

CHAPTER 13

Sufism

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Introduction

Sufism has been a dominant force in shaping Islamic societies since the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE. The manifestations of Sufism we consider normative today grew out of a broad synthesis of early mystical trends and movements that coalesced in Nishapur in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. This great mystical synthesis was articulated most succinctly by Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) and Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074), both of whom were scholars of hadith as well as legal experts in the Shāfi‘ī school of law. These two important figures demonstrate the intimate relationship that has existed between Sufism and the science and study of hadith. Both al-Sulamī and al-Qushayrī employed the conventions of hadith science to establish a genealogy for Sufism as well as a basis for its authority as an Islamic discipline in its own right. They used hadith conventions to compile and present statements from the early progenitors of Sufism, who hailed primarily from Iraq and the Hijaz in the ninth century CE.

Louis Massignon’s extensive study of Sufi terminology established a consensus that Sufism finds its inspiration and general contours from the two main sources of Islamic thought, the Qur’an and the sunna (Green 2012, 26–27). The sunna of the Prophet according to Sunni Muslims is epitomized in the hadith (Brown 2009, 6). The differences between Sufis and non-Sufis derive mostly from varying conceptions of authority rather than a greater or lesser fidelity to hadith. Both Sufis and non-Sufis quote hadith extensively to support their claims. Some examples of hadiths that were contemplated by early Islamic mystics point to God’s immanent presence in the world. In one tradition, God says, “I am present when my servant thinks of me ... And whosoever seeks to approach me by a span, I approach him by a cubit; and he who seeks to approach me by

one cubit, I will seek to approach him by two fathoms; and whoever walks towards me, I will run towards him" (Knysh 2010, 8). Hadiths such as this indicate lofty and exalted states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*) that Sufis have tried to achieve through ascetic and mystical pursuits. Sufis believe that those Muslims who have realized these states and stations should be the true religious authorities in Islam because they exemplify in both their inward states and outward actions the way (*sunna*) of the Prophet.

Early Muslim renunciants (*zuhhād*) and pietists (*‘ubbād*) of the eighth century CE were often characterized by later hadith scholars as unreliable transmitters of hadith even if they were lionized by later Sufis for their ascetic and moralistic values. Rather than being concerned with the soundness of a hadith based on the reputations of its various narrators, these religious virtuosi often pulled from the accessible and abundant hadith lore of their times to motivate their fellow Muslim believers toward renunciation of worldly matters, fighting in the cause of God and earning gainful employment, among other such virtues (Knysh 2010, 18–26). A notable exception among these early renunciants is ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) who is generally considered reliable by scholars of hadith and whose *Kitāb al-zuhd* is an important compilation of hadith focusing on ascetic values and renunciation. His collection is one of the earliest and most comprehensive of this genre which was subsequently taken up by other great hadith scholars such as Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855).

The ambivalence of early hadith scholars toward the ascetics and sermonizers of their time should not mislead us concerning the relationship between Sufism and hadith during the fourth and fifth Islamic centuries (tenth and eleventh centuries CE). Sufis such as al-Sulamī and al-Qushayrī used hadith science to establish the authoritative basis of Sufism so that it could stand as its own Islamic discipline. Furthermore, Sufism spread to the far reaches of the Islamic world by the seventh/thirteenth century and became normative in most areas of the Muslim world by that time. Thus, we can see that Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymiyya's (d. 728/1328) attack on what he saw as the excesses of Sufi practice and thought in his time was met with hostility by learned elites in both Egypt and the Levant. By the thirteenth century CE, we are no longer speaking of a conflict between Sufis and hadith specialists as was the case in the ninth century CE, since many of the foremost specialists in hadith science from this later period were themselves Sufis. Rather, it is the modern discourse around Sufism that has revived similar criticisms of ascetics and renunciants that were made by hadith scholars of the early Abbasid period, equipping modern Salafī apologists with an arsenal for attacks against Sufis.

Early Sufis and Their Reliance upon Hadith

Some of the most important progenitors of Sufism lived in the ninth century CE in Baghdad at the time when the canon of Prophetic hadith was being formalized. The ninth century was a time of great struggle between the partisans of hadith and the Abbasid Caliph who was supported by a cadre of pietistic theologians, later known as the Mu‘tazila (see Chapter 12). In this struggle over religious authority and over who

would come to wield interpretive authority in Islam, the Abbasid Caliph eventually succumbed and threw his support behind the scholarly class who were characterized by their adherence to the dictates of hadith over independent reason. The early mystics and ascetics of Iraq, who were also the forerunners of Sufism, generally belonged to this hadith movement. (An exception to this is the early *Ṣūfiyyat al-Mu‘azila* who were Mu‘tazilī ascetics and Sufis; Gimaret 2015.) These were mystics such as Ḥārīth al-Muḥāsibī, Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 298/910), and Sahl b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896). Al-Muḥāsibī, for example, is said to have refused to accept his inheritance from his father on account of having considered him a Mu‘tazilī (Knysh 2010, 43). Sufism developed as a coherent movement in this period of hadith dominance and Sufis referred to hadith as a primary source to justify their claims.

