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Antinomian Sufis

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BETWEEN SUBLIMATION AND SUBVERSION: DIVERGENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS SOCIAL NORMS AND THE SHARI'A IN EARLY SUFISM (850–1200)

Several different, albeit interconnected, modes of mystical piety emerged in the Muslim communities around the Mediterranean as well as West and Central Asia between the third/ninth and seventh/thirteenth centuries. The practitioners of these forms of piety occupied a range of positions in society along the spectrum of socio-economic, political and cultural belonging, and, given the heterogeneity of the mystical modes of piety in origin and approach, some early Muslim mystics were situated at the margins or even outside the boundaries of the "social and political mainstream" of their local communities on account of their beliefs and practices, while others occupied the centre stage of that mainstream.

The early mystics of Baghdad and Basra in lower Iraq, for instance, harboured some antisocial and iconoclastic tendencies side by side with socially and legally conformist ones. Celibacy, vegetarianism, avoidance of gainful employment, withdrawal and seclusion, as well as a certain proclivity for outlandish behaviour on the part of some mystics, must have raised eyebrows, even though these practices were not adopted by all or even most mystics. Other characteristic practices and beliefs – notably sam'î of the Sufis of Baghdad, which was a blend of music, poetry and dance – may have been legally and theologically suspect in the eyes of some traditionalist Muslims.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that we do not know what the central charge was against the Baghdad Sufis in the first documented (albeit unsuccessful) attempt to prosecute them in 364/977. Elsewhere, in Nishapur in northeast Iran, members of the Path of Blame, the Malakatayya, were almost certainly social and legal conformists, since blending into society was the hallmark of their piety. But side by side with mystics like the Sufis of Baghdad, and the Path of Blame in Nishapur who saw their piety as a deepening or expansion of legalistic observance and/or viewed the shari'a as an indispensable precondition and a steady companion of their religiosity, apparently there were others who had a confrontational relationship with the religious law, hence also with the social mainstream in large urban centres, where religious scholars of various stripes were rapidly gaining the status of religious authorities. An early example is the "pneumatics" (ruḥāniyya), as documented by Abū ʿAṣīm Khushaysh ibn ʿAṣram al-Nasafi (d. 533/867):

They are so called because they believe that their spirits see the māskūt ("the divine dominion") of the heavens, that they see the pastures of paradise, and further, that they have sexual intercourse with the hours. Furthermore, they believe that they wander with their spirits in paradise. They are also called fikrīyya ("meditators") because they meditate and believe that in their meditation they can reach God in reality. Thus they make their meditation the object of their devotions and of their striving towards God. In their meditation they see this god by mean of their spirit, through God speaking to them directly, passing his hand gently over them, and as they believe, looking upon them directly, while they have intercourse with the hours and daily with them as they lay upon their couches, and while eternally young boys bring them food and drink and exquisite fruit.

al-Nasafi then proceeded to report on other groups of mystics:

Other mystics teach that when love of God has supplanted all other attachments in the heart (khuldā), legal bans are no longer valid (ruḥān). And some teach a method of ascetic training (especially of the diet) that so

mortifies yearnings for the flesh that when the training is finished the "ascetic" gains license to everything (iḥlāṣ). Another group maintains that the heart is distracted when mortification becomes too vigorous; it is better to yield immediately to one's inclinations; the heart, having experienced vanity, can then detach itself from vain things without regret. One last group affirms that renunciation (zuhūl) is applicable only to things forbidden by religious law, that enjoying permitted wealth is good and riches are superior to poverty.

It is, of course, possible to question whether, and to what extent, the mystics al-Nasafi described actually existed—after all, heresiographers could be somewhat too zealous in sniffing out heretics. Yet, it is noteworthy that accusations of iḥlāṣ ("permissivism and antinomianism") and zuhūl ("incarnationism or inheritance of the Divine in the material world, especially in human form") appear very early in the sources, concomitantly with the emergence of mystical forms of piety. And, criticism came not only from the outside—thus the Mu'tazila and SOP in particular charged on the charges of obscenarian anti-rationalism, making "false claims" to work miracles as well as rash dismissal of discursive learning against the mystics—some very prominent Sufi authors themselves joined the chorus to hold forth against libertines and antinomians who, they argued, should be differentiated from the true Sufis. It is difficult to argue that all these internal and external critics of libertine and antinomian mystics were simply fighting a chimera, and the inevitable conclusion is that there were indeed many mystics, increasingly all called Sufis, who were heedless or critical of the social mainstream and the emerging religio-political establishments of their societies and who found themselves branded as antinomians by Sufis and non-Sufis alike.

Who exactly were the libertines and antinomians associated with Sufism that were universally rejected by many Sufis and non-Sufi observers? It is difficult to trace these shady characters, but Abu Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) gave a full listing of them in the "Book of Errors" of his The Book of Light Flashes on Sufism (Kitāb al-luma' ili-taṣawwuf), under the heading "On those who erred in fundamentals and were led to misbelieve." These included the following: (1) those who thought that once mystics reached God they should

\footnote{1}{For documentation on the incident in 364/877, see Karamustafa, Sufism, the Formative Period, 33, n. 45. A concise discussion on the Path of Blame, with references, can be found in the same work, 48-50.}
be called "free" instead of "Godservants"; (a) a group of Iraqis who thought that the Godservant could not achieve true sincerity unless he ceased to pay attention to how others viewed him and who thus proceeded to ignore social norms in his actions, whether these were right or wrong; (c) those who placed sainthood above prophecy on account of their baseless interpretation of the Qur'anic story of Moses and Khidr (Qur'an, 18.60–82); (d) those who argued that all things were permitted and that prohibition applied only to excessive license taken with others' property; (e) those who believed in divine inherence in a person; (f) those who understood discourse of "passing away" (janā') as the passing away of human nature; (g) a group in Syria and a group in Basra (Abd al-Wahid Ibn Zayd is named) who believed in vision of God with the heart in this world; (h) those who believed that they were permanently and perfectly pure; (i) those who believed that their hearts contained divine lights that were uncreated; (j) those who sought to avert blame from themselves when they incurred the punishments laid down by the Qur'an and violated the custom of the Prophet by arguing that they were compelled by God in all their actions; (k) those who surmised that their closeness to God exempted them from observing the same etiquette that they followed prior to achieving proximity to the Divine; (l) a group in Baghdad who thought that in passing away from their own qualities they had entered God's qualities; (m) a group in Iraq who claimed to lose all their senses in ecstasy and thus to transcend sensory phenomena; (n) those who erred in their beliefs concerning the spirit (ruh), with many versions of this error listed, most notably the belief in the uncreatedness of the spirit and the belief in transmigration of spirits.

Sarrāj did not claim to have personally seen all these groups, but there is little doubt that they existed (although their detractors do not doubt their imagination in their descriptions of them) and that they were generally linked with Sufism. A contemporary of Sarrāj, al-Mutahhar Ibn Tahir al-Maqdisī, who composed an historical work called Kitāb al-balad wa-ta'īrād around 355/966 gave the names of four Sufi groups he came across as Husniyya (Husain means "beauty"), Malamaṭiyaa, Sāqīyya/Sawqiyaa (which probably should be amended to Shawqiyya [shawq: "longing"]), and Ma'dhiriyya (Ma'dhir: "excused"), and made the following observation about them:

These are characterized by the lack of any consistent system or clear principles of faith. They make judgments according to their speculations and imagination, and they constantly change their opinions. Some of them believe in incarnation (fulūd), as I have heard one of them claim that His habitation is in the cheeks of the beardless youth (murd). Some of them believe in permisienssiveness (ibāha) and neglect the religious law, and they do not heed those who blame them.6

Such somewhat generic accusations against Sufis continued to be aired even later, as evidenced by two critical chapters in the Tahshīrat al-awānīn fi ma'rīfat maqālāt al-anām ("Instructions for the Common People concerning the Knowledge of Human Discourses") of the Twelver Shi'i Jamāl al-Dīn al-Murtaḍā al-Rāżī (lived first half of 6th/12th century). In his hostile review of the Sufis, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Murtaḍā mentioned antinomians called Wāṣyiyaa (the "Attainers"), who thought that they attained union with God and thus saw no need to observe religious duties, as well as others who were against books and learning, and still other Sufis who cared only for sensual pleasures such as eating, dancing, and wearing nice clothes.

Noteworthy, however, is Maqdisī's use of the name Malamātī for those who neglected the law and were not concerned with public blame. The term Malamātī was initially used to refer to the movement known as the "Path of Blame" in Nishapur during the fourth/tenth century. The followers of this latter movement, as documented by Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulami (d. 412/1021), appear to have understood "blame" primarily to mean "self-censure" rather than "public censure", and they certainly did not neglect the law. Nor is there strong evidence that they sought to discipline the lower self by subjecting it to public blame through commission of deliberate and conspicuous acts that violated social norms.7 After all, attracting public blame would have been contrary to their goal of attaining complete public anonymity in an effort to conceal their true spiritual state from all others and thus deny the lower self, nafs, the opportunity to gloat in public attention of any kind. It appears, however, that sometime during the ascendancy of Iraq-oriented Sufism in Khurasan during the fourth/tenth century, the term Malamātī came to be applied (perhaps first by Sufis who did not think very highly of the Path of Blame?) increasingly to real or imaginary libertines, who justified their social and legal transgressions, genuinely or in dissimulation, either as "indifference to public blame occasioned by true sincerity" (number 2 in Sarrāj's list of errors above) or as "disciplining the lower self by abasing it through public blame". Maqdisī's usage certainly reflects this different use of

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the term outside Nishapur, and other independent evidence corroborates his observation. In a work written by the Caspian Zaydī Imam Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭusayn al-Muʿayyad bīlḥāl (d. 411/1022) that apparently is "the earliest extant Zaydī literary reaction to Sufism," the author referred to some Sufis who called themselves "the people of blame" (ahl al-malāma) and stated, "They claim that by involving themselves in evil situations and committing reprehensible acts they abuse their ego, yet in reality they fall from the state of repentance and may well revert to being offenders (fiṣṣaqa)."

Abū ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Sulami, who was a contemporary of al-Muʿayyad bīlḥāl, is oblivious to this use of the term Malāmatī to designate libertines and portrays the members of the Path of Blame as law-abiding mystics, but in spite of Sulami's attempts at preserving the good name of this Path, the name Malāmatī comes to be used during the fifth/eleventh century to refer to antinomians who are indifferent to the sharīʿa. Not surprisingly, Abu'l-Qasim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), whose conception of Sufism was carefully circumscribed by adherence to the religious law, mentioned the Malāmatīs of Nishapur only in passing in three entries in the biographical section of his Risāla ("Treatise"), possibly because the term Malāmatī was already tainted with antinomianism in his eyes, but 'Ali ibn 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī (d. between 465/1073 and 469/1077) devoted a whole chapter of his Uncovering the Veiled (Kashf al-maḥjūb) to the question of "blame," which is packed with interesting information. Referring to the Qur'ānic locus of the concept of blame - Qur'ān 5.54, which refers to the Prophet and his companions, "they struggle in the path of God and do not fear the blame of any blamer" - Hujwīrī reminded his readers that "God's elect [that is, prophets and saints] are distinguished from the rest by public blame" and that "public blame is the sustenance of God's friends." He then proceeded to differentiate the different meanings of the concept with admirable clarity:

Blame is of three kinds: (1) [blame attached] to following the right path, (2) blame [incurred] intentionally, (3) [blame attached] to abandoning [the law]. Blame is attached to following the right path when one who minds his own business, practices religion and abides by the rules of social interaction, is blamed by the people; this is the way people behave towards him but he is indifferent to all that. Intentional blame is when one attracts great public esteem and becomes a center of attention, and his heart inclines towards that esteem and grows attached to it, yet he wants to rid himself of the people and devote himself to God, he incurs public blame by dissipulating a [blameworthy] act that is not against the law so that people would turn away from him. Blame is attached to abandoning the law when one is gripped in his nature by infidelity and misbelief so that people say that he abandoned the law and prophetic custom, while he thinks that is he is walking the path of blame. Hujwīrī explained and endorsed the first two kinds, citing examples for them, and rejected the third, decreeing it as a ploy to win fame and popularity. The proponents of this last kind often justified their actions as a deliberate attempt on their part to abuse the lower self, and while Hujwīrī thought that public blame could certainly have that therapeutic effect - he proffered an example from his personal experience about how being pelting with melon skins by formalist Sufis saved him from a spiritual snare that had seized him - he could not countenance such flagrant violation of the religious law.

Hujwīrī's attitude towards blame was shared by other fifth/eleventh century and, later, sixth/seventh century figures who discussed the concept. Like Hujwīrī, Abū Ḥāmid Ghazālī (450/1058–1111) objected to those who contravened the law in the name of malāma, but accepted shocking though licit acts in order to repel public attention and along with it the desire for fame or good name (jāhā); Ghazālī cited an unnamed renunciant who began to eat voraciously when he was visited by the political ruler in order to avert his latter's attention from himself. The Zāhiri traditionist and Sufi Mūmammad ibn Ṭahir al-Maqdisī "Ibn al-Qaysarānī" (448/1058–507/1113) criticized the Malāmatīs of his time as antinomians. Mūmammad ibn Munawwar, the biographer of Abū Saʿīd-abu ʿUbd-Allah Khayr (357/967–440/1049) who wrote towards the end of the sixth/seventh century, quoted Abū Saʿīd as having said, "The Malāmatī is he who, out of love of God, does not fear whatever...

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8 Wilfred Madelung, "Zaydī Attitudes to Sufism," in Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteenth Centuries of Controversies and Polemics, eds. P. de Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 120.


happens to him and does not care about blame. At around the same time as Ibn Munavvar, the Hanballah preacher and writer ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn ‘All Ibn al-Jawzī (510/1126–597/1200) decried Mālikīs in much the same way as Ḥuṣain and Ghazzālī, though in more caustic terms:

Certain Sufis, who are called the Mālikīyya, plunged into sins and then said, “Our goal was to denounce ourselves in the public eye in order to be safe from the disaster of good name and hypocrisy.” They are like a man who fornicated with a woman and impregnated her, and when he was asked, “Why didn’t you practice coitus interruptus (‘aṣrī)?” he replied, “I had heard that ‘aṣrī is reprehensible.” Then they told him, “And you had not heard that fornication is prohibited?” These ignorant people have lost their standing with God and have forgotten that Muslims are the witnesses of God on earth. Ibn al-Jawzī was in principle against intentional blame, and he stated unequivocally, “it is no religious act for a man to humiliate himself in public.” He narrated with disapproval what he considered clear examples of outrageous behavior, mentioning specifically Aḥmad b. ‘Uṣayn al-Nīrī (d. 595/995) and Aḥmad b. Shihāb (d. 534/946), though he was mostly silent about similar behavior of Sufis closer to his own time. Like Ḥuṣain and Ghazzālī, however, he had no qualms about pious exemplars repelling public attention for the right reasons and repeated the anecdote about the renunciant who pretended to be a glutton in front of the political ruler with approbation.

Were there really many libertines among who claimed to be Mālikīs during the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh century? This question is rendered more complex by the emergence, at this period, of other terms that in time came to represent libertinism, notably darvīsh (Persian: “pauper, beggar”) and qalandar (Persian: “uncouth”). Although the linguistic origins of these terms as well as the history of the social types they designate are obscure, it is likely that these terms were initially used equally for regular beggars as well as itinerant renunciants who practiced extreme ‘atwakkal (“trust in God”). Some of the latter accepted charitable offerings without, however, actively seeking

after charity, while others no doubt survived through active begging or, at least, were commonly perceived as beggars. It is, therefore, reasonable to see a confluence of voluntary and involuntary poverty, of wandering renunciants and the destitute, in the origin of darvīsh and qalandar, even though the etymologies of the two terms remain uncertain. During the fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth centuries, darvīsh seems to have mostly retained its primary meaning of “poor, beggar”, but the term must have already started to assume the added connotation of a particular kind of piety characterized by itinerant mendicancy in this period, since the use of the term in this sense and the image of a wandering dervish – complete with his hallmark accoutrements of a begging bowl (kakhkīl), a trumpet made from the horn of a ram or deer (nafrij or biq), a hat of felt (‘ajāf), a short axe or hatchet (sabārūn), a patched bag (chanta), a gnarled staff (’uṣūn), an animal skin (pīst), and a rosary (tasbīh) – is well attested from the late fifth/eighth century onwards. The term qalandar may have had similar origins, but, unlike darvīsh, it came to be associated with libertinism from very early on, primarily because of the emergence of the qalandar as a peculiar literary type in Persian poetry during the late fifth/eleventh and early sixth/twelfth century – significantly, at the same time as the appearance of the ghazal as a new poetic form. More properly, one should talk of the emergence of a cluster of images organized around the central character qalandar. This cluster, which finds its first full-fledged expression in the poetry of Majdūdī ibn ‘Abd al-Sanā’ī (d. 527/1131), sometimes jelled into a separate genre called qalandariyya, but more commonly it existed as a free-floating bundle of imagery found most conspicuously in lyric poetry but also in other poetic genres. It was composed of several sets of images connected, most notably, to the central themes of wine-drinking, sexual promiscuity, gambling as well as playing games of backgammon and chess, and entering into non-Islamic (especially Zoroastrian and Christian) cults, all located at the kharābīt (literally meaning “ruins” but with the very real connotation of “tavern” and “brothel”). Through the use of this provocative cluster woven around the figure of an unruly libertine, a highly positive spin was given to the qalandar’s way of life as the epitome of true piety cleansed of all dissimulation and hypocrisy, and the qalandar (along with his “look-alikes”, rind [“heavy

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20 Ibn al-Jawzī, Tahlīs, 468.

drinker] and qidwah ["rascal"] was portrayed as the truly sincere devotee of God unconcerned with "the blame of blamers" — in other words, as the real Malāmāt. In this way, the term qalandar was brought within the orbit of the term Malāmāt.

The complexity of the issue of Sufi antimonianism during the sixth/twelfth century is best documented in Ibn al-‘azzī’s (510/1126–597/1200) polemical work The Devil’s Delusion (Talbīs Iblīs). In that chapter, Ibn al-‘azzī specifically denounced the following Sufi practices: sumūt; ecstatic dance and hand-clapping; gazing at bearless youths; an excessive concern for cleanliness and ritual purity; dwelling in lodges; celibacy; giving up property; wearing ḫurtī ("aprons") and muqāqa’ ("patched cloaks"); investiture with the cloaks refraining from eating meat; rejection of trade and employment; withdrawal from society through solitude and seclusion; abandoning marriage and for the most part children; travelling without provisions with no particular destination, sometimes in solitude and walking at night; avoiding medical treatment; refusal to mourn the death of close companions; and abandoning scholarship. Ibn al-‘azzī also took the Sufis to task for the following beliefs: distinction between ‘ilm al-bātin ("inner knowledge") and ‘ilm al-zāhir ("outer knowledge"); this latter equated with ‘ilm al-sharī’a ("knowledge of the sharī’a"); loving God passionately (’iblīs); vision of angels, jinn, demons, and even God in this world.22

All these practices and beliefs were indeed associated with Sufism, even though no single Sufi accepted all of them. Ibn al-‘azzī rejected them as reprehensible innovations (bid’a, pl. bid’āt) and attempted to prove his case with the help of reliable hadith.23 He was most unhappy with how the Sufis, in his eyes, undermined the supremacy of the sharī’a by their claim to possess an "inner knowledge." The distinction that the Sufis drew between sharī’a and ḥaqīqa ("reality"), he argued, was patently wrong since the two were completely identical, and contrary to Sufi views, inspiration (iḥām) was not a separate means of communication with God but was simply the result of genuine knowledge (iḥrān). It was clear to Ibn al-‘azzī that the Devil had succeeded in deluding the Sufis mainly by diverting them from discursive knowledge.24

Remarkably, Ibn al-‘azzī’s criticism of the Sufi in particular sounded like the self-critical remarks of some eminent Sufi authors as Sārāj, Hujwīrī, and Abū Hamīd Ghazālī. Particularly telling in this regard is Ibn al-‘azzī’s account of "libertines" who discredited the Sufis.25 According to Ibn al-‘azzī, certain antimoniants and libertines had infiltrated Sufism and assumed Sufi identities in order to protect themselves by masking their true identities. These fell into three classes: (1) outright infidels; (2) those who professed Islam but followed their shaykhs without asking for any evidence or even "specious arguments" (’ahdūb) about the legal-theological status of the acts they were asked to perform; and (3) those who did produce "specious arguments" for their actions but were deluded by the Devil into thinking that their false arguments were sound. Ibn al-‘azzī reviewed and rejected six such "specious arguments," all quasi-theological props for libertinism and abolition of the sharī’a, some of which recall the heresiographical observations by al-Nasā’ī quoted above. According to him, some justified their hedonism through predestination arguments; some argued that God did not need our worship; some took refuge in God’s infinite mercy; others gave up the effort to discipline the lower self as an unattainable goal; still others claimed to have transcended the law by having successfully tamed their lower selves or by having experienced clear signs of God’s approval of their behavior in the form of miraculous occurrences or visions and dreams.

In his decision to exclude libertines from the body of Sufism, Ibn al-‘azzī was in agreement with most Sufi observers of the Sufi landscape, who also sought to domesticate or eliminate the antimonian trends interwoven into their tradition of piety. It is noteworthy that the scope of Sufism as it was viewed by its most powerful critic largely coincided with its scope as it was understood by its most astute "insider" observers from Sārāj to Hujwīrī. Ibn

23 Ibn al-‘azzī, Talbīs, 31–45 (chapter 10); the last pages of this chapter (47v–49r) contain passages from an unidentified work of Ibn ‘Abī Dāwūd (411/1020–513/1120). Chapters 9 and 11 also contain material relevant to Sufis. An English translation by D. S. Margoliouth appeared serially in Islamic Culture 9 (1932–33) and 10 (1933–34) and 9 (1948–49); I have used this in making my own translation.
24 The standard Sufi response to the charge of bid’a was (1) to deny the accusation and to prove that the practice in question was instead "recommended" (sunnah); for instance, was the strategy adopted by most Sufi authors who discussed the question of sumūt though they carefully circumscribed the practice with qualifications; for brief overview, see Jean Dunand, "Sama’," in Music and Mysticism I. The Encyclopedia of Islam, ed. ed., 6: 109a–109b as well as Arthur Goldreich, "The Sama’ Controversy: Sufi vs. Legalist", Studia Islamica 74 (1992): 43–63; and (2) to accept that the practice under discussion was an innovation but to cast it as an "acceptable innovation" and not a reprehensible one; this option was adopted especially in the cases of wearing patched frocks, building khanaqahs, and extended seclusion; see Frits Meier, A Book of Etiquette for Sufis, in Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism, trans. John O’Kane (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 26–39.
25 Many early Sufis on the other hand, saw the sharī’a as a secure foundation for their spiritual endeavors; see Berndt Raschke, "Warum ist der Sufi orthodox?" Der Islam 71 (1994): 305–7.
26 Ibn al-‘azzī, Talbīs, 47v ff.
al-Jawzî rejected the practices and beliefs that he associated with Sufism, while the Sufi authorities evaluated them critically, endorsing many and ruling out others, but outsider critics and insider “experts” alike agreed on the boundaries of the form of piety that they picked out for review.

In his attempt to refute the whole of Sufism as antimanoism plain and simple, Ibn al-Jawzî relied directly on the views of the eminent scholar Sufi Abû Hamîd Ghazâlî. In his discussion of libertinism in particular, Ibn al-Jawzî reproduced materials that can be traced back to the works of “the Proof of Islam.” Indeed, since all six of the specious arguments and their correct answers given by Ibn al-Jawzî in his Deliverances appear in a Persian treatise of Ghazâlî titled *The Iqâd of Antimanoism* (Hamâqât-i ‘abî-i i’lîfât), it is certain that Ibn al-Jawzî had access to an Arabic version of Ghazâlî’s treatise or another Arabic text that reproduced this latter’s content.46 For his part, Ghazâlî naturally did not write *The Iqâd of Antimanoism* as a refutation of Sufism; instead, he meant it as an attack against antimanoins who masqueraded as Sufis. While Ghazâlî debunked such “false” Sufis and expostulated the necessity of obeying the *shari’â* in several of his other works, the *Iqâd* was his most extensive and vehement criticism of “permissivists” (i’lîfân).47 In this treatise, Ghazâlî decried antimanoins as the worst of all people. Misled by lust and laziness, these had dropped all prescribed ritual observances and embraced total sexual promiscuity. In so doing, they had allowed themselves to become mere toys in the hands of swindlers, who used them to mislead others. Deprived of any critical faculty, they had accepted Satan’s incitement that scholarship was but a veil for true scum such as themselves and had turned into venomous critics of scholars. While admittedly not all such antimanoins were “Sufi pretenders” (sûfî-ar’ûd), Ghazâlî focused on these pretenders, for whom he reserved his most acerbic tone. Like the Sufis, these impostors dressed in blue gowns or wore the patched cloak, shaved their moustaches, carried prayer-rugs and toothbrushes but, unlike the Sufis, they freely consumed wine, used illicit funds without shame and availed themselves of all bodily pleasures. Ghazâlî discussed in some detail eight “specious arguments” (shabhât) that the Sufi-pretenders produced and refuted them one by one (the two that were not directly reproduced by Ibn al-Jawzî were the denial of afterlife and the argument that true poverty meant the absence of all knowledge, including knowledge of good and bad deeds or of paradise and hell). Ikalî, beyond measure by these would-be Sufi libertines and their hostile attitude towards scholarship, Ghazâlî the scholar-Sufi declared them, in no uncertain terms, beyond the pale of Islam and advised political rulers to ruthlessly exterminate these thoroughly incorrigible sinners.

It is very likely that the libertinism and antimanoins decried by Ghazâlî and Ibn al-Jawzî included not only those who were criticized by Sarrât (i.e., those whom Ghazâlî called the “Sufi pretenders”) but also the nascent *qalandâr* and *darvîsh* types who had already begun to enter the social stage during the sixth/seventh century. Some of the practices denounced by Ibn al-Jawzî – specifically rejection of employment, withdrawal from society, abandoning marriage, and itinerancy without any provisions – would seem to point to mendicant devotions. But, on the whole, there is little non-literary evidence about the *qalandârs* and *darvîshes* as social types before the seventh/eighth century.48

Apart from the issue of whether the literary *qalandar* corresponded to some real libertiners in Persian-speaking Muslim communities, however, the flowering of the *khârābât* cluster gives rise to another significant question: could this new and potent poetic imagery be read as a literary commentary on the state of Sufism during the time period under consideration? More specifically, did the web of images spun around the figure of the qalandar constitute the criticism of the new Sufi communities that had taken shape under the leadership of powerful training masters? Indeed, the emergence of the *khârābât* imagery in Persian poetry was most likely the literary counterpart of Qushâyri and Fuzûlî’s theoretical critique of the formalism that was so evident in the new Sufi social enterprises built around increasingly more authoritarian training shaykhs resident in their lodges. Whether it had an actual social basis or not, the *khârābât* complex was the poetic response to the Sufi lodged (khânaqâh) and the *qalandârs* emerged as the authentic Sufis who were willing to sacrifice absolutely everything for the sake of God, while those khânaqâh-residents actually called “Sufis” were transformed in poetry to mere “extroverts” who had abandoned the search for God in their greed for this world and thus had turned Sufism into a profitable social profession. In this sense, the so-called Sufis of the lodge communities were indistinguishable from all the other social types, such as the *bâbî* experts or the jurists of the madrasas, that for most mystics exemplified a compromise, even a
corruption, of true piety because of their willingness to translate their expertise in religion to social, economic, and political power. It was for this reason that in the "strange looking glass" of the khurābāt complex, "the norms and values of Sufi piety [were] all reversed", and the qalandar was elevated to the role of the genuine mystic. This complete role-reversal suggests that whether real or imaginary, the antinomian, non-conformist edge of Sufism always functioned as an indispensable mirror in which Sufis could look to see a critical reflection of their true place in society and on the spiritual path.

In addition to the nascent phenomenon of mendicant dervishes who began to function as "living commentary" on socially respectable, conformist Sufism, there was another social type whose ascendency from the fifth/eleventh century onwards contributed to the growing popularity of antinomian Sufism. At around the same time as the appearance of the qalandar type, the "wise fool" (collectively referred to as νaμāl al-majānīn in Arabic), came to the surface as a prominent social type of medieval urban culture and gradually found a place in Sufi thought and practice as "the one captivated by God" (mawālihi). The wise fools lived beyond the pale, violating all social conventions, yet they were revered, even admired, especially on account of their total disregard for this world and their readiness to admonish their fellow citizens, particularly the wealthy and the powerful, against negligence of the hereafter. In time, the wise fool came to be identified with the mystic who lost all self-consciousness in the encounter with God and became totally bewildered. The overpowering effect of divine intimacy had been described by the earliest Sufis, such as Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrazī (d. 286/899 or a few years earlier) and Abū'l-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī, and the bewildernment that resulted from such intimacy had been, at least to certain extent, exemplified in the lives of Nūrī and Abū Bakr al-Shībīlī. About two or three generations after Shībīlī, as Sufism became established and Khurasan during the second half of the fourth century, certain wise fools now appeared in Sufi garb as "holy fools". Most notable were Muḥammad Maʿṣūqī of Tīsā and Luqūm of Sarakh. These figures were widely considered to have been freed of all constraints, including "reason", and, as madmen, they were not expected to abide by the law. Abū Sa'īd-ī Abūl-Khayr (537-640/947-1054) reportedly venerated Muḥammad Maʿṣūqī, and about Luqūm he observed, "No one is more unconnected and unattached and more pure than Luqūm. He has no ties whatsoever with anything, not with this world or the hereafter, and not with the self." Luqūm himself is supposed to have said, "Thirty years ago the True Sultan conquered my heart and since then I no one else has dared exercise dominion over it and dwell therein." The holy fools were not particularly ḥusaynī; in Syria and Egypt, for instance, where they were better known under the name muwaṭallīn ("one madly enamored of God") Ḥabīb al-Bān̄ (d. 1728) was an early representative of this type. Ḥabīb al-Bān̄, who reportedly "was heedless of urine on his garments and legs and used to be immersed in mud", does not appear to have been clearly associated with Sufism, but by the seventh/eighth century, prominent Damascene muwaṭallīn such as Yūsuf al-Qaramīš (d. 675/1279) and 'Alī al-Kurdi had already come into the orbit of Sufism. From this point onwards - well into the twentieth century - practically all regions where there were sizeable Muslim communities produced such enraptured saints, who often lived in liminal spaces in and around major urban centers and who were widely perceived as Sufi figures. The same phenomenon, that of the absorption of enraptured saints into Sufism, appears to have been at work also in rural environments, as exemplified in the way a rural majūlih of the Nile delta, 'Aḥmad al-Bāduwī (d. 675/1276), gradually became a major Sufi saint of Egypt by the early Ottoman period. Thus Sufism thus came to be inextricably laced with antinomian dervishes and enraptured saints.

**BETWEEN FAME AND NOTORIETY: DERVISH PIETY (1200-1900)**

Antinomian and non-conformist Sufis may have had murky beginnings, but they surfaced with a vengeance, starting in the seventh/eighth century, in the form of itinerant bands of mendicants who roamed the countryside and inhabited liminal spaces around towns and villages as well as solitary

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enraptured saints who lived at the margins of urban society. The proliferation of dervish groups and majdūb saints coincided with the growing popularity of some outlawish, shocking ritual practices, such as walking on fire, biting snakes and scorpions, and piercing the body with sharp iron skewers, by some otherwise socially integrated Sufis.

Dervish groups as identifiable social collectivities first appeared as two widespread movements: the Qalandariyya, which first flourished in Syria and Egypt under the leadership of Persian-speaking figures, most notably Jamāl al-Dīn Sāvī (d. ca. 630/1232-33), and the Ḥaydariyya, which took shape in Iran as a result of the activities of its eponymous founder Qubī al-Dīn Ḥaydār (d. ca. 618/1222-23).\(^{44}\) Both movements rapidly spread from their respective places of origin to India in the east and to Asia Minor in the west.

By way of example, it might be helpful to provide a brief review of the life of one of these key figures. Jamāl al-Dīn was born towards the end of the sixth/seventh century, probably in the Iranian town of Sāva, situated just to the southwest of present-day Tehran. There is some evidence that he may have studied to become a religious scholar, since in at least one account he is said to have issued legal opinions without consulting any books, and in other sources he is reported to have studied the Qurʾān as well as religious sciences and to have written at least a partial Qurʾānic exegesis. As a young man, he travelled to Damascus to continue his studies, where he became affiliated with the Sufi hospice of ʿUthmān Rūmī located at the foot of the Qaṣīṭān mountain to the northwest of the city. Soon, his allegiance to ʿUthmān Rūmī gave way to extreme asceticism through his encounters with remarkable holy men named Jalāl Dargūnī. Jamāl al-Dīn shaved his face and head and began to spend his time sitting motionless on graves with his face turned in the direction of Mecca, speechless and with grass as his only food. Another tradition of reports in the sources attributes Jamāl al-Dīn’s turn to ascetic practices to his scrupulous endeavour to preserve his chastity, in a way reminiscent of one part of the Qurʾānic story of Yūsūf (the Qurʾān, 12:31-35).

Jamāl al-Dīn was soon accosted by a group of disciples and eager followers. In order to preserve his solitude, he left Damascus and spent the last years of his life in total social isolation in a cemetery in Damietta in Egypt, where a hospice was later built around his tomb.

Jamāl al-Dīn was first and foremost an uncompromising renouncer. He was stringent in his rejection of this world, as evidenced by his penchant for residing in cemeteries, in both Damascus and Damietta, as well as by the extreme care he took to dissociate himself from all established patterns of social life through such practices as shaving the head and all facial hair, donning woolen sacks, and refusing to work for sustenance. Presumably, he was also celibate. He shunned all kinds of attention and preferred to lead the life of a complete recluse. It is not possible to determine the nature of his attitude towards the religious law. While there is no sign that he deliberately eschewed prescribed religious observances or clearly violated legal prohibitions, reports on his life leave the impression that conformity to the shariʿa was not a major issue in his career. The unmistakable message of his personal example was total rejection of society.

The examples of Jamāl al-Dīn Sāvī and Qubī al-Dīn Ḥaydār proved to be infectious. Qalandar hospices appeared within decades after Jamāl al-Dīn’s death, in Damascus, Damietta, Cairo and Jerusalem, and groups of “sack-wearing” Qalandars fanned out from the Arab Middle East to Anatolia in the west and to Iran, Central Asia and India in the east, where prominent early representatives included ʿUthmān Marandi, better known as Laʿl Shāhīb Qalandar of Sehwan (d. 673/1274) and BūʾAll Qalandar of Panipat. Ḥaydārīs, with their distinct iron paraphernalia and short sleeveless cloaks, also spread in these same regions. Before the end of the seventh/eighth century, other dervish groups similar to the mendicant Qalandars and Ḥaydārīs began to take shape. The followers of Baraq Baha (d. 707/1307-8) in Asia Minor and western Iran, followed by Abdalīn of Rūm, Jamāl, Bektāsī, and Shams-i Tabrīzī in Asia Minor and Madārīs and Jalālīs in Muslim South Asia were other representatives of this new wave of religious mendicancy.\(^{45}\)

The itinerant dervishes band considerably expanded the repertoire of unconventional and anti-shariʿa behavior of previous antimonic Sufis by adopting a host of openly antiscopic practices. They wielded mendicancy, itinerancy, celibacy and self-mortification with striking forms of socially transgressive behavior, which they viewed as the ultimate measure of true religiosity. They actively violated prevalent social norms by adopting such shocking practices as nudity or improper clothing, shaving all bodily and facial hair, wearing iron chains, rings, collars, bracelets and anklets, as well as using hallucinogens and intoxicants. Not content with avoidance of gainful

\(^{44}\) See Karamustafa, God’s Uproar Friends, 39-46 for detailed accounts on these two figures. The missionary biography of Jamāl al-Dīn Sāvī that follows is adapted from this work.

\(^{45}\) For a general history of the dervish groups until about the tenth/eleventh century, see Karamustafa, God’s Uproar Friends; Ahmet Yağcı Ocal, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Manzarası Süifik Kalendarı (XIV–XVII Yüzyıllar) (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1993) also contains much information and analysis concerning dervish groups in the Ottoman Empire.

employment, family life, indeed most forms of social association, they moved from mere non-conformist behavior to active rejection and destruction of established social customs. In this way, the dervish groups were striking in their deliberate and blatan rejection of the social mainstream as well as their apparent disregard for most strictures of the Shari'ah.

This new dervish piety was not homogeneous, and it manifested itself in the forms of solitary mendicants, wandering bands and partially settled dervish communities. While mendicancy and itinerancy remained the norm, the attraction of settled community life sometimes prevailed, and some began to practice mendicancy and itinerancy on a part-time, mostly seasonal, basis. Wandering and begging in a state of extreme poverty most of the year, these dervishes returned to their homes for the rest of the year, where they enjoyed the relative comfort of settled life. Throughout such diversity, however, anti-social, unconventional behavior remained a constant.

The penchant of the dervishes for distancing themselves from the established social and religious order was visible also in their adoption of controversial and radical beliefs and doctrines, even though it is extremely difficult to tease these out from the available sources, which are often biased and outright hostile towards the mendicants. It appears that the dervishes applied radical interpretations to central religious (in particular mystical) concepts such as passing away of the self (Janâ'), poverty (faqr), theophany (tajallî) and saintliness (wakilaya). Indeed, they viewed their antinomianism as the natural result of the "correct" interpretation of these concepts. Thus, rejection of society was often justified as the passing away of the self, which was expressed in the language of death. The dervish was one who voluntarily chose death and "died before dying". The alleged hadith, saying of the Prophet Muhammad, mauta ghabr an tama'ata ("die before you die") supplied the prophetic sanction for this attitude. Technically, therefore, the dervish considered himself to have the status of a dead person. He often physically demonstrated the utter seriousness of this conviction by dwelling in cemeteries in the proximity of the dead. The implication was that he was not bound by social and legal norms. The latter applied to "legal persons" of clear social standing. The dervish, however, having shattered the confines of society, had no social persons: he functioned in a territory that was above and beyond society.

Similar interpretations of the concepts of poverty, theophany and saintliness always yielded the same rejectionist conclusion. Poverty literally meant absolute poverty. Theophany implied the presence of God in all his Creation, and thus the meaninglessness of legal prescriptions and proscriptions. Saintliness meant the existence of saints, the dervishes themselves, who were exempt from social and legal regulations. The underlying message was one and the same: the dervish had to implement an absolute break with his social past and to devote himself solely to God by means of radical renunciation.56

Even though the dervishes were united in their total rejection of society, it is important to emphasize that there were significant differences among the different dervish groups, in both external appearance and behavior. The uncontrolled ecstasy of the Abdalās of Rûm, with their boisterous communal rituals marked by music, dancing, consumption of hashish and self-laceration, diverged considerably from the learned gaiety of the Jenābs with their carefully-crafted matted hair and belts studded with bells, while both of these groups stood quite apart from the fierce asceticism of the "heavy-moral" Haydarās and the clean-shaven, sack-wearing Qalandars. There were also linguistic factors that worked to render them distinct: the Qalandars and Jenābs were overwhelmingly Persian-speakers, while Abdalās of Rûm and probably also Haydarās mainly spoke vernacular Turkish. These groups remained essentially separate for several centuries, at least until around the tenth/sixteenth century, even though it is likely that they heavily influenced each other. Outsider observers, Muslim and non-Muslim, frequently confused these groups with each other, yet the same cannot be said for the dervishes themselves, who appear to have been highly conscious of their own distinctive group identities.

Other dervish groups that took shape in this period distinguished themselves not by practicing renunciant mendicancy, but by incorporating shocking practices into their communal rituals. Most prominent in this regard were the Rifa'i dervishes, who achieved notoriety by their practices of fire-walking, snake-biting and body-piercing. In contrast with the earlier Sufi practices of samû'a, tearing the cloak in ecstasy, and searching for manifestations of God in the creation (most notably in the form of "gazing at hairless youths") – all of which had come under fire by critics of Sufism, but were nevertheless practiced widely – the new repertoire of outrageous ritualistic activity of the Rifa'i's such as biting live snakes and scorpions, swallowing broken glass, sticking needles into the body and walking on fire, was positively scandalous. Nevertheless, such "miracle performances" became popular, and the Rifa'iyya and its branches rapidly spread from their origins in upper Iraq to Syria, Egypt, Anatolia and eventually the Balkans. In the Maghrib, similar practices appeared much later, when two new groups took shape in Morocco: the Hamādsha (Hamâdsha in the local pronunciation), whose spiritual lineage

56 For a fuller account, see Karamustafa, God's Unruly Friends, 13-23.
is traced back to two obscure Moroccan saints of the eleventh/seventeenth and early twelfth/nineteenth centuries, Sidi Abi l-Hasan ‘Ali b. Hamasdu (d. 1171/1789 or 1175/1783–3), known popularly as Sidi ‘Ali, and Sidi Ahmad Dghuhi (dates unknown), and ‘Isa wa (Aissouas), founded during the early tenth/sixteenth century by Muhammad b. ‘Isa l-Sufi an l-Mukhtarri (d. 532/1136). These groups were well known for the activities associated elsewhere with the Rif‘i‘is, as well as for slashing their heads with knives or axes and beating their heads with hard objects.37

The establishment of the regional empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, Uzbekis, and the Mughals during the tenth/sixteenth century led to changes in the organization of the dervish groups. In many regions, the loose social collectivity of the previous few centuries was assimilated into a new, institutionalized Sufi path. In Ottoman Asia Minor and the Balkans, the Bektashiyya emerged as a more major Sufi path that carried the legacy of the earlier Qalandars, Haydaries, and Abdal of Rumi, while in India the Qalandars formed associations with the socially respectable Sufi paths (‘arif), which led to the emergence of “hyphenated” paths like the Chishtiyya-Qalandariyya. The Khakas in Iran probably came into being as a distinct path through a merger of different movements such as the Haydariyya and Jalalyya. Not all of the earlier dervish groups survived into the early modern period, however, and some simply disappeared altogether, as evidenced by the case of the Jam‘i in the Ottoman Empire.38

But new dervish saints continued to appear with regular frequency in the early modern period. In Asia, such figures were generally identified as qalandars, shaykhs (Central Asia) or mulung (South Asia), but the term qalandar no longer denoted allegiance to the specific example of Jam‘al al-Din al-Sufi. The stories of these saints believed to have been pulled out of society directly by God vary considerably in this era, but there are recurring patterns and common features that can be noted. Some majalis were presumably not integrated into society even from childhood and grew up as misfits of one kind or another, as in the example of the Central Asian qalandar poet Bāḥbrahīm, known as Mas‘rūb (1640–1711 CE).39 Others evidently underwent conversion experiences as adults that threw them off course from socially respectable life trajectories into the “social wilderness” at the heart of urban society. The Punjabi poet and saint Shah Ḫusayn of Lahore (1539–99 CE), for instance, was a Qadiri Sufi until he experienced a dramatic spiritual transformation at the age of 36 when he heard his Sufi teacher recite the verse “The life of the world is nothing but play and pleasurable distraction” (Qur’an 6:32), which led him to cast aside his previous social identity and start living beyond the pale, drinking wine in public and singing and dancing in the streets.40 Still others, like Muhammad Ṣa‘īdī Ṣafī (1676–1755 CE) and ‘Abd Allah Nīsābūrī (1688–1760 CE) of Central Asia, had complex but continuous relationships with an established Sufi path (in their case the Naqībī).41 Conversion from a respectable social status, especially from the ranks of religious scholars and Sufis, continued to be a common trope in hagiographic and literary accounts of enraptured saints in the age of the regional empires, though in some cases such conversion did not necessarily mean a complete rupture in the relationship between antimonic dervishes and mainstream Sufi paths.

The antimonic and antisocial repertoire of majāhil of the early modern era mirrors that of the earlier dervish groups, but it is in the historical accounts of the former that we come across clear evidence of transgression and even inversion of prevalent gender roles, for which the historical record of the late medieval dervish groups remains inconclusive. Abū Bakr ibn Abī l-Walī‘ of Aleppo (503–93), for instance, who spoke in the Arabic vernacular and is presumably the earliest to have been described as a dervish or a devotional poet, was a woman.42 Shah Ḫusayn of Lahore, mentioned above, not only often “spoke in the voice of a woman” in his Punjabi poetry, but openly lived with his Brahmin lover Madho in a homoerotic relationship in defiance of prevalent heteronormative customs.43 Māsā Sādā Sūhāq (d. 1449 CE), originally a Chishti Sufi from


42 Papas, Mystiques et vagabonds en islam, 137–57.


44 For a full account, see Kugle, Sufis and Saints’ Bodies, 181–210; the quote is on 201.
Gujarat, went even further by completely inverting gender roles when he decided to take on the persona of a woman: "he donned the red clothes of a bride awaiting her groom and adopted the nickname Sada Sohab 'the Fiery Bride'".44 It appears, therefore, that transgression of gender roles was a persistent feature of saints captivated by God, and in South Asia their shrines exercised a special attraction to transgendered individuals (khuras) until recent times, as in the case of the Punjabi saint 'Abd al-Latif Shāh, known as Barrī 'Imām (d. 1210/1708).45

The dervishes and unaffiliated individual enraptrapped saints survived well into late colonial times, but they gradually petered out in the era of modern nation states, except in South Asia.46 The attitudes of the colonial authorities as well as the political elites of the new nation states towards the dervishes and the challenges that these latter presented to both colonial and national establishment agendas of "modernization" formed fascinating subjects of study.47 In some instances, the "wild and unruly" dervishes of the medieval and early modern times have retroactively been "tamed" into symbols of national/regional religious identity, with major shrine complexes honouring their "historic" legacy, as in the cases of Lāl Shāh Bīz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif, Pakistan; and Ahmad al-Badawi in Tanta, Egypt.48 The formation of

cultic activity around the shrines of antinomian dervishes as well as their poetic and hagiographical legacy preserved and cultivated in the various vernaculars of Muslim peoples constitutes a significant chapter in the Islamization of the common masses everywhere, which is a topic that still awaits its researchers.

How should we explain the somewhat sudden upsurge of antinomian dervish activity during the thirteenth century and its lasting popularity in Muslim communities from that point onwards until well into the twentieth century? To a large extent, the formation of dervish piety appears to have been a reaction to the increasing institutionalization of Sufism from the twelfth century onwards. The dervish groups rejected the basic institutions of society, but their living critique was pointed specifically towards socially well-integrated Sufis, who formed widespread patron-client networks that controlled much property and wielded immense political and social power. The dervishes viewed these respectable Sufis as "op-outs" who had forsaken the basic mandate of the Sufi path — which was selfless and total devotion to God — for the comfort of social acceptance built upon cultivation of a spiritualized (albeit socially plausible) subjectivity. In this sense, it is possible to see dervish piety as a real-time running commentary — mostly vehemently critical — on socially domesticated Sufi paths. The dervishes functioned as the social and religious conscience of socially mainstream Sufis.

This inextricable though largely conflictual bond between antinomian dervishes and socially mainstream, law-abiding Sufis partly explains the emergence and durability of dervish piety in medieval and early modern times when mainstream urban Muslim religiosity everywhere assumed an unmistakable Sufi colouring. Where there were Sufis — and no place was devoid of them — there were dervishes. Yet, it is important to realize that, quite apart from its ties to mainstream Sufi paths, antinomian dervish piety had its own independent appeal to large numbers of ordinary believers, particularly in the countryside, where it seems to have impacted the everyday piety of many, often newly Islamized, Muslims in a formative way. The dervishes spoked in the vernacular as opposed to the learned idiom of the cultural elite, and they were not normally cluttered with — and thus were not compromised by — ties of clientage with power holders (though there were exceptions, such as Baraq Baba); as such, it appears that they were often perceived as the very personification of total devotion to God — in other words, as the true saints. Their social distance from the cultural elites and their real closeness, especially in terms of poverty and everyday language, to the common people evidently rendered them viable candidates for popular saintliness. Their exemplary piety informed the daily religiosity of rural and urban masses, at

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46 There is no comprehensive historical overview of the dervish groups for the early modern and modern periods, but for many leads and references, see Jürgen Warnem Fremnges, Journey to God: Sufis and Dervishes in Islam, trans. Jane Upton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and Alexandre Papin, "Tévreb", The Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE.

47 For an exemplary anthropological study based on fieldwork in Lahore, Pakistan, that includes much coverage of qalandars, see Katherine Pratt Ewing, Arguing Saintliness: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

times in a defining manner. In some cases, there even appears to have been real blending between mendicant dervishes and actual communities of itinerant beggars, musicians, and bards. The enduring popularity and lasting legacy of dervish piety should be understood in the light of the popular appeal it has had among the common people from its origins in the seventh/thirteenth century until well into the modern period.

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Mysticism in Medieval Sufism

Lloyd Ridgeon

INTRODUCTION

In this essay I shall attempt to tease out the extent to which there is truth in Martin Ling's statement that "Sufism is nothing other than Islamic mysticism." Undertaking this investigation is perilous because the key terms of the study are far from clear. Indeed, the term "Sufism" is discussed in various ways by those who have called themselves Sufis, resulting in emic authors investigating the derivation of the term or citing a range of definitions in their treatise from "past masters" of the tradition. Moreover, some Western academics have simply labelled Sufism with the term "mysticism," even though the meaning of this word is greatly contested and its suitability for non-Christian traditions is suspect. An example of the pitfalls that are encountered when defining mysticism becomes all too apparent when considering the attempt of Nitin Smart, who considered mysticism as "primarily consisting in an interior or introverted

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9. See for example, R.A. Nicholson, The Mystics of Islam (London: George Bell & Sons Ltd, 1894); Annette Schimmel, The Mystical Dimension of Islam (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); and Alexander Keyhan, Islamic Mysticism: A Short History (London: Routledge, 1995). Unfortunately, some of our own works have also used the term rather empirically; see Lloyd Ridgeon, Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism (London: Routledge, 2011). "Mysticism" is a term that is difficult to define due to various understandings that have been offered by those who claim to have experienced something that transcends the usual state of consciousness. This essay is not a discussion about the "reality" of mysticism, I have refrained from discussing the word "mysticism" and associated terms in speech-marks which would highlight the tenuous nature of the term, although readers may envisage speech-marks there should they wish. 

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