degrees of spiritual achievement and rank among saints is hardly radical in Islam, this specific terminological distinction among saints is unique to Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, and is, curiously, not employed elsewhere in his oeuvre. This schema is also distinctive in that it inverts conventional associations of the terminology. While there always are by definition implicit gradations of sanctity involved, it is conventional in Sufi literature to use the term “Friend of God” to most of God’s saints, regardless of their relative place in the saintly hierarchy, yet Tirmidhī applies it only to the saints among the saints, the elite of the spiritual elite.<sup>153</sup>

#### The Friend of God’s Due

The term *walī Ḥaqq Allah* is open to many translations and interpretations. The term *walī* can be understood in various ways, but given the context the conventional reading of “friend” seems without need of justification. *Ḥaqq*, or “truth”, to the contrary, is not only a highly polyvocal concept denoting—depending on the context or genre involved—the Divine, truth, law or duty, but is a particularly unexpected turn of phrase in this context of discussions of closeness to God. Tirmidhī’s intention in using this elliptical and cryptic term seems to be to underline the distance that remains between such a journeyman saint and the object of his devotions (namely God). Tirmidhī thus describes the “average” saint with language that simultaneously casts his “friendship” as being with God, God’s truth, or God’s rights, or the obligations owed to God. For these reasons and my desire to mirror the thought-provoking unconventionality of his terminology, I render the term as “Friend of God’s Due.”

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<sup>153</sup> As discussed earlier, other distinctions and titles are applied for members of the *Diwān al-Awliyā’*

Another implication of Tirmidhī's unexpected choice of words, I think, is a connotation of continuous spiritual struggle. This is linguistically manifested in the emphasis in his title in Tirmidhī's system on friendship being indirect, that is with God's law and their fulfillment, as opposed to God himself. The Friends of God's Due occupy a lofty station and enjoy the bounties of cleaving to God, but continue to contend with the carnal soul that bedevils generality of believers. A "veil" remains between them and God. Tirmidhī writes:

And if God sends them forth from their rank to undertake a work, He gives them help through guardians, and they acquit themselves of those works with the guardians. Then they return to their ranks. This is their constant practice.<sup>154</sup>

Since he is subject to the urges of the carnal soul, the achievements of the Friend of God's Due are the result of his struggles in taming his *nafs*. He is so vulnerable that he must be accompanied by guardian angels when performing missions on God's behalf. Only when he has returned to his saintly station is he safe once again. His struggles are cyclical and, thus, the risk of spiritual backsliding and even outright ruin is omnipresent. Radtke again:

The Friend of God's Due is without a doubt holy, blessed and beloved of God, but his status remains paradoxically precarious due to the continuing influence of the carnal soul within him. His spirit soars but remains to some extent chained to earth by the illusions and distractions that blind the masses from God and the realities of his angelic realm.<sup>155</sup>

#### Friends of God

The smaller, more intuitively identified, saintly category is that of the Friends of God. They are the elite from among the spiritual elite, those set aside in pre-eternity by God for

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<sup>154</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 69.

<sup>155</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 80.

spiritual glory. The Friends of God have been blessed by God to be protected in normal circumstances from the urging of their carnal souls.<sup>156</sup>

This difference has a number of important ramifications. Their relief from the whisperings of the carnal soul is constant and *permanent*, a result of their God-given nature as opposed to a temporary blessing. They experience peace and stability unknown to the Friend of God's Due and are consequently able to trust in God fully and be at peace with his will. Radtke explains, "Because of the gift of faith that was bestowed upon them in pre-eternity, the faithful possess a sense of composure and trust in a happy final outcome. God-inspired tranquility increases their composure and their faith grows stronger." Thus, their faith and commitment—unlike those of the Friend of God's Due—"pay no attention to the prosperity of the time or its reversal of fortune" and their spiritual state is unaffected by the vagaries of life.<sup>157</sup>

They are purified and blessed with the gift of non-prophetic revelation<sup>158</sup> and able to receive communication from God when conscious.<sup>159</sup> With this closeness to God comes knowledge of the Unseen, according to Tirmidhī, even concerning their own ultimate fate in the Hereafter. "God conceals the knowledge of final outcomes from the true believers out of consideration, lest their carnal souls act on their own initiative, and lest arrogance and vanity

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<sup>156</sup> Tirmidhī makes it clear that it remains possible to fall from grace since he discusses the blessings bestowed on saints as they progress spiritually as being extremely perilous, but he does not explain how this works when a saint's soul has been sealed from normal temptation.

<sup>157</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 136,199.

<sup>158</sup> Tirmidhī emphasizes this fact and often identifies this group by the label "those who receive supernatural speech."

<sup>159</sup> Unlike normal people, with whom God only communicates during their sleep (if at all).

take hold of them because of the favors God as bestowed on them.”<sup>160</sup> This knowledge is granted to the Friends of God because they have been protected from their carnal souls.

Perhaps the most interesting dimension to this conception of sainthood is the presumption that the once that carnal soul of the Friend of God has been purified, they cease to exist separately from God’s will. Unlike the Friend of God’s Due, the Friend of God is not in danger of being corrupted by the miraculous blessings granted by God to saints. Thus, the Friend of God is described by Tirmidhī as “inactive,” meaning he allows himself to be moved by God’s will. While the Friends of God’s Due act in the world on God’s behalf, they do so without fully escaping their carnal souls and, thus, ultimately remain apart from God. Friends of God, by contrast, become pure instruments of God whose own wills are, thanks to God’s grace, utterly absent from their selfless acts.<sup>161</sup>

Elsewhere, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī forcefully dismisses other Sufis who argue for the possibility of infinite spiritual progression<sup>162</sup> as not merely as mistaken, but as “fool[s] [who are] given to words and analogies...[and who] speak...with the tongue of devils.”<sup>163</sup> The precise target of these fulminations are ultimately ambiguous, as Tirmidhī ties this act of rebellion against God directly to being “compelled by the carnal soul,” a failing which is hardly rare in

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<sup>160</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 135.

<sup>161</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 69.

<sup>162</sup> The idea that is, those who deny that there are “station[s] beyond which there is no other”—

<sup>163</sup> On this point, the translators are moved to observe that “[a]s usual Tirmidhī ... denigrate[s] ... [his opponents’] moral character before presenting his arguments against their views” (Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 96). It is ironic that al-Hakim al-Tirmidhī imputes such base spiritual inclinations to his adversaries in these debates, as one can’t help but wonder if his impassioned advocacy of the limits of spiritual stations might be in part influenced by the need to put forward his theory of the Seal of Friendship, a lofty office that he unmistakably implies himself to occupy. To accept the notion of infinite spiritual potential for the Friends of God would undermine the *raison d’être* for his distinctive concept of the Seal of the Saints, which is discussed below.

human affairs (or even sainthood, according to Tirmidhī). Given Tirmidhī's uncompromising assessments of the faults of *even other saints* and the way Tirmidhī explains most beliefs with which he disagrees as a shameful surrender to the carnal soul, it is difficult to imagine many outside the august ranks of the *abdāl* to whom these critiques would not apply.

### The Abdāl

On the *Abdāl*—who are presumably drawn from the ranks of Tirmidhī's "friends of God" and about whom much has already been said already—Tirmidhī declares quite unambiguously that the world would not continue to exist without their sanctifying presence and mediation before God. Thus, Tirmidhī broadly affirms the elaborate saintly schema discussed earlier.<sup>164</sup>

### The Seal of the Saints

In the doctrine of the Seal of the Saints, we have Tirmidhī's most distinctive and influential contributions to Islamic thought. The Seal of the Saints is the greatest of the Friends of God and the leader of the *Abdāl*. He knows firsthand and intimately the advanced spiritual states of other Friends of God and has reached the pinnacle of closeness to God. Tirmidhī explains:

[H]e has advanced through all these realms to the realm of Unicity and Singleness [...]. He is the chief of the Friends of God and he possesses the seal of Friendship (*khatim al-walaya*) from his Lord. When he arrives at the limit [or the last] of God's names, where shall he go from there?<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> One sometimes wonders whether some of this is not motivated by a desire to reproach the Shī'ī for their (in Tirmidhī's Sunni view) extreme reverence for the Prophet Muhammad's family.

<sup>165</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 97.

This figure performs a role for sainthood saints that Tirmidhī likens to place of the Prophet Muhammad in the unfolding of prophethood in the world. Tirmidhī writes that the “station [of the Seal of the Saints] is the closest station to Muhammad.”<sup>166</sup>

By acting as a “seal” in the sense of conferring legitimacy, the Seal of the Saints certifies the sacred institution that he heads. Like Muhammad, he serves as an intermediary with God for his peers; just as most pre-Islamic prophets<sup>167</sup> depend on Muhammad’s intervention for their ultimate salvation, so do most of the Friends of God require the grace bestowed by God through the Seal of the Saints in order to attain paradise.

Whereas the physical world depends on the grace arising from the presence of the *Abdāl*, the *Abdāl* ultimately depend on the Seal of the Saints for their well being. Thus, the ultimate welfare of the *Abdāl*, the holiest of saints, in the next life ironically appears to be tied entirely not to their own virtues. A more important position in the cosmic order for the Seal of the Saints is difficult to conceive of, even if it is unclear how literally these claims are to be taken in light of the extended discussions that occur elsewhere in Tirmidhī’s work concerning the salvation of the saints, who unlike the masses will enter Paradise without being judged.<sup>168</sup>

#### The upper limits to spiritual progress

As has already been noted, Tirmidhī argues forcefully against the notion of infinite spiritual growth. In the case of the real Friends of God, God’s attributes enter their breasts and

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<sup>166</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 207.

<sup>167</sup> According to Sufi tradition, the Prophet Abraham is an exception, attaining salvation without Muhammad’s intercession.

<sup>168</sup> This would seem to contradict the notion of full Friend of God being set aside for salvation during pre-eternity, as well.

become merged with their hearts, so that the Friends of God reach a state of sanctity that “is not subject to being ‘known,’” and the Friend’s heart “at last takes up a settled position.” Nothing—no stage of higher spiritual achievement (or authority)—lies beyond this position.<sup>169</sup>

However, while on the one hand placing limits on spiritual development among God’s Friends, Tirmidhī rejects a familiar—and, in Islamic orthodoxy, nearly sacrosanct—limit for human spirituality. Tirmidhī questions the peerless virtue of the first “elite” of Islamic tradition, the luminaries of the first few generations of Muslims who lived during the golden era of the Four “Rightly Guided” Caliphs.<sup>170</sup> Tirmidhī argues at length, and from various (sometimes creative) angles, for the idea that, contrary to orthodox Islamic tradition, holiness comparable to that of Umar and Abu Bakr and other spiritual giants of the Islamic golden age will return to the Ummah at the end of time.<sup>171</sup>

#### Perfected sainthood and prophethood partake of same essence

In addition to the various functional parallels established between sainthood and prophethood (e.g., miracles, revelation), Tirmidhī provides various arguments that blur the line between sainthood and prophethood, in some cases even asserting the former can surpass the latter in holiness. Those “who receive supernatural speech” (i.e., Friends of God) are “very close [in rank] to the prophets” and have, Tirmidhī provocatively declares, “almost

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<sup>169</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 98.

<sup>170</sup> These are, in chronological order, Abu Bakr (r. 632-634), Umar (r. 634-644), Uthman (r. 644-656), and ‘Ali (r. 656-661). In Sunni Islamic tradition, the mores and widely shared religious convictions of the era that ended with ‘Ali’s assassination in 661 CE are considered normative for successive generations. It is assumed that the Ummah has been in collective moral decline ever since, with the Muslims collective holiness being inversely related to their historical distance from this golden era.

<sup>171</sup> One wonders whether the impetus for this doctrine arises from the exigencies of his doctrine of the Seal of Saints, a post-golden era figure whose spiritual potential would otherwise be curtailed.

attained their status.”<sup>172</sup> All but a handful of the pre-Islamic prophets or saints will depend on Muhammad for salvation and that only a few<sup>173</sup> will exceed enter paradise in advance of the saints of the Muslim community. In fact, twelve pre-Islamic prophets will wish to belong to Muhammad’s *Ummah*.<sup>174</sup>

Saintly miracles are real and akin to those of prophets

Not surprisingly, Tirmidhī emphatically affirms the existence of miracles by saints. He takes “scholars of outward religious learning” to task for “reject[ing] the miraculous gifts...of the Friends of God, such as walking on water and traveling great distances in brief time” because they mistakenly assume that to believe in these occurrences would lessen the dignity of God’s prophets. Tirmidhī adopts conventional Sufi terminology and ideas.<sup>175</sup>

What is most interesting about Tirmidhī’s discussion of miracles is how he ascribes these errors not to the customary culprits of ignorance or even sin. Rather, deniers of saintly miracles balk at non-prophetic miracles because they themselves lack them, he claims. Thus, there is an additional, almost Freudian factor: jealousy. Many other early Sufi writers refute skepticism regarding saintly miracles by going to considerable lengths to differentiate the ontological status of saintly miracles from those of prophets by enumerating the (sometimes rather fine) circumstantial distinctions between the two, but Tirmidhī takes a different and far simpler tack. Rather than dutifully demoting the miracles of the saints, the author turns the

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<sup>172</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 130.

<sup>173</sup> According to one tradition, Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob, Isaac, and Mary.

<sup>174</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 130,157. Another tradition cited by Tirmidhī explains that “God has servants who are not prophets or martyrs, and the martyrs and prophets envy them because of the closeness and the position God has given them.”

<sup>175</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 19.

tables by challenging the understanding and motivations of skeptics. He takes the parallel existence and legitimacy of saintly miracles for granted and denounces rejecters for being “far astray” and ignorant of a fundamental and self-evident distinction.

Saints can sin, but only because they are fated by God to do so

The final aspect to Tirmidhī’s conception of sainthood under consideration here is his novel understanding of sin. The “friends of God” are protected from their carnal souls, but remain capable of sin in a paradoxical manner: the saint can sin *when it is foreordained by God*. This distinction seems a rather fine one to this writer,<sup>176</sup> the idea seems curious when viewed psychologically and sociologically, as it could be used to rationalize moral infractions by those deemed saints.

Still, his description of the pain and fear experienced by the Friend of God upon committing such a “sin” is very moving, and paradoxical in the way it describes consuming shame for what is, it seems, an involuntary error:

Every hair [on his body] cries out to God in remorse, every one of his veins groans to God in pain, every one of his joints springs apart in fear and terror. His carnal soul is baffled and his heart is bewildered. Moreover, when he looks at God’s loftiness, he almost dies fear, and when he looks at God’s love, he bursts into flame like a fire. Then the fire consumes his bones and his liver is almost cut to shreds.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> One wonders whether it is more a stylistic nuance resulting from one of Tirmidhī’s persistent metaphors (namely, that the Friend of God is so merged with God’s will that he ceases to act independently) than a meaningful theological distinction.

<sup>177</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 165.

A “sin” that is not the result of personal choice seems a contradiction in terms, but of course this is the crux of a millennium old debate within Islamic theology. So perhaps this is in keeping with the overall predestinarian tenor of his thinking.<sup>178</sup>

#### The uniformity of the saints

Tirmidhī posits, based on prophetic traditions, that the Friends of God share the same spiritual essence, as their hearts are literally fused into one perfect heart.<sup>179</sup> This precept, while a beautiful and powerful metaphor for the shared nobility and utter absence of ego of the Friends of God, seems paradoxical given Tirmidhī’s relentless emphasis on hierarchy among the saints. It seems at odds with the existence of the many spiritual ranks that Tirmidhī establishes and insists on so firmly, not to mention the underlying dependency relationship of the vast majority of saints to the *abdāl* and the Seal of the Saints. Nevertheless, to a degree, the assertion that their hearts form one perfect heart does parallel in Islam the Qur’anic assertion that although the prophets came at different points in history and differed to a degree in the character of their messages and in the quality of God that they most manifest (Jesus, *rūḥ al-Allah*;<sup>180</sup> Moses, *kalīm Allah*;<sup>181</sup> Muhammad, *ḥabīb Allah*<sup>182</sup>), they are nevertheless one in the sense that “We [i.e. God] do not distinguish between them” (Qur’ān 2:285).

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<sup>178</sup> What makes this doubly challenging intellectually is Tirmidhī’s emphatic insistence on the Friends of God being for all practical purposes spiritually perfect. Yet Tirmidhī seems hesitant to take this idea to its logical conclusion, and affirms doctrine that seems to me as political (i.e., intended to head off criticism for giving saints excessive reverence) as it is theological in origin.

<sup>179</sup> “The hearts of the Friends of God are so intimately joined together through God’s loftiness that all their hearts have become as the heart of one man. And the Prophet has spoken of this: “Seventy thousand of my community shall enter Paradise without a reckoning, their hearts having become like the heart of one man.” Moreover, they have become this way because their hearts are oblivious to everything except God, and they have attached themselves to a single point of attachment. Thus they are as one heart” (Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 145).

<sup>180</sup> The “Spirit” [or “Breath”] of Allah.”

Sociologically, it would seem to establish a societal expectation of a degree of external uniformity—whether in terms of teachings or behavior—among claimants to sainthood. For him to hold this position is unexpected given how frequently and passionately he decries charlatanry among fellow mystics.

Saints manifest all divine traits in human relations

Another quality of the Friends of God is the way that they manifest God's qualities in the world.<sup>183</sup> The Friend of God “models himself on God and conforms to that which is due.” When he initially encounters wickedness, like God he is offended and ready to hold sinners accountable, but his predisposition toward clemency prevails in the first instance. When he again encounters wickedness, he is outraged and eager to smite fully, but again refrains from stern reactions since God's breath of mercy in his heart “intervenes and extinguishes that rage and softens his speech.” However, when sinners persist despite his warnings, his wrath is unleashed and is this third time pitiless and implacable, for such rebellious behavior is, says Tirmidhī, the hallmark of the enemies of God. Such offenses a sincere believer cannot tolerate.<sup>184</sup>

These descriptions are intriguing on multiple levels. They establish the saint as the conduit of God's mercy, and also his wrath, as well. In doing so, saints represent the whole

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<sup>181</sup> The “Converser with Allah.”

<sup>182</sup> The “Beloved of Allah.”

<sup>183</sup> In Islamic theology, nothing is known about God's essence since only his “names”—his qualities—are knowable. See Rubin Uri, “Asnam,” *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim world*, ed. Richard C. Martin (New York: Macmillan Reference USA: Thomson/Gale, 2004) 106.

<sup>184</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 191.

gamut of divine qualities in human affairs.<sup>185</sup> In this scenario, saints not only guide and save, but enact God's will as vicegerents and dispensers of justice. Tirmidhī even describes saints as God's "spear."<sup>186</sup> The subtext of this might be another "encroachment" into the traditional role of prophets. It has to be said that while saints may not be bringing a new law from God in Tirmidhī's mystical framework, they seem to be doing more than just providing spiritual guidance about an existing dispensation.

## Conclusion

In the writings of Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī one spies through the mists the contours of the future edifice of classical Sufi sainthood for the first time and encounters an intricate and powerfully articulated an extended argument for the centrality of saints in Muslim spiritual life.

Seen from a sociological perspective, Tirmidhī's framework has interesting—and in some respects conflicting—implications. On the one hand, one might view his *Sira* as a veiled manifesto of independence for Sufi religious leaders from traditional scholars who rely exclusively on exoteric sources of guidance. The framework constantly emphasizes the primacy of the kind of unmediated spiritual knowledge possessed by the saints, and its unrepentant elitism and privileging of innate spiritual gifts over acquired knowledge also in practice elevate Sufi teachers conventional exoteric scholars as spiritual guides.

At the same time, Tirmidhī's stringent saintly typologies and scathing charges against so many of fellow mystics undermine in practice the *shuyukh* as a locus of religious authority

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<sup>185</sup> This is a notion we will see again in more developed form when we turn to Ibn 'Arabi.

<sup>186</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 195.

by explicitly relativizing the wisdom of most saints (i.e., who fall under the rubric of Friends of God's Due). Yet more damaging, it asserts that charlatanry is widespread among claimants to sainthood.

One could interpret some aspects of his thought—especially the notion of the Seal of the Saints and his creative re-interpretation of the Seal of the Prophets—as stratagems for self-promotion since they not only establish an august spiritual office for which he is a obvious candidate, but they even go so far as to tie it to the Muhammad's own mission through symmetrical discussions of saints and prophets.

## CHAPTER 4: IBN ‘ARABĪ: SAINTHOOD IS ELABORATED

### Ibn ‘Arabī’s importance

“[I]n any investigation into Islamic sainthood, the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi constitute a major reference point, which the researcher ignores at the risk of laying himself open to many misinterpretations.”<sup>187</sup> Few figures can be credibly said to have left a mark on Sufism even remotely comparable in influence or sophistication to that made by the famous—and, for some Muslims, infamous—mystic Ibn ‘Arabī. It is furthermore difficult to exaggerate either Ibn ‘Arabī’s originality or brilliance. Ibn ‘Arabī’s fame results from many qualities to his incredible literary and theological output, but his most important contributions are, in my view, his powerful expressions of ontological paradoxes of human existence (which we touch upon only very briefly) and his compelling re-articulations of the teachings on sanctity inherited from Tirmidhī and other early Sufi thinkers.

Ibn ‘Arabī—often referred to by his admirers as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (“Great Master”)<sup>188</sup>—was born during the last quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE in Murcia in Moorish Spain, where he functioned as a scholar of hadith until his departure on pilgrimage to Mecca in 1200. Over the next 45 years, he traveled widely through the Middle East visiting Mecca several times and ultimately settling in Damascus, where he spent his final two decades of life.

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<sup>187</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Seal* 10.

<sup>188</sup> As a result, ideas pertaining to or in the spirit of Ibn ‘Arabī are sometimes referred to as being “Akbarian.”

Ibn Arabī undoubtedly borrowed much from other mystics of his era, but even in cases where he can be said to have built on the insights of his predecessors, he often brought to the discussion of sainthood a degree of systemization and/or sophistication that had yet to be seen within Sufism. “Most other early Sufi thinkers seem to broach the topic only in passing. They did not produce a theory of *walaya per se*.”<sup>189</sup>

As Chodkiewicz points out, Ibn ‘Arabī lived in an era of upheaval,<sup>190</sup> and “Studies of the veneration of saints in the Muslim world,” notes Chih, “have often linked it to periods of crisis.”<sup>191</sup> So it does not come as a great surprise that momentous philosophical and doctrinal change was on the horizon, as well.

[T]he age of Ibn ‘Arabi must be regarded as the start of a new era. It witnessed the appearance both of the theoretical formulations and of the institutions that were to dictate all later developments in Islamic mysticism down to our day. ....It...was also the period of transition in Sufi doctrine from implicit to explicit, and the start, sociologically speaking, of its transition from informality to formality, fluidity to organization.<sup>192</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabī’s time was notable for being the stage for far-reaching developments in and the diffusion of new mystical doctrines, doctrines which had previously only been transmitted either orally or in fragmentary written form.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s creativity and eloquence are undeniable, but his doctrinal originality can be exaggerated. Glassé gives an example of this dynamic in Ibn ‘Arabī’s influence: “Although Ibn ‘Arabī is credited with this doctrine, *waḥdat al-wujūd*...Ibn ‘Arabī’s role was in fact that of

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<sup>189</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Seal* 17.

<sup>190</sup> For example, the loss of Bagdad to the Mongols in 1258 and the collapse of Abbasid rule.

<sup>191</sup> Chih, “Sainte té” 90; my translation.

<sup>192</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Seal* 10.

expressing more formally, and perhaps more amply, ideas that had up until then been taught only orally.”<sup>193</sup>

The newly systematic mystical framework that emerged from this historical crucible during this time bears the unmistakable imprint of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought. His “comprehensive synthesis” of existing Sufi beliefs was “from then on viewed as a summit ... an essential landmark and a fruitful source of technical terminology.”<sup>194</sup> Since then, many have agreed with the Great Shaykh and many have disagreed, but—however they felt—few have been able to ignore him.

#### Ibn ‘Arabī’s controversy nearly equaled his influence

In keeping with his larger-than-life qualities, controversies surrounding Ibn Arabī have been equally decisive on subsequent Islamic intellectual history. His influence on kindred spirits has been matched in depth, duration and intensity by the acrimonious debates over certain of his more challenging ideas that have raged at regular intervals in Muslim lands. During the two and a half centuries following his passing, a cottage industry of polemics, often based on the writings of Ibn Taymiyya<sup>195</sup> was born, with 34 scholarly refutations and 138 hostile fatwahs being produced against him in Arabic alone.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Cyril Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, Rev. ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001) 192.

<sup>194</sup> Glassé 192.

<sup>195</sup> Claude Addas, *Ibn ‘Arabī, the Voyage of No Return* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2000) 143. Ibn Taymiyya’s attacks focused primarily on his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikām* (“Bezels of Wisdom”). The *Futūḥāt*, to the contrary, received lavish praise from Ibn Taymiyya.

<sup>196</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Seal* 19.

Ibn Arabī's highly esoteric teachings became the subject of polarizing debates between mystics who found his fresh and sometimes dizzyingly subtle insights into Islamic tradition liberating and those who saw in his sometimes highly provocative presentation of otherwise widespread Sufi beliefs grossly impious deviance, if not outright heresy that needed to be stamped out.

The idea in Ibn Arabī's philosophical system to have attracted the most attention and vitriol is undoubtedly the notion of *wahdat al-wujūd*<sup>197</sup> or "Unity of Being", but this subtle metaphysical construct does not fall within the scope of this paper. Like Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī before him his beliefs concerning sainthood and especially its supposed culmination, the "Seal of the Saints," have also inspired controversy and opposition from Muslim scholars over the centuries

### **Saints as the quasi-peers of the Prophets**

Whether through illustrative new layers of detail or through the disclosure of hitherto unexplored corollaries or alternate interpretations, Ibn 'Arabī embellished and deepened his era's mystical traditions in a multitude of exquisite ways.<sup>198</sup> One notable departure on Ibn 'Arabī's part from the legacy of Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and early Sufis was his more overt advocacy of a subtler distinction between the spiritual stature of the saints and that of the prophets. Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī was cautious on this matter, loudly reaffirming the ontological superiority

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<sup>197</sup> This term—which Nasr and Leaman point out was never used by Ibn 'Arabī.—refers to the controversial theological claim that since nothing except God truly exists, all things to the extent they "exist" at all exist in God 5. Hence the notion of the Unity of Being.

<sup>198</sup> Since there is enormous overlap between Ibn 'Arabī and Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī—and, indeed, many other early Sufis—I will confine myself primarily to those areas of Akbarian thought where new doctrines (or idiosyncratic interpretations of existing ones) are put forward.

of prophets over saints.<sup>199</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī explicitly includes prophets in the discussion and is occasionally mischievously provocative, even if he too periodically reaffirms their preeminence.

After making the politically obligatory declaration that prophetic miracles are fundamentally different from those of the saints, Ibn ‘Arabī goes on at length of the near-prophetic qualities of saints.<sup>200</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī more openly—albeit still strategically and sometimes tacitly—asserts what most previous mystics only dared to hint at, that prophets and saints are colleagues in a sense and that prophets are from this particular standpoint basically fellow saints who have been assigned a lofty but ultimately kindred responsibility. Whereas the responsibility and scope of prophethood is limited to a time and place, Ibn ‘Arabī said sainthood is universal and beyond time or place. Ibn ‘Arabī asserts the part of a prophet that is saintly to be “superior” to that of that which is “prophetic,” but understandably hastens to note that this distinction can only be made when discussing prophet’s internal natures since other saints do not possess have both gifts in their own person.

Like Tirmidhī, Ibn ‘Arabī’s discusses (and at far greater length<sup>201</sup>) the notion of the manifestation of God’s attributes in saints. Each of God’s names, says Ibn ‘Arabī, “has a servanthood specific to it, and the specific characteristics of the perfect men are determined

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<sup>199</sup> This might be partly because Tirmidhī had been accused of denigrating the sanctity of the prophets by praising the virtues of saints.

<sup>200</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī was not the only one to push the envelope regarding the excellences of saints, as this quote from Qushayri shows: “the Sufi shaykhs, like Khidr, are endowed with special mercy and knowledge directly from God that are denied even the prophet Moses” (Karamustafa 118-19).

<sup>201</sup> This is explored in great detail in his famous (and most controversial) work, the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikām*.

by the specific names they serve.”<sup>202</sup> Yet paradoxically, in keeping with Tustari’s precept that “[t]he first stage of *tawakkul* (dependence on God) is that the worshipper should be in the hands of God like a corpse in the hands of the washer... [turning] without impulse or initiative on its part”<sup>203</sup> this manifestation is ultimately an *absence*. The disappearance of the saint’s identify—his separation of himself from God—accompanies the manifestation of divine attributes, to the point where he no longer “acts” at all (i.e., he does nothing in his own capacity, independently of God’s will). This inactivity and complete submission lead the gnostic to a stage of spiritual perfection where the only act he performs is “the contemplation of God in his creation.”<sup>204</sup>

### **A thriving ecosystem of sanctity**

Some Sufis have claimed that the hidden world of saints mirrors that of prophets in quantity as well as in the respects discussed already in connection with Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, meaning that the total number of saints is comparable in magnitude to that of the prophets (e.g., 124,000 of them). Given the presence of saints in all times and places, this is not hard to imagine; if all nations have received a “warner” from God, as the Quran asserts, it stands to reason that an innumerable multitude of lesser, non-prophetic guides were raised in most times and places in pre-Islamic history between appearances of a divine dispensation.

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<sup>202</sup> William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989) 369.

<sup>203</sup> Qtd. in J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 29.

<sup>204</sup> Hakim 35.

What distinguishes Ibn ‘Arabī from earlier Sufis is the infinite gradations and variations of sainthood that he introduces. In terms of concrete “fixed”<sup>205</sup> classes of saints, Ibn ‘Arabī adds a host of new categories. In his schema, sainthood is broken down into 84 concrete classes. Forty-nine classes of conventional, circumstance-dependent saints whose ranks ebb and flow are laid out by Ibn ‘Arabī, and another 35 classes of greater, “fixed saints (i.e., the *Rijāl al-Adad*) are discussed as well. Among these categories are some rather exotic types, such as the *Rajabiyyūn* (saints whose miraculous powers only manifest during the month of Rajab<sup>206</sup>) or the *Mudabbirūn* (saints who choose to return to this world after attaining union with God to help others; as Chodkiewicz puts it elegantly, “having arrived at Unity, they return to multiplicity”).<sup>207</sup>

This, however, is just the tip of the iceberg. McGregor observes that Ibn ‘Arabī adds two new dimensions to the saintly typologies which vastly increase (and complicate) the types of saints.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of the assembly of saints claims that each level a saint reaches includes all the levels below it. That is, if the seventh level, for example, is reached, that individual may be found at each preceding level. Progress up the *tabaqāt* [classes] in other words, is cumulative. It would appear then, that with all three elements of classification in play—the inheritance,<sup>208</sup> the horizontal classes<sup>209</sup>, and the

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<sup>205</sup> That is, the types of saints discussed already in the context of Tirmidhī and Sufism in general.

<sup>206</sup> The 7<sup>th</sup> month of the Islamic lunar calendar. Rajab has been traditionally viewed as a holy month.

<sup>207</sup> Here I am reminded of the Buddhist *Bodhisattva* archetype of saint.

<sup>208</sup> This type of sainthood is discussed below.

<sup>209</sup> That is, the customary classes.

cumulative nature of the latter [in Ibn ‘Arabī’s scheme]—the varieties of sainthood in the diwan are innumerable.<sup>210</sup>

Thus with Ibn ‘Arabī the notion of sainthood reaches such levels of complexity and variety that one can imagine a 124,000 *types of saints*! Ibn ‘Arabī populates the universe with saints at many different levels of cosmology. To understand this claim, we must look at the idea of prophetic inheritance.

### **Prophetic inheritance**

Sufis contend that the famed “inheritors of the prophets” mentioned in the Hadith are not exoteric conventional scholars who gain knowledge indirectly—via books and reasoning—but rather the Sufi *awliyā’* whom Allāh has blessed with intuitive, direct knowledge (i.e., *ma’rifā*)—predates Ibn ‘Arabī (and even Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī), but once again we see a long-standing doctrine finding its hitherto fullest expression and acquiring intriguing new dimensions in Ibn ‘Arabī’s hands.

A simple but far-reaching example is Ibn ‘Arabī’s broader interpretation the of hadith in question. Ibn ‘Arabī takes note of the *plural* construction of this phrase and deduces from this linguistic detail that Sufis inherit not only from the Prophet, but also—and in spite of the *Khatm an-Nabiyyīn*—from other prophets (including those of the Jewish and Christian traditions), as well.

These “vertical” sacred lineages (as opposed to the “horizontal” classes of the *Dīwān al-Awliyā’*) lead to some counterintuitive but very stimulating notions, such as the idea that saints not only inherit spiritual teachings from previous, pre-Islamic prophets but that such a “non-

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<sup>210</sup> Richard J. A. McGregor, *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt: The Wafā’ Sufi Order and the Legacy of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004) 10.

Muhammadan” saint can become so attuned to this previous prophet’s message that he may unknowingly say things *that violate Islam* (or even appear heretical).

Another striking consequence of the idea of prophetic inheritance is the expectation that saints tapping into different prophets’ spiritual heritages will be blessed with different types of miracles. “The most outward manifestation of a saint’s inheritance,” says McGregor, “is the type of miracles he performs; if he is Moses-ike (*Musawi*), then his face or hand might glow (cf. Q. 27:12), if he is an inheritor of Jesus (*‘Isawi*<sup>211</sup>) then he might walk on water or raise the dead.”<sup>212</sup>

That is not to say that these prophets are wholly independent of Muhammad, as Ibn ‘Arabī subscribes to the notion of the *Nur Muḥammadi* (Muhammadan Light)<sup>213</sup> of Sahl al-Tustarī and Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī—which Ibn ‘Arabi adapts for his own signature concepts of the

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<sup>211</sup> Note the distinction here between “Christian” in the conventional sense and *Isawi*. This is not meant to imply that Ibn ‘Arabī accepted claims to divine guidance by “normal” Christian saints, who presumably subscribed to Trinitarian beliefs that are anathema to Muslims. An *Isawi* saint is basically a Muslim, but one who through some mysterious way draws on the earlier, proto-Islamic spiritual lineages of Jesus Christ, who according to Islamic tradition is one of the vast number of prophets—one famous hadith claims there to have been a total of 124,000—who preceded the Prophet Muhammad. So, while Ibn ‘Arabī is known for some intriguingly ecumenical utterances, it would be mistaken to take this concept as an endorsement of other religions’ claims to divine truth.

<sup>212</sup> McGregor 19.

<sup>213</sup> Böwering explains this crucial doctrine, as follows: “God is the light that issues forth in its radiance and articulates itself in the primordial light of Muhammad the primal man and archetypal mystic. This divine light pervades the whole universe of this-worldly and other-worldly realities and represents the hidden marrow of their existence .... The primordial Muhammad represents the crystal which draws light upon itself, absorbs it in its core (the heart of Muhammad), projects it unto mankind in the Quranic scripture, and enlightens the soul of mystic man...Man issues as an infinitely small particle of divine light in pre-existential eternity” (Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Quranic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl At-Tustari* (d. 283/896) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980) 264). See also Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Quran in Classical Islam* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006) 172.

*Ḥaqiqah al-Muḥammadiyya* (Muhammadan Reality)<sup>214</sup>—and the *al-Insān al-Kāmil* (Perfect Man).<sup>215</sup>

While the prophets are direct sources in their own right they ultimately derive their inspiration from the head of their order (i.e., Muhammad), whose own essence by virtue of his being the culmination of Creation predates—according to these traditions long cherished by Sufis—the creation of the world and from whose own “light” the world itself was created

Ibn ‘Arabī complicates things yet more by adding that saints can inherit from *multiple prophets at once* and, worse, that this relationship of inheritance is neither static nor even necessarily exclusive. Some saints inherit from multiple prophets at once. Thus, a saint manifesting multiple distinct virtues that are strongly associated with specific prophets might be receiving inspiration from more than one prophet. For example, a saint who is both gentle and powerful might be simultaneously *‘isawi* and *muḥammadi*, respectively. Finally, Ibn ‘Arabī also notes that these inheritance relation can change—he himself began, he claims, as *‘isawi*, but later became successively *mūsawī*,<sup>216</sup> then *hūdī*.<sup>217</sup>

The previous point by Chittick concerning the difficulty of determining the degree of literalism intended in saintly typologies is yet more apt in the case of Ibn ‘Arabī’s vast

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<sup>214</sup> The *Nur Muḥammadi* and the *Ḥaqiqah al-Muḥammadiyya* are very closely related, to the extent of often being used interchangeably. The latter seems to this writer to differ primarily in style, acknowledging more openly the Logos-like implications of this ontological concept.

<sup>215</sup> Or the “Complete Human.” The *al-Insān al-Kāmil* “represents the fullest manifestation of the divine in the cosmos and is also the origin of all human spirits and a representation of their greatest potential” (Valerie J. Hoffman, “Annihilation in the Messenger of God: The Development of a Sufi Practice,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31.3 (1999): 352).

<sup>216</sup> Pertaining to Moses.

<sup>217</sup> Pertaining to Hūd, a pre-Islamic prophet sent to the Arabian tribe of Aad, which rejected him and was destroyed by God for it.

constellation of classes of saints. Ibn ‘Arabī’s evident fondness for symbolism can complicate things. In his *Futūḥāt*, Ibn ‘Arabī explains that “for everything involving a precise number in this world there is a corresponding group of saints containing an equal number of individuals.”<sup>218</sup> Thus, there must be saintly analogues to the 12 months, the 24 hours in a day, the 7 days in a week, the 4 corners of the earth, and so on.

### **Ibn ‘Arabī’s update on the Seal of the Saints**

Ibn ‘Arabī enthusiastically mined Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī’s *Sirat Khatm al-Awliyā’* in his *Fūṭuḥāt al-Makkiyya* (“Meccan Revelations”), borrowing especially deeply from its statements concerning the notion of the Seal of the Saints.<sup>219</sup> Ibn ‘Arabī’s treatment of the Seal of the Saints is loosely based on Tirmidhī’s concept of the same name, but Tirmidhī merely provided a starting point for the Great Shaykh. Ibn ‘Arabī some few noteworthy (and characteristically creative) departures from Tirmidhī’s framework, as we shall see.

Not unlike how Tirmidhī’s broke the notion of sainthood into two new categories, Ibn ‘Arabī splits the office of the Seal of Saints into three: the Seal of non-Muhammadan Sainthood, the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood, and the Seal of the Children.

In Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology, the Seal of non-Muhammadan Sainthood is the Prophet Jesus. Jesus thus presides over all non-Muhammadan saints in a complex manner. In an ironic (and quite original<sup>220</sup>) twist given the traditional Islamic belief in true prophethood ending

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<sup>218</sup> Qtd. in Chodkiewicz, *Seal* 47

<sup>219</sup> “Borrowing” is perhaps not the best choice of words, since Ibn ‘Arabī modified Tirmidhī’s ideas and terminology quite freely.

“Ibn ‘Arabī’s explicit promotion of Jesus to this high office in the spiritual hierarchy is unique among major Ṣūfī theorists” (Elmore 144).

with Muhammad, Ibn ‘Arabi establishes that saintly inspiration enjoyed by saints inspired by pre-Islamic prophets is overseen Jesus and will remain with us until the end of time (i.e., Jesus’s Second Coming). So, these lineages live on and even continue to grow in a certain sense. However, there is a catch. These non-Muhammadan spiritual lineages are imperfect. They are indirect by virtue of the fact that they arrive not directly from Muhammad,<sup>221</sup> but indirectly through his follower Jesus. To use an astronomical metaphor, the moon continues to shine after the sun’s setting, but its light is not really its own.

The Seal of Muhammadan Saints—hereafter referred to as simply the “Seal of the Saints,” since this is the aspect that gets most attention from Ibn ‘Arabī—is a complex figure that enjoys even more cosmic importance in Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology than that of his counterpart Tirmidhī. An explicit parallel to the Seal of the Prophets and the measure and culmination by which all saints are judged and sanctified, the Seal of the Saints is also the culmination of Muhammadan sainthood, meaning that there are no Muhammadan saints outside of his lineage. (This last point takes on great import when one notices how unmistakably Ibn ‘Arabī hints that he himself is the Seal.<sup>222</sup>) The Seal is the supreme authority

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<sup>221</sup> Who, as discussed, is the primordial this-worldly source of mystical inspiration according to doctrine of the Muhammadan Reality.

<sup>222</sup> This introduces a conundrum. I find it hard to imagine that Ibn ‘Arabī was asserting by this that the inspiration of the Seal (i.e., himself) ended so much as simply his preeminence in that chain of spiritual transmission. Given Ibn ‘Arabī’s belief that the highest offices of the Congress of Saints are reserved for the Muhammadan saints and given how this office will exist to the end of time, it seems impossible that he could really have intended for Muhammadan sainthood to end with him as did full prophecy with the Prophet Muhammad.

of the saints and it is through his office that saints are able to come into contact with the highest form of knowledge of God.<sup>223</sup>

Finally, there is the ambiguous (and far less known) concept of the Seal of the Children. The Seal of Children is an apocalyptic figure who will arrive at the close of the Last Days. He will be “both the last born of the human race<sup>224</sup> and the last of the saints.”<sup>225</sup> Far less attention is paid to this “seal” than to his two colleagues, perhaps because he might otherwise upstage the Mahdi<sup>226</sup> and Jesus, the two central figures of the final epoch in Islamic eschatology.

### **The Muhammadan Reality, the Perfect Man and the assumption of traits**

The final Akbarian doctrines under discussion are a cluster of metaphysical concepts that are as subtle and challenging as they are momentous, but of which there is no hope of giving more than the most brutally cursory overview here. To fully understand Ibn ‘Arabi’s conception of sainthood, one must realize that the Muhammad—in his capacity as the Perfect Man—is the ontological prototype of both man and the universe.”<sup>227</sup>

For the Muhammadan Reality is also the ‘Perfect Man’ (*al-insan al-kamil*), the mystic who is perfected not in an ethical sense but as encompassing all of God’s attributes. Such a man unites God with the world, not as a bridge but as an interface (*barzakh*), the

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<sup>223</sup> A rather controversial claim given how all the Prophets—including Muhammad—are saints, as it implies that, as Elmore puts it, “even the Prophet Muḥammad had to receive his knowledge of God via” the office of the Seal of the Saints (146)!

<sup>224</sup> Thus, humanity ends in the sacred, just as it began. In Islamic tradition, the progenitor of the human race Adam, is believed to have been a prophet of God, even though he presumably had a rather thin flock to minister to.

<sup>225</sup> Chodkiewicz, *Seal* 137.

<sup>226</sup> A messianic figure in Islamic eschatology who will—together with a returned Jesus Christ—defeat evil at the end of time and usher in a new era of peace and justice.

<sup>227</sup> William C. Chittick, “The Perfect Man as the Prototype of the Self in the Sufism of Jāmī,” *Studia Islamica* 49 (1979): 138.

imperceptible border between a shadow and the light. It is for the sake of such a Perfect Man that the universe has come into being. So the Perfect Man alone preserves the existence of the universe.<sup>228</sup>

Muhammad's perfection arises out of his *takhalluq*, or assumption of God's attributes, which is the means through which God self-manifests in the world.

Such metaphysics are challenging to grasp, but the key aspect for this study is the fact that the *awliyā'* attain their spiritual status through *takhalluq*, as well. "The whole practical or operative...side of Sufism is oriented towards the realization...of the state of primordial perfection which belongs only to the Perfect Man."<sup>229</sup> It is through their imitation of Muhammad's assumption of God's attributes that they fulfill their role—the closer they come to Muhammad's perfect *takhalluq* the closer they are to God and the more important they are to the world's salvation. It is ultimately through the saints ongoing *takhalluq*—their own dissolution into the spirit of the Perfect Man and, thus, surrender to God—that the world is preserved.

## **Conclusion**

Ibn 'Arabī took the pigments and dyes of early Sufi spirituality and painted exceedingly intricate and lavish tableaux illustrating the philosophical core of the Sufi worldview in new hues, often coming up with striking new expressions of age-old truths. Ibn 'Arabi's vision of a near infinity of saints arranged rank upon rank from earth to God's own presence saturates creation with sanctity and implicitly reorients religious life around the ideals for which saints stood. While he perhaps occasionally veers into idiosyncrasy, I believe that in most cases he

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<sup>228</sup> Baldick 84.

<sup>229</sup> Chittick, "The Perfect Man" 138.

captured an authentic (and rarely so compellingly articulated) inner dimension to Islamic belief, using sainthood as his canvas for sacralizing all aspects of life.

## CHAPTER 5: REACTIONS AND CONCLUSION

### Introduction

There are practical reasons for social scientists to instinctively rely on the methods of Weber or Geertz: To adopt a more hybrid methodological approach that borrows from both thinkers' methods is challenging, and making meaningful connections between theological and cosmological doctrines and the social sciences often requires considerable imagination. Finding new topics that have not already been explored at some length is no small task, so this final chapter focuses on three groups of issues that are somewhat loosely related: parallels and differences between the Weber's "saints" and those of Sufism; and finally some reflections on the sociological dimensions of Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and Ibn 'Arabi and some less widely discussed consequences of the transition to a saint-free modernity.

### Comparing and contrasting the Awliyā' to Weber's Elect

In terms of their presence in and impact on the social sphere, there are both parallels and contrasts between the Sufi doctrines discussed here and Weber's thesis of the sociological side of the Protestant faith.

Protestantism has had little room for sainthood—as noted, Mecklin considers the aftermath of the Reformation to have all but obliterated the concept in Western consciousness—yet interesting similarities remain. Both systems place a strong, insistent emphasis on predestination, and both pointedly use the term "the elect." Both systems ascribe true success not to one's own efforts but rather to the unearned grace of God. Most stalwarts of either worldview (whether Sufi saints, or thrifty consumers) are largely unaware of their

contribution to improving the world, merely doing what comes naturally to them; both feature a pronounced distaste for overindulgence in the material appetites (e.g., Tirmidhī cites a *hadith qudsi*<sup>230</sup> that would have probably appealed to Weber’s frugal, disciplined Protestant: “I am in the heart of the one who abstains, who desists and who is chaste.”<sup>231</sup>); and both mock and in principle exclude the efficacy of “works” as a means to ultimate success.

A few dissimilar positions deserve note as well. Whereas the Protestant ethic assumes that God’s favor for piety will be manifest for all in the world to see—i.e., that God will bless the elect with material success—Tirmidhī emphasizes on several occasions that the greatest Friends of God are unrecognized and anonymous, and many saints are not even aware of their status.<sup>232</sup> Another dissimilarity concerns the Friend of God’s motivations, as according to Tirmidhī, “[t]he Friend is unconscious of acting as an agent of God’s Law and is thus indifferent to how his contemporaries may judge him.”<sup>233</sup> This is unlike Weber’s virtuous Protestant who, while perhaps not conscious of his status, is on a certain level powerfully motivated by his image.

The greatest Sufi saints are invisible to the world, operating entirely in the background. Favors from God and miracles can serve as evidence, but the true mark of true sainthood, says

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<sup>230</sup> A Prophetic saying that transmits a non-Quranic revelation from God to Muhammad. Many such sayings concern spiritual matters.

<sup>231</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 93.

<sup>232</sup> “[I]n the eyes of followers the present shaykh is a rich man because he is pious; his manna is the fruit of his baraka...the sign of God’s beneficence towards him” (Rachida Chih, “What is a Sufi Order? Revisiting the Concept Through a Case Study of the Khalwatiyya in Contemporary Egypt,” *Sufism and the ‘modern’ in Islam*, ed. Martin van Bruinessen and Julia D. Howell (London ; I.B. Tauris 2007) 32).

<sup>233</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī 190.

Kalabadhi, is something that is internal and by its very nature resistant to analysis by others<sup>234</sup> Radtke goes so far as to say that the Pole (i.e., the greatest saint of a given age) is entirely overlooked and unrecognized by the masses, to the extent that when he speaks, Tirmidhī says, the Pole is ignored by his contemporaries, who find him utterly unremarkable and unblessed by God. This Sufi precept seems opposed to the expectation of blessings manifested in the world that is at the heart of the Protestant worldview that Weber explores.

Even this seemingly fundamental contrast contains nuances. In principle, Sufism turns the Protestant theological assumption that God's favor will be manifested in worldly distinction on its head. but at the same time when we dig deeper we quickly encounter paradoxes woven deep into the formal doctrine of sainthood. As Ephrat notes, "the more the walī refuses the vanities of this world, the more his prestige is enhanced."<sup>235</sup> Even thornier is the conflict between the saint's theoretical anonymity and self-effacing mode of living and *his social role*, the fact that in order to fulfill his public function, the saint (or at least some saints at any given time) must be known. "The friends of God ... need ... to have public recognition in order to fulfil their salvific function."<sup>236</sup> To lead others to God, saints must be known as such, but, paradoxically, the greatest of the saints remain in theory generally hidden.

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<sup>234</sup> Kalābādhī speaks of "the experiences which God puts into the secret heart, experiences which are only known to God and to those who enjoy them"(Kalābādhī 66).

<sup>235</sup> Daphna Ephrat, "In Quest of an Ideal Type of Saint: Some Observations on the First Generation of Moroccan Awliya' Allah in 'Kitab al-tashawwuf,'" *Studia Islamica* 94 (2002): 74.

<sup>236</sup> Ahmet Karamustafa, "Walaya According to al-Junayd (d. 298/910)." *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought: Essays in Honour of Hermann Landolt*, ed. Todd Lawson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005) 69.

### Sociological observations on Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and Ibn ‘Arabī

Each in their own way, Ibn ‘Arabī and Tirmidhī argue forcefully for a paradigm of sainthood which subtly calls into question conventional doctrinal lines between the institutions of prophethood and sainthood within Islam and which has some unexpected resonances for the sociologist of religion schooled in the theories of Max Weber. Their sacred typologies and historical schema introduce a host of intriguing nuances into important traditional doctrines, and complexify the division of labor between mystics and jurists.

The sometimes rather elaborate speculation on the *Dīwān al-Awliyā’*— the detailed discussions of its membership and functions, from the *Kashful Mahjub* in the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the writings of a West African shaykh 8 centuries later<sup>237</sup> —raises interesting psychological questions and sociological parallels. While premoderns such as Ibn ‘Arabī or Hujwirī were clearly not reacting to the mechanistic, post-Reformation view of the world explored by Weber, it is striking how these precise and elaborate classifications that unite the world of spirit with the physical world challenge the modern, post-Protestant Reformation, post-Enlightenment worldview.<sup>238</sup>

The mystical doctrine of the Muhammadan Reality has particularly interesting sociological dimensions. One must take care not to succumb to the temptation of socio-political reductionism that I have lamented elsewhere at such length, but whether one traces the Muhammadan Reality exclusively to theological sources or to the socio-political interests

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<sup>237</sup> A. A. Batran. “The Kunta, Sidī Al-Mukhtār Al-Kuntī, and the Office of Shaykh Al-Ṭarīq Al-Qādiriyya.” *Studies in West African Islamic History. Vol.1, the Cultivators of Islam*, ed. John Ralph Willis (London: Cass, 1979) 144-50.

<sup>238</sup> In fact, I would contend that in the secularized and rationalized cognitive environment of Western society, Sufism represents a powerful means of reconnecting to the classical civilization analogous to the one whose decline Troeltsch laments so evidently.

of mystically-oriented scholars,<sup>239</sup> there seems to be no denying the doctrine's momentous socio-political ramifications. For the Prophet Muhammad to be granted a cosmic, Logos-like role in creation, literally or figuratively, has immense ramifications for norms of religious authority and epistemology. It legitimizes and ennobles an esoteric hermeneutic framework that by definition cannot be adjudicated by the Islamic legal establishment and which ultimately relativizes the authority of jurists at least to some degree. Moreover, the Muhammadan Reality potentially legitimizes innumerable potential lineages of institutional authority that in practice—even if not in theory—compete with established legal institutions. It is for this reason that Elmore declares that “the principal beneficiaries of al-Tustarī's innovations<sup>240</sup> are rather the *awliyā'*, the *Ṣufīs* themselves, than the Prophet (despite his new, cosmic status).”<sup>241</sup>

One particularly interesting aspect of Akbarian thought is the potential social implications of the doctrine of *takhalluq*. Baldick worries that, given the existence of *jalali* (powerful) attributes along with *jamali* traits of beauty, the principle that human affairs are a mirror of all God's traits will encourage fatalism or complacency in the face of anti-social behavior.

His [Ibn `Arabī's] presentation of the human condition as the manifestation of contrasting names of god—such as the compelling (*al-Jabbar*) on the one hand, and the

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<sup>239</sup> That is, their need to advocate a notion of religious authority that gives them not only legitimacy but also an advantage over traditional scholars.

<sup>240</sup> The most notable of which is the notion of the Muhammadan Reality.

<sup>241</sup> Elmore 135.

pardoning (*al-Ghaffar*) on the other—excludes all possible freedom, just as it leads to a passive resignation in the face of injustice.<sup>242</sup>

According to this view, by holding socially undesirable personality traits as to be of equally divine origin as socially acceptable ones, Ibn ‘Arabi opens the door to unconscious laxity in promoting the positive values and optimism needed by society. This is an intriguing concern the merit of which I do not feel able to judge, but it certainly highlights how it is not inconceivable that this seemingly otherworldly metaphysical teaching could affect societal values in unexpected ways.<sup>243</sup>

### **What is “good” sociology of Islam?**

Most of the concerns voiced here about studies of Islam can be traced back to one of several methodological errors or faulty categories.

#### It avoids binary oppositions

It is surprising to see how tenaciously some social scientist have clung to heavily schematic portrayals of Islamic society, history, and culture that divide Muslims into vast, hermetically sealed opposing camps as opposed to the vast, multi-tiered continua that they (and all peoples) clearly are. As the assessment of the historical assumptions of Gellner and Geertz shows, binary oppositions such as rural/urban and mystic/legalistic remain prominently embedded in the field. Asad “rejects the schema of an unchanging dualistic

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<sup>242</sup> Baldick 85. Baldick's view here, unfortunately, is not only theologically mistaken—but it is especially psychologically naïve. He arguably ignores the fact that human freedom is limited by the conditioning of the ego; and that the remembrance of these names of God might, with appropriate training, diminish the compulsive conditioning of the ego; and thereby in fact bring about freedom from the forms of enslavement that are both conditioned and compulsive passivity in the face of injustice or conditioned and compulsive activity when action would be unwise.

<sup>243</sup> I am reminded of critiques of the Hindu Caste system. In both critical narratives, it is assumed that cosmological beliefs directly impact social behavior.

structure of Islam” and calls for consideration of “the social structures of Muslim societies in terms of overlapping spaces and times, so that the Middle East becomes a focus of convergences (and therefore of many possible histories).”<sup>244</sup>

It uses multiple perspectives and methodological lenses

Commenting on the work that has been done on Islam in the field of anthropology, Tapper makes suggestions that apply—if with some translation—to the sociological study of Islam, as well. Serious anthropological scholarship, he writes, “asks awkward questions about the political and economic interests and the personal connections of powerful ideologies at all levels of society”<sup>245</sup> and how ideology and discourse develop. Thus,

The best anthropological studies of Islam, by Muslims as well as non-Muslims, have resisted the tyranny of those (whether Orientalist outsiders, or center-based ulama) who propose a scripturalist approach to the culture and religion of the periphery; they aim to understand how life (Islam) is lived and perceived by ordinary Muslims, and to appreciate local customs and cultures...as worthy of study and recognition in their own social contexts, rather than as ‘pre-Islamic survivals’ or as error and deviation from a scriptural (Great Tradition) norm.<sup>246</sup>

Similarly, when reviewing politics, Moaddel takes Islamicists to task for their “tendency to explain Muslim political behavior and concrete political institutions in terms of the analysis of Islamic text.”<sup>247</sup> These are warnings to which I’m broadly quite sympathetic, within certain

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<sup>244</sup> Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986) 11.

<sup>245</sup> I would add that these caveats apply equally to discourse *about* Islam by scholars, who are no less at risk of ideological cooption—consciously or unconsciously—in their work.

<sup>246</sup> Richard Tapper, “‘Islamic Anthropology’ and the ‘Anthropology of Islam’,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 68.3 (1995): 192.

<sup>247</sup> Mansoor Moaddel, “The Study of Islamic Culture and Politics: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 380.

commonsensical limits. I readily agree that scholarly discussions must address the complexity and diversity of religious experience and resist the urge to artificially impose single-factor scenarios in avoid to placate orthodox religious sensibilities.

To escape the impasse that so often plagues sociological analysis of Islam and Muslims,<sup>248</sup> an attempt needs to be made to balance these two extremes to keep them in fruitful dialogue. Cornell points out concerning Sufism that “Merely locating the saint in a particular social structure is not enough to conceptualize sainthood as a living phenomenon.” Nor can one view a saint only through the tenets of mysticism. “The study of sainthood must,” he argues, “reconcile both social and doctrinal perspectives if it is to have any lasting value.”<sup>249</sup> This incorporation of intention and insider understandings into the analysis of action is not new to sociology, as illustrated by Weber and Geertz in their concepts of *Verstehn* and the Thick Descriptions, respectively.<sup>250</sup>

The contrast between Cornell’s eclectic, multi-pronged approach and that of Chabbi in her entry on the *Abdāl* in the *Encyclopædia Iranica* is striking and illustrative for these purposes. The latter’s summary—108 words out of in a 1,474-word entry, which works out to a meager 7%—of the idea of the *Abdāl* follows:

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<sup>248</sup> I suspect this also to be true of, much of contemporary religious today in general, which no longer falls neatly under traditional cognitive or doctrinal rubrics but often remains nonetheless deeply influenced by established religious traditions.

<sup>249</sup> Cornell 272.

<sup>250</sup> *Verstehn* (German for “understanding”) refers to the inclusion of actor intentions in the analysis of social action. A Thick Description is a broader interpretation of actions that incorporates the actor’s own understanding of the action along with normal functional analysis.

According to classical Sufi theory, as formulated in the 4th/10th century, a fixed number of *abdāl/awlīā'* are chosen by God and, by their presence, preserve universal equilibrium, especially during periods between prophets. They transmit *baraka* “blessing” and are considered able to perform *karāmāt* “charismata” but not *moʾjizāt* “miracles,” which are the prerogatives of *anbīā'* “prophets.” Like the prophets, on Judgment Day they will perform the function of *ṣafāʾa* “intercession” on behalf of the human race. The origin and early development of this doctrine in medieval Islamic society poses a complex problem.<sup>251</sup>

The remaining nine tenths of the entry patiently explore the doctrine’s historical development and various origin theories. There is no mention of the many classes and understandings of the *Abdāl* and their most important and celebrated member, the *Qutb*, makes no appearance in this dry taxonomy of a rich topic.

Socio-historical discussions necessarily have their place, but I find it striking how little light this piece—which reads more like a post-mortem than an overview, in my opinion—sheds on a doctrine that has inspired the Islamic imagination for many centuries. For all the article’s detail and scholarship, students hoping to understand the concept’s significance in Muslim society and literature will have to look elsewhere .

#### Grant texts a place in the analysis

Still, as even Moaddel concedes, “textual analysis provides indispensable evidence” for understanding the development of Islamic cultures. Muslim cultures are more than the sum of their texts or doctrines, and they vary enormously between place and time. The local must not be neglected for a universal that only exists in theory. While it is not the place of social scientists to insincerely parrot orthodox dogma in place of fact as he or she understands it, scholars should also remember that contradictions are to certain extent in the eye of the beholder, especially in questions of religion. “[T]he concept of ‘religion’ is paradoxically

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<sup>251</sup> J. Chabbi, “*Abdāl*,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985) 173-174.

consistent and clear to most carriers of particular religious traditions, yet unsettled, and perhaps even inherently ambiguous, in content and form to others—including many committed to these traditions.”<sup>252</sup> In my view, cold factual analysis needs to be leavened with humility and openness to considering insider perspectives. Which brings us to the issue of texts and scripture.

The pitfalls of Great Tradition reductionism of the faithful are to be avoided, but so are monocausal culturalistic explanations that deny religious tradition or doctrine any contribution to Muslim society, as well. Treating these ideas as symbols hermetically sealed off from history or Islamic tradition impoverishes our understanding of their significance, origins and impact. The conceptual advances of scholars such as Cornell and Woodward have shown that a mixed approach is required.

To completely neglect Islam’s Great Tradition(s) and locate the discussion exclusively in cultural practices that are assumed *a priori* to be wholly independent of Islamic society’s collective patrimony intellectually dooms the endeavor as surely as does the imposition of hegemonic ideologies or ahistorical constructs. Without generalizing about all Islamic cultures, I think Lyon’s observations about the implications of Woodward’s research for the study of Javan Islam bear application elsewhere:

For Woodward, scholars of Javanese religion...need but to undertake comparisons between their field material and appropriate Islamic texts and sources on Muslim

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<sup>252</sup> Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, “Social theory in the study of Muslim societies,” *Muslim Travellers Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman (London: Routledge, 2001) 4.

practice in the Indian and Middle Eastern traditions to become aware of the true extent of Islamic influence in Javanese religion.<sup>253</sup>

As in the case of Cornell, the research of Woodward seems to show that theoretical progress now often depends on *interplay between textual tradition and ethnography*, a mix of critical theory and an understanding of the canon that informs Muslim culture everywhere to one degree or another—whatever the social scientist thinks of said beliefs—albeit to varying degrees and in a myriad of forms and interpretations.

A truce must be struck between these inevitably warring theoretical commitments on the part of social scientists so that a multi-faceted epistemological approach capable of covering new ground becomes possible. Moaddel emphasizes the need for analysis to operate on multiple levels and with an awareness of diversity and variation. “[S]everal analytical levels are involved in the study of Islamic culture,” he writes, and lists some of the false dichotomies that are mistakenly resorted to (e.g., “diversity in Muslim histories versus the formality of the Islamic text”). Finally, one must “[r]ecogniz[e] that each level often explains only a particular aspect of Muslim politics” in order to avoid the disastrously mistaken premise that written tradition dictates Muslim social actions, which he memorably dubs “an ecological fallacy.”<sup>254</sup>

Garrett observes that the German sociologist Thomas Luckmann (b. 1927) has “lamented over the stagnation and even regression of theoretical development in the sociology of religion while denominational research remains a flourishing enterprise.”<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Margot L. Lyon, “Rev. of *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta*, by Mark R. Woodward.” *American Ethnologist* 18.4 (1991): 820-1.

<sup>254</sup> 381. To this I would add the importance of realizing that Islamic cultures—like all cultures—develop out of not only a legion of different sources and influences, but also out of the constant “cross-pollination” between different spheres of culture and sources of authority.

<sup>255</sup> Garrett 220.

Looking at the almost obsessive focus on Islamic movements in sociology of Islam today, I experience similar regret, as I think the doctrinal and theological sides of Islamic culture merit more careful consideration than they often receive at the hands of sociologists.

Incorporating paranormal beliefs into the discussion

Cornell warns that “[a]lthough finding an adequate way of dealing with the paranormal is difficult from a scientific point of view, it is necessary if one is to go beyond the current understanding of sainthood in Islamic Studies.”<sup>256</sup> Admittedly, one cannot reasonably expect academicians to take Sufism’s metaphysical presumptions at face value,<sup>257</sup> but alternatives surely exist between the poles of blinkered positivism that narrows the discussion to deadening ephemera and an equally unfruitful and unreflexive a priori acceptance of all religious claims at face value.

In this vein, Cornell explains another finding of his study of Moroccan sainthood that illustrates the promise of creative interdisciplinary analysis. While the facts uncovered are in themselves of great import for these purposes, I am more interested in how they result from a marriage of scientific analysis and thick description-esque interaction with their underlying beliefs.

[T]he most well-known evidentiary miracles, those that impact the physical environment...appear much less frequently than do epistemological miracles.... [P]aranormal abilities having to do with knowledge are mentioned nearly three times as often as those having to do with power over nature... [One can therefore] conclude

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<sup>256</sup> Cornell 272.

<sup>257</sup> Most of which concern esoteric ontological questions that even in Islamic parlance are referred to as “the Unseen.”

that in the formative period of Moroccan Sufism it was more important for a saint to be a person of knowledge than a person of power.<sup>258</sup>

Here new vistas of insight are opened by moving beyond simple functional or surface analyses to interacting holistically with the Sufi textual tradition and its supernatural worldview. By considering the implications of a documentary source customarily ignored by social scientists (namely hagiographies), Cornell gleans valuable insights into Sufi historical norms and the role of Sufi saints in the collective imagination in medieval Morocco.

### **Reflections on perhaps the most crucial “function” of saints**

For all the emphasis on the various concrete roles played by saints in Islamic societies as patrons and deal brokers, it is ironic that perhaps the most socially momentous and consistently observed “function” of the saint has been widely overlooked by social scientists. As has been noted, traditional Sufi cosmology holds that the greatest of the saints play a pivotal role—in some cases, very literally—for the material world. The ontological accuracy of that belief is impossible to assess from a scholarly perspective and is even open to debate from a Muslim creedal standpoint, but this fact does not make the doctrine irrelevant for our purposes. To the contrary, when taken figuratively as an expression of the hidden role played by the *Diwan al-awliya*’ (or the *Lamedvovniks* in Judaism) in the inculcation of fundamental socio-cultural values upon which society ultimately depends this grandiose claim becomes surprisingly defensible.

Something fundamental to human civilization has been lost in modern life, and the restoration of sainthood in some form in human consciousness might begin to remedy this gap. Thus, Coleman asserts of our time that “[saintly] virtues [are] need[ed] to point beyond

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<sup>258</sup> Cornell 115-16

ordinary morality to virtue's source and ground because, as Alasdair MacIntyre contends, we moderns have lost a coherent sense of grounding purpose and unity in the universe and life."<sup>259</sup>

Most interestingly, such arguments can be made without resort to theology or metaphysics, as illustrated by these thought-provoking observations on the links of solidarity forged by the cult of the saints:

It may well be, as Robert Bellah and his associates have recently argued in *Habits of the Heart*, that without tradition there can be no vital communities—what they refer to as “communities of memory”—and without living communities of memory there can be no anchored sense self, no ground “to give meaning to death, suffering, love and commitment, citizenship and justice.” ... Saints ... anchor a sense of tradition by facilitating communities of memory. For Bellah and his colleagues, these represent the only real communities that exist. **In losing them, perhaps, we risk losing meaningful society as well.**<sup>260</sup>

Here we see compelling arguments from an eminent social scientist for sainthood as an essential building block of communal solidarity, the ambient glue that binds together the otherwise fissiparous elements of society and which cognitively integrates life's mysteries with everyday life. Modernity's many psychological and social malaises may not have been caused by the loss of sanctity, but they are clearly exacerbated by it since the enormous void left by the departed saint has yet to be filled.

Even after death, saints provide a psychologically valuable service by assisting people in sanctifying and implicitly connecting things in life that are otherwise delinked from the psychologically comforting framework of an established moral tradition and code. A saint-centered worldview

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<sup>259</sup> John A. Coleman, “After Sainthood?” Hawley 224.

<sup>260</sup> Coleman 208; emphasis added.

generates a network of familiar spirits [...] who communicate a sense of the continuity, variety, and amplitude of the community of faith, and who as ertswile denizens of this world span the gap between the known and the unknown. They mediate between the numbingly quotidian phenomena of this life and the central, sometimes densely mysterious forces that control it.<sup>261</sup>

Thus, saints provide other human beings inspiration for self-improvement, reminders of the existence of values that transcend the material world and powerful psychological strategies for coping with the inscrutability of life and the setbacks of forces beyond one's control.

#### Saints as unconscious moral yardsticks

Finally and perhaps most importantly, there is the passive role of the saint as not only a visible moral yardstick—such a notion is hardly novel—but also an inherently unattainable ideal that is constantly present in the collective consciousness. Famed psychologist William James (d. 1910) had a particularly unusual and intriguing view of saints and their ultimate function in society. The saints' lives, according to James (and as summarized by Coleman)

functioned vis-a-vis ordinary lives in much the same way that Utopian dreams criticize the mediocrity of ordinary schemes of justice. Saints represent a critical negativity, challenging the mediocre to a higher life. Just as societal justice tends to disintegrate into a defense of the status quo unless Utopias are imagined to depict what is politically possible, so a society without saints tends to allow virtue to sink to the level of utilitarian value.<sup>262</sup>

Now, if there is anything to James' theory, then the concrete impact of the saints' very presence—whether physically or merely discursively, in the collective memory—on society would seem to utterly dwarf all the ephemeral and, in Brown's parlance, "one-off" relations with which sociologists have often occupied themselves.

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<sup>261</sup> Hawley xix.

<sup>262</sup> Coleman 220.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to shed some light on the place of Sociology in the study of Islamic mysticism and Islamic sainthood, and vice versa. As this has involved a disparate collection of topics that are not often (or easily) discussed together it is perhaps natural that my conclusions be somewhat disjointed.

While the saint may have receded from modern consciousness in many societies, his recent departure intellectual and cultural life in so many places does not change how essential an element he has been in the psycho-social soil from which the Abrahamic traditions have sprung over the last 3 millennia. There are significant differences among these traditions regarding the place of the saint, but so many ideas and practices are shared that an argument can be made that the saint is a pillar of the inner core of these traditions, at least before the modern period. While the most notable quality of many saints—the ability to intercede with God—is not universally accepted in any of these traditions, saints remain focal points of communal and spiritual life in important ways.

In our examination of some of the most important sociological concepts and theories concerning Islam, Sufism and Islamic sainthood, we discovered that examinations of Islam and Muslims by Western social scientists have often been complicated by transposed attitudes and quasi-orientalist categories that do not correspond well to facts, values and experiences of many Islamic societies. The theories of the early pioneer Max Weber and later disciples Ernest Gellner and Clifford Geertz provided penetrating new insights and tools for the analysis of cultures, but in the case of Islamic societies the acuity of these new frameworks was often dulled by this Eurocentric inheritance, and this dynamic has been especially pronounced in the case of Sufism and Islamic sainthood.

Our overview of core Sufi beliefs regarding sanctity revealed a “sacred canopy” that shares many essential values with the mystical traditions of Christianity and Judaism, but lays out a considerably more elaborate and theologically developed vision of sanctity. Sufi tradition builds a sacred epistemology that tempers scripture and inherited tradition with time and space-bound considerations through human religious guidance. In doing so it produces a uniquely elaborate, saintly cosmology that underscores at every turn the presence of God in the natural world and the centrality of humility, introspection and ongoing religious guidance in a spiritually inclined Muslim’s life. Sufi saints link the material world and everyday life with an unseen, better world from which higher moral values are derived in popular consciousness. They provide a constant reminder in a world of ambiguity and compromise of absolutes and transcendent values.

In Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, this potent set of values and symbols first began to assume a systematic shape. Tirmidhī’s notion of the Seal of the Saints was a fateful contribution to Sufi history, laying the foundations for a new discourse began the task of philosophically integrating a new locus of religious authority in Islamic societies into Islamic theology and religious practice in a form that lends itself to propagation outside existing initiatic circles.

In many ways, Ibn ‘Arabi completed Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī’s project, taking the Tirmidhī’s essential concepts and mode of expressing Sufi wisdom and developing a new idiom for expressing spiritual realities that remains rooted in early Sufi values and beliefs but also which weaves the many disparate compartments of a believer’s intellectual and spiritual life into a coherent whole. At the same time, Ibn ‘Arabi’s compelling new theosophical constructs the many Sufi orders that then were emerging as popular movements a compelling shared idiom for expressing their shared worldview (and defending it against detractors).

Our examination of Sufi cosmology and theology has yielded some interesting sociological insights. The parallels between Sufi doctrine and Weberian economic theory are complex, with both systems featuring “saints” exhibiting surprisingly kindred characteristics and behavioral patterns. We have seen that some of the most innovative recent studies of Sufism have depended on a multi-modal analytical model that operates simultaneously on the level of the doctrinal imagination of the faithful and on the socio-economic sphere that sociologists naturally prefer, while also treating binary oppositions and generalizations with the utmost caution.

The eclipse of saints in Western life coincided with the erosion—if not outright loss—of some of the most essential social values that had underpinned human society up to that point. The physical world may not literally depend on them, as mystics often claim, but a credible argument can be made that their contribution through most of history to the well being of the social order—that other “world” that human beings inhabit—has consistently been crucial. Like Coleman, I wonder whether “in losing our saints we have lost something not only unspeakably lovely but truly essential to human culture and imagination.”<sup>263</sup> Perhaps that is a “miracle” of sainthood most observers can agree on. One hopes sociologists will become more receptive to holistic discussions of the complex and multi-faceted contribution of saints to their societies over the centuries, especially within Islam.

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<sup>263</sup> Coleman 225.

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