Muhammad b. ‘Alī al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (b. c. 205–215/820–830, d. c. 295–300/907–912), an early Islamic mystic who lived in Khurāsān and Transoxania (the land beyond the Oxus river, or Amu Darya, which historically marked the boundary between the Iranian plateau and the Central Asian steppe), is known primarily for his doctrine of *wilāya* (sainthood), which later became an important component of Sufi thought and practice. While al-Tirmidhī never used the term Sufi or *taṣawwuf* (the practice of being a Sufi), his approach to Islamic mysticism demonstrates the existence of mystical approaches that were similar to Sufism but existed outside of Iraq. Al-Tirmidhī’s mystical terminology is distinctive, but the structural similarities that he demonstrates in his works show that Islamic mysticism was a widespread discourse by the end the ninth century CE. One of al-Tirmidhī’s most acclaimed works is *Nawādir al-uṣūl* (*Rare Principles*), a mystical commentary on 291 hadiths from the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Tirmidhī not only demonstrates that Prophetic hadith are central to Islamic mysticism but also that only an interpretation that is inward, *ab intra*, can fully appreciate the depth of the Prophet’s words. In his 182nd principle, al-Tirmidhī begins his discussion with a Prophetic hadith: “From ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Amr, may God be pleased with him, from the Messenger of Allah may God bless him and grant him peace who said, “The spirits of the believers meet within the proximity of one day’s journey even if one of them has not [physically] seen his companion [in belief] at all.”” Al-Tirmidhī comments on the hadith by explaining that the spirits of the believers meet beyond the confines of the human body when the spirit overcomes the attachments and desires of the lower soul. When this happens the spirit rises and can roam more freely in the spiritual realm. Since, according to him, true believers have this quality, it is the spirits of believers that will meet before their bodies physically meet. Al-Tirmidhī then gives the example of how some of the early Muslims used to meet physically but know that they had met previously in the spiritual realm (al-Tirmidhī 1972, 164). Al-Tirmidhī’s goal was to use hadith as a basis for each of his 291 principles which demonstrate how the spiritual universe interacts with the physical world and governs the mystical path.

Another important mystic from Basra, al-Tustarī, wrote a partial commentary on the Qur’an that followed a similar approach. Neither al-Tirmidhī nor al-Tustarī were Sufis per se, but their works laid the foundations for Sufism as it developed into its mature form. Both of these figures showed how the mystical interpretation of Qur’an

and hadith could uncover meanings that were not readily understood by a mere surface reading of these texts. Through their attempt to interpret the Qur'an and hadith in this way, they were demonstrating how Islamic mysticism continually returns to these two sources for its inspiration and fundamental doctrines.

Hadith and Normative Islamic Mysticism

It is well known that early Muslim ascetics were influenced by Christian asceticism, which had already been well established in both Syria and Iraq before the Arab/Islamic conquests of the seventh century CE (Green 2012, 19–21). A clear example of this kind of Christian asceticism can be found in the work of Isaac of Nineveh (d. 700 CE) from Iraq, who wrote a series of homilies about the virtues of the monastic life. Some of the early Muslim ascetics and mystics of Syria, in particular, advocated celibacy as an important component of the mystical path (Knysh 2010, 37). These Islamic ventures into asceticism and mysticism occurred before the canonization of hadith in the ninth century CE, which took the form of a corpus of widely recognized collections of Prophetic traditions representing the sunna of the Prophet. Once this corpus of hadith became the standard by which the sunna of the Prophet would be judged, it brought about a re-envisioning of Islamic mysticism that would align closer to the hadith. Al-Junayd, al-Tustarī, and al-Tirmidhī were all important figures in this re-visioning of Islamic mysticism. Their approaches were synthesized and institutionalized later by the likes of al-Sulamī and al-Qushayrī in the eleventh century CE. Thus, hadith played a crucial role in the development of Sufism as a uniquely Islamic approach to mysticism.

Celibacy is a case in point. At the end of the eighth century and beginning of the ninth century CE, ascetics such as Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 215/830) were advocating celibacy as a component of their ascetic/mystical practice. Al-Dārānī had studied the mystic path with 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd (d. c. 133/750) and Rabī' b. Ṣabīḥ (d. 161/777) at Basra and 'Abbādān, an island on the Shaṭṭ al-'Arab, in Iraq. Upon returning to Syria he developed his own mystical teaching centered on *tawakkul*, total reliance upon God, and *riḍā*, complete acceptance of the divine will (Knysh 2010, 36). His use of celibacy fitted well with a strict ascetic regime that he had developed at 'Abbādān, which was a training ground for Iraqi ascetics during the latter part of the eighth century and first part of the ninth century CE (Knysh 2010, 17). In this way, the asceticism of Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī was not significantly different from the ascetic regime of Isaac of Nineveh (d. 700 CE), an early Iraqi Christian ascetic and monk at the monastery of Bethabe in Kurdistan.

The supremacy of the hadith movement was realized by the middle of the ninth century CE when the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil rescinded the *Miḥna* and decided to back the supporters of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. Muslim mystics from the end of the ninth century CE no longer made celibacy a central component of their mystical teachings. Al-Junayd, for example, had to defend his support for celibacy against the existence of Prophetic hadith that directly opposed it. Al-Tirmidhī probably went the furthest by stating that celibacy had no place in Islamic mysticism because it directly contravenes

the Prophetic hadith. By the tenth and eleventh centuries CE, the Sufis were stating that the shari‘a, based on principles primarily derived from the Qur’an and hadith, was the law that was required of all Sufis. By al-Qushayrī’s time, the hadith and its expression in *fiqh* (Islamic law) had become supreme as a standard by which normative Sufi practice was regulated.

The Development of Sufism in Khurāsān

Abū Naṣr ‘Abd Allāh al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) wrote one of the first major works defending Sufism from its detractors. His book *Kitāb al-Luma‘* sought to place Sufism within the broader milieu of Islamic scholarship. According to al-Sarrāj, there are three types of scholars in Islam who are worthy of the title “inheritors of the prophets” (*warathat al-anbiyā’*). These are the scholars of hadith, the scholars of law (*fiqh*), and the scholars of Sufism (*taṣawwuf*). For al-Sarrāj, these scholar-types are nested so that the scholar of law must accept and adhere to the dictates of hadith (al-Sarrāj 2014, 8), and the scholar of *taṣawwuf* must accept and adhere to the dictates of both law and hadith (al-Sarrāj 1914, 9–11). However, for al-Sarrāj, the scholar of law is of a higher rank than the scholar of hadith and the scholar of *taṣawwuf* is of a higher rank than both the scholars of law and hadith. This nested hierarchy is similar to al-Tirmidhī’s hierarchy of knowledge, which places the scholar of outward knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-ẓāhir*) below the scholar of wisdom (*ḥikma*). For al-Tirmidhī, both of these scholar-types are of lower status than the scholar of gnosis (*ma‘rifā*) as exemplified by the saints, the *awliyā’* (al-Tirmidhī 1571, fol. 16b). Both al-Sarrāj and al-Tirmidhī place hadith in a position of foundational importance for Sufism.

One of the fundamental aspects of Sufism is the idea that, even after the prophets, God continues to communicate with humanity through knowledge that he bequeaths to his saints (*awliyā’*). This knowledge does not have legislative force; however, it is still a means of guidance for humanity according to many Sufis. Thus, we see in both al-Sarrāj and al-Tirmidhī the idea that God communicates to humanity directly through the Qur’an and then indirectly through the recorded words and deeds of the Prophet (hadith), and furthermore, more indirectly through his saints. Thus, the Qur’an and the hadith, while being the first and foremost expressions of God’s will, also provide a standard by which the words of the saints can be judged. In this way, the Qur’an and the hadith provide an essential frame of reference for Sufi epistemology.

Al-Sarrāj was from Ṭūs, a city in northeastern Khurāsān and al-Tirmidhī was from the city of Tirmidh in Transoxania. Both Khurāsān and Transoxania became important centers of Islamic learning and thought during the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. While many of the early Sufis of the ninth century CE came from the central lands of Islam such as Iraq and Syria, Sufism developed its mature form in the eastern province of Khurāsān during the eleventh century CE. The city of Nishapur in Khurāsān was home to the two most important figures in the development of early Sufism whom we have already mentioned, Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī and Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī. Being hadith scholars, their scholarship in hadith heavily impacted their articulation of Sufism. Al-Sulamī and al-Qushayrī used the science of hadith to

establish Sufism as an Islamic discipline alongside other knowledge disciplines in Islam such as *tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis), *hadith*, and *fiqh* (law).

Al-Sulamī's contribution to Sufism has been likened to the contribution of Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820) to Islamic legal methodology. Al-Shāfi'ī sought to make *hadith* the main arbiter for recourse to legal rulings by bringing about more uniformity in the Islamic legal system and reducing the role of local traditions as a source of law. In a sense, al-Sulamī performs this task for Sufism by emphasizing the centrality of *hadith* to Islamic mystical thought and practice (Thibon 2009, 132). For example, in his book on *futuwwa* (chivalry), al-Sulamī takes pains to demonstrate the importance of *futuwwa* by citing numerous *hadith* about this aspect of Islamic spirituality. It would be facile to say that al-Sulamī was simply trying to bolster the orthodoxy of *futuwwa*. Rather, al-Sulamī is attempting to show that *futuwwa* is an important notion to the *hadith* corpus and thus should be incorporated into Sufi aesthetics (Thibon 2009, 133). While some have criticized the reliability of al-Sulamī in narrating *hadith*, it cannot be denied that al-Sulamī was steeped in *hadith* culture. He transmitted *hadith* orally in Nishapur for 40 years and transmitted local *hadith* traditions from Khurāsān to *hadith* masters in Baghdad. The only purely *hadith* work of al-Sulamī that survives is his *Arbaʿīn*, a collection of 40 *hadith* related to topics of Sufism (Thibon 2009, 134). In this book, he provides proofs from *hadith* for various controversial practices of the Sufis such as *samāʿ* (audition), *raqs* (dancing), and wearing the *muraqqaʿa* (patched frock).

In addition to his profuse use of *hadith* in support of Sufism, al-Sulamī used the conventions of *hadith* science to record and catalog the words of early Islamic mystics up to his time. One of the most important *hadith* conventions he used is the *isnād* (chain of narrators) that connects the person recording the tradition to the original speaker through an oral chain of transmitters. By recording the words of the early Sufi masters in this way, al-Sulamī establishes them as authorities in Sufism. This attention to *isnāds* by al-Sulamī mirrors the importance of the *isnād* in *hadith* studies. Through this use of *isnāds*, al-Sulamī associates the early Sufi masters with the Prophet since he considered them to be the true inheritors of the Prophetic legacy. In this light, the Sufis consider the words of the saints to be a lesser form of inspiration from God, but nevertheless an extension of the charisma of the Prophet.

Al-Qushayrī was no less influential on the development of Sufism than al-Sulamī, who was his teacher. Like al-Sulamī, al-Qushayrī was a scholar of *hadith* as well as a legal expert in the Shāfi'ī school of law. Above and beyond this, he was a well-known Sufi master whose Sufi manual, *al-Risāla*, became a classic and is still taught to this day in Sufi circles around the world. Al-Qushayrī used the methods of *hadith* transmission along with the Arabic literary stylistics of *adab* culture to mold a unique and far reaching synthesis of Islamic mystical thought (Chiabotti 2014, 579–580; *adab*, comparable to the Latin *urbanitas*, refers to cultured etiquette in the early Abbasid period and was associated with skill in the literary arts as well as knowledge of culture and refined taste. See Gabrieli 2015). This synthesis is what we generally refer to as Sufism in its mature form that has lasted down to this day.

Al-Qushayrī made use of poetic verse to capture Sufi expressions of mystical insight and divine rapture, and after al-Qushayrī, poetry would become the primary mode of

communicating Sufi aesthetics. Al-Qushayrī was known to recite Sufi poetry as mystical commentary on the hadith that he would narrate in his teaching sessions (Chiabotti 2014, 575). Here we can see that the practice of hadith narration could sometimes provide a background for Sufi mystical expression. The use of hadith for this purpose was highly motivating for Sufi aspirants, who no doubt felt that they were hearing the words of the Prophet himself as they listened to the hadith narrator. In this sense, the narrator provided a living and personal connection to the Prophet, while the hadith audition sessions could elicit strong mystical experiences in the participants. It is therefore unsurprising that Sufis would actively engage in hadith narration and transmission.

Al-Ghazālī and Hadith

Modern controversy surrounding Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), acclaimed Sufi and author of the *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* (*Revivification of the Religious Sciences*), illustrates the evolving place of hadith in Sufism. Al-Ghazālī quotes weak hadith profusely in his *Iḥyāʾ*, and in modern times, he and other Sufis have been accused of carelessness when it comes to narrating hadith and even of being innovators (*ahl al-bidʿa*) for using weak, or allegedly forged, hadith to support their ideas and practices. This criticism requires several important caveats. Sufism had become so widespread in the Muslim world by the end of the early modern period that it is impossible to essentialize Sufis as “careful” or “careless” about the hadith they narrate. Moreover, Sufis were hardly alone in utilizing weak hadith. Rather, hadith experts and Muslim scholars in general have accepted the use of weak (though never forged) hadith in disciplines other than Islamic theology. For example, weak hadith have traditionally been widely accepted when discussing the *sīra* (biography) of the Prophet. In fact, most of the material that relates to the Prophet’s biography can be categorized as weak by the standards of hadith experts. Nevertheless, these traditions are seen as relevant and useful since the Prophet’s biography does not impinge upon the duties and prohibitions that are central to a Muslim’s daily worship, or the principles of faith. Similarly, weak hadith have been allowed when they relate to the promotion of virtues. Again, since virtues do not relate to specific commands and prohibitions in Islamic law they are given consideration as part of the Prophetic heritage and thus are useful in promoting good character among Muslims (Brown 2011, 6–7).

Some Sufis considered the knowledge vouchsafed to them from God to be an arbiter of the soundness of particular hadiths. The celebrated Andalusian Sufi Muḥammad b. ʿArabī al-Ḥātimī (d. 638/1240) used several hadiths in his works that he knew to have no basis according to the requirements of hadith science. One such hadith found throughout Ibn ʿArabī’s *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan Revelations*) reads, “I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known. So I created the cosmos that I might be known.” All major hadith critics consider this hadith to have no basis in the Prophet’s words. Ibn ʿArabī knew that this hadith was weak or even forged. However, he considered it to be “sound” according to spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) (Brown 2009, 193–195). While there certainly were Sufis like Ibn ʿArabī who considered their personal unveiling from God to carry formal weight about the soundness of a given Prophetic tradition,

this was not the case for the vast majority of Sufis. Generally, Sufis respected the classificatory system developed by hadith scholars. Rather, the difference between Sufis and their detractors with respect to the use of hadith was in the relative value and weight given to weak hadith as well as the appropriate context within which those weak hadith should be used (Brown 2011, 15).

Ibn Taymiyya and Radical Conservatism with Respect to Hadith

Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) was a Ḥanbalī scholar known for his unrelenting attacks on what he considered religious innovation (*bidʿa*) among the Muslims of his time. He criticized a series of practices that were widespread among Muslims, some of which related to Sufism, such as *tawassul* (seeking the intervention of a saint), visiting the tombs of saints and prophets, and the institution of the Sufi shaykh (spiritual guide). Ibn Taymiyya lived in a time of social and political turmoil in the wake of the Mongol invasions of the Middle East, and his criticisms do not indicate that he is necessarily more fideistic toward hadith than the Sufis but, rather, that he inclined toward a “strict constructionist”¹ interpretation of hadith. This is embodied in the approach espoused by his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 750/1351), who held that religious beliefs and rituals should be assumed false unless proven otherwise. By contrast, contracts and personal interactions are permissible unless proven otherwise (Brown 2009, 187). This view runs counter to the majoritarian view that applies the same five-point scale of permissibility (*al-aḥkām al-khamsa*) to religious rituals as it does to economic dealings. Both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim demonstrate a radical conservatism with respect to the interpretation of hadith that was not adopted by the vast majority of Muslim scholars. Rather, the majoritarian view was that all human actions, whether religious or non-religious could be graded according to five different levels of permissibility depending on their *ḥukm* (ruling) in relation to the *Sharīʿa*. According to these Sunni scholars, the hadith is just one of four main sources for Islamic law that also includes the Qurʾan, *ijmāʿ* (consensus of the scholarly community), and *qiyās* (analogical reasoning). This legal schema provided much greater flexibility than the binary approach of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim. However, we should understand that these two scholars were intent on trying to instill a more conservative approach to Islam in reaction to the major threat posed by the Mongol invasions to Islamic civilization. While Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim were considered outliers for much of Islamic history, in the modern period their ideas have witnessed a resurgence in the various Salafī movements that have become important articulations of Islamic religiosity in many modern Muslim societies (for more on the beginnings of Salafism and its relationship to Sufism, see Weismann 2007; for modern Salafī approaches to hadith, see Chapters 15 and 16).

Salafism has its roots in a reaction to the threat of European colonialism and Western hegemony over Muslim societies. Thus, while modern-day Salafis will criticize Sufis for not adhering well to the dictates of hadith and for innovating affairs in religious matters, this criticism is better understood as a veiled attack on Sufi

authority. Most Salafis consider Sufis to have failed to protect Muslim societies from the threat of colonialism. Similarly, neither Ibn Taymiyya nor Ibn Qayyim were antithetical to Sufism as an expression of Islamic religious thought and practice. Rather, they criticized particular aspects of Sufism, which they considered to be innovations. Some scholars of Islam have even argued that both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim were themselves Sufis who upheld the ethical teachings of Sufism (Weismann 2007, 188).

The Role of the *Isnād* in Sufism

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE, Sufi brotherhoods (*ṭuruq*, sg. *ṭarīqa*) became a normative part of Muslim social organization throughout the Muslim world. This has remained the case up to the modern period, since when a decline began in the influence of Sufi brotherhoods following colonization and the establishment of modern nation states. Nevertheless, Sufi brotherhoods still function as important social institutions all over the Muslim world today. Sufi *ṭuruq* developed modes of transmitting religious authority through the institution of the *shaykh–murīd* (master–disciple) relationship. The relationship between teacher and disciple in Sufism has been traditionally one of spiritual education (*tarbiya*) on behalf of the teacher with complete obedience expected on the part of the student. The basis of this master–disciple institution lay in the authority of the Sufi *shaykh*, who was understood to be a living representative of the Prophet and who derived his authority through a chain (*silsila*) of teachers reaching back to the Prophet himself. In a sense, one can visualize the Sufi *silsila* as a “living hadith,” just as the hadith *isnād* (chain of narrators) connects the writer or reader of the hadith to the Prophet through a series of narrators. In this way, the structure of Sufism extends logically from the other Islamic disciplines that preceded it such as hadith and *tafsīr*.

There are two types of *isnād* that are important to Sufis. The first is known as *isnād al-ṣuḥba* (the chain/connection of companionship), which requires that a disciple spend time learning from and emulating a master who has perfected many of the Prophetic character traits. The second type is the *isnād al-‘ilm* (the chain/connection of knowledge), which is a mystical chain of transmission from teacher to student that extends back to the Prophet. This second *isnād* indicates a type of esoteric light-knowledge that passes from teacher to student through the masters of a particular *ṭarīqa* issuing originally from the Prophet (Weismann 2007, 188–189). This idea is somewhat similar to the Shi‘i notion of a light-knowledge that is inherited by the Imams from the Prophet. For many Sufis, however, this *isnād* is less esoteric than it is a conduit of blessing (*baraka*) that flows from the Prophet. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī articulated this idea succinctly when he described knowledge through the analogy of water. While the Prophet is like an ocean in his knowledge, the saint is like a river and the Muslim scholar is like a creek. Knowledge flows from its source and reaches humanity through particular individuals who carry this knowledge to the people (al-Tirmidhī 1972, 60). While this analogy sees knowledge as flowing from the source of the Prophet, who took his knowledge ultimately from God, al-Tirmidhī is primarily commenting on the capacity of different types

of human beings to receive knowledge from God. For some Sufis, the Prophet only confided this special knowledge to a select few of his companions who then taught it to others. This is the inward (*bāṭin*) knowledge that can only be known through initiation into a *ṭarīqa* and by taking the hand of a Sufi master. In support of this idea, Sufis will point to the hadith of Abū Hurayra, a prominent companion of the Prophet, who is reported to have said, "I memorized two vessels [of knowledge] from the Prophet. As for the first, I made it known among the people. As for the second, if I made it known my throat would be cut" (al-Tirmidhī 1972, 189). For other Sufis, however, this inward knowledge is not an esoteric knowledge that was passed down from the Prophet, but rather it is a knowledge bequeathed to them directly from God. This is what Sufis call *maʿrifa* (gnosis) or *ilhām* (inspiration). In support of this type of knowledge, Sufis will point to the idea expressed in Qurʾan 2:269 that God gives wisdom (*ḥikma*) to his servants who are neither messengers nor prophets: "He gives wisdom to whomsoever he wills, and whoever is given wisdom is given great good. And none truly remembers save those who possess hearts."

In many ways, the second type of *isnād* performed the role of authentication for Sufi masters and supported their claims to religious authority. Just as the *isnād* of a particular hadith lends that hadith authoritative value as representative of the words of the Prophet, so too the Sufi *isnād* indicates the authority of a Sufi shaykh's claim to be a living representative of the Prophet. Al-Tirmidhī, al-Sulamī, and al-Qushayrī all considered the Sufi saints to be the true *khulafāʾ* (successors) of the Prophet. However, since almost anyone could claim to be a Sufi master and to have been bequeathed inward knowledge, there needed to be certain outward qualifications that would keep imposters from claiming sainthood and Sufi authority. Some of these qualifications were outward religious knowledge of the shariʿa, following the sunna of the Prophet, companionship with a Sufi master, and finally an *isnād*.

Not all Sufis followed these conventions. The Uwaysis, for example, claimed that they did not need companionship with a Sufi shaykh. They followed the example of Uways al-Qarnī, a second generation follower (*tābiʿī*) who never met the Prophet but was named by the Prophet as one of the greatest of God's saints (Baldick 1993, 7). The Qalandars also did not follow the normal conventions of Sufism. This group of wandering ascetics sought to break social conventions even if it related to the sunna of the Prophet as understood through the hadith. They would shave all their hair, put steel rings in their noses, ears, and genitalia, walk about without clothes or barely dressed, and eschew marriage and even friendship (Karamustafa 2006, 41). All of these actions run directly counter to the sunna of the Prophet as it was formulated and summarized in the hadith literature. The Qalandars represent another ascetic/mystical movement in Khurāsān that predated Sufism. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī records ascetics of his time in the ninth century CE who resemble closely the Qalandars of the thirteenth century CE. Rather than seeing the Qalandars as a socially deviant group that was reacting to the social conformity brought about by the strictures of the Prophetic sunna, we can see them historically as an ascetic/mystical group that predated Sufism but was eventually superseded by it. This same phenomenon happened to other ascetic/mystical groups that predated Sufism such as the Malāmatiyya and Karrāmiyya. The Malāmatiyya, literally "the people of blame," represent an ascetic/mystical movement from Khurāsān and Transoxania that was known for its strict regime of censoring the soul (*nafs*) and its ethic of hiding acts of worship. Its base of support was among the urban guilds that

constituted the marketplace in medieval Islamic cities of the East. The Karrāmiyya represent the opposite end of the social spectrum, focused their efforts on reforming the rural and urban poor, and were known for sometimes ostentatious acts of asceticism. Neither of these movements survived the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century CE.

Remolding Sufism in Light of Salafism

The rise of Salafism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has posed one of the greatest challenges to Sufism. Salafis have attacked some of the fundamental ideas and practices of Sufism, labeling them innovations that were unknown at the time of the Prophet. Many present-day Salafis follow the example of Ibn Taymiyya, who, as we mentioned previously, was intent on undermining the authority structures that were at the heart of the Sufi enterprise. Sufis have responded with their own justifications for Sufi thought and practice based on their interpretation of the Qur'an and sunna. In this way, Sufis have had to come to terms with aspects of their ritual practice that may not align directly with norms established through hadith. Sufis will argue that the hadith are just one source for Islamic law and that other sources such as *qiyās* (analogical reasoning) also come into play when deciding about the legality of a particular ritual practice. In response to criticism from Salafis, some Sufis have altered the terminology they use in order to recast their religio-mystical approach in ways that they feel will not be misunderstood. For example, a Yemeni Sufi movement based in Tarīm, the Ḥabā'ib, eschews the use of Sufi terminology associated with Ibn 'Arabī. The Ḥabā'ib have reinvented their approach to Sufism by focusing on *da'wa* (proselytization) rather than *tarbiya* (spiritual training) based on the master-disciple relationship (Knysh 2001, 413).

This approach to Sufism in the modern era echoes the position of the famous Sufi of the eleventh century CE, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Hujwīrī (d. 1077), who said, "Sufism was a reality without a name, and now it is a name without a reality" (al-Hujwīrī 1970, 45). Al-Hujwīrī contends that Sufism was the de facto approach of the Prophet and his companions, but, as the Muslim community grew large and differentiated, there remained only a spiritual and mystical elite among Muslims who carried on the way of the Prophet. In other words, al-Hujwīrī considers the terms "Sufi" and *taṣawwuf* to be cultural and linguistic appellations arising from historical circumstance. According to him, the reality that these terms came to signify was a reality that had existed since the time of the Prophet. Again, we can see that the debate between Salafis and Sufis revolves primarily around modes of defining and interpreting Islam, whether they be more textually driven and egalitarian or whether they be more interpretive and based on saintly authority.

In the Indian Subcontinent, a Sufi/Salafi division plays itself out in the debate between Barelvīs and Deobandis. This division is largely based on a theological debate in Sunni Islam over the cosmic relevance of the Prophet (Mapril and Blanes 2013, 168). However, it also underlines the complex role Sufism plays in Islam. Not all Deobandis have a Salafi orientation. To the contrary, some are Sufis, but they usually restrict the cosmic relevance of the Prophet, while Barelvīs give prominence to the cosmic role of the Prophet even after his death. Barelvīs, on the other hand, are all

Sufis (Riaz 2008, 75–76). The interpretation of hadith plays a key role in the Deobandi/Barelvi division. Barelvis tend to adopt a more theological approach which allows for more latitude in interpreting Qur’anic verses and hadith when making claims about the nature of the Prophet. Deobandis, on the other hand, follow a less interpretive and less theological approach. This division echoes the discussion earlier in this chapter about the antagonism between *ahl al-hadith* (hadith folk) and the Mu‘tazila theologians in the ninth and tenth centuries CE.

Some of the main points of controversy between Barelvis and Deobandis hinge on the light-based nature of the Prophet, the ability of the Prophet to know past, present, and future events, and the ability of the Prophet to be present in places even after his death. Deobandis criticize Barelvi views about the Prophet by saying that they give him supernatural qualities that border on the divine. Deobandis then point to various hadiths quoted by Barelvis and allege that these hadiths are weak or forged. Barelvis counter that their use of weak hadith is only in support of statements already established from the Qur’an as well as hadith that are considered by all Muslims to be sound and acceptable. One such verse from the Qur’an says, “There has come to you from Allāh a light and a clear book” (Q 5:15). Almost all the early exegetes of the Qur’an consider the meaning of “light” in this verse to refer to the Prophet. While Barelvis do not negate the human aspect of the Prophet, they interpret this to mean that the true essence of the Prophet is derived from light, and they emphasize his light-based nature. Deobandis, on the other hand, will interpret this same verse to mean that the Prophet serves as a metaphorical “light” by providing guidance for all of mankind. Deobandis, wary of where the logic of this light-based nature of the Prophet could lead, tend to be more conservative in their interpretation and emphasize the Prophet’s human qualities (*bashariyya*) (Geaves and Gabriel 2013, 217).

The modern discussion between Deobandis and Barelvis, Salafis and Sufis, can be understood by looking at how these groups approach the famous hadith of Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh about the light-based nature of the Prophet:

It is related that Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh said to the Prophet: “O Messenger of Allāh, may my father and mother be ransomed for you, tell me of the first thing Allāh created before all things.” He said: “O Jābir, the first thing Allāh created was the light of your Prophet from his light, and that light remained in the midst of his power for as long as he wished, and there was not, at that time, a Tablet or a Pen or a Paradise or a Fire or an angel or a heaven or an earth or a sun or a moon or a sprite or a human being. And when Allāh wished to create creation, he divided that Light into four parts, and from the first made the Pen, from the second the Tablet, from the third the Throne, and then he divided the fourth part into four parts. He created from the first of those parts the bearers of the throne, and from the second the Footstool, and from the third the rest of the angels. Then he divided the fourth of these parts into four parts. From the first he created the heavens, and from the second the earths, and from the third Paradise and Hell. Then he divided the fourth of these parts into four parts. From the first he created the light of the eyes of the believers; and from the second the light of their hearts, and that is the knowledge of God; from the third the light of their intimacy [with God], and that is the affirmation of his oneness: There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God; [and from the fourth everything else.]” (al-Qaṣṭallānī 1864, 12)

This hadith is narrated by ‘Abd al-Razzāq b. Humām al-San‘ānī (d. 827), a narrator from Yemen who is considered trustworthy by all major scholars of hadith. There are several characteristics of this hadith that make it a point of contention between Deobandis and Barelvis, as well as between Salafis and Sufis. While this hadith is narrated by a trustworthy narrator, the hadith does not come with a *sanad* (chain of transmission) that connects the narrator, ‘Abd al-Razzāq, to the Prophet. (This type of hadith is called *marfū‘*, “raised.” It is ascribed to the Prophet without an intermediary *sanad* because of the reliability of the narrator.) Second, the *musnad* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq (his personal compilation of Prophetic hadith) has not reached us in full, and the part of his *musnad* that is extant does not contain this particular hadith. Rather, this hadith has been transmitted from him through other secondary sources. Various hadith scholars have classified this hadith over a wide continuum from sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) to weak (*ḍa‘īf*) and even to fabricated (*mawḍū‘*). The wording of the hadith clearly contains vocabulary and concepts that can be traced to a later time period than that of the Prophet, dating to around the eighth century CE. However, the presence of anachronisms does not disqualify a hadith completely because generally hadith are interpreted based on their meaning and not their specific wording. This hadith, as we mentioned, is consistent with meanings articulated in verses of the Qur’an and sound hadith. Most Sufis would probably claim that this hadith is weak (*ḍa‘īf*) but that its meaning is sound based on supporting evidence from other textual witnesses. Salafis, on the other hand, might classify this hadith as forged based on the many problems inherent in the hadith text. Furthermore, they might go on to claim that by using this hadith Sufis are lying about the Prophet, which is a grave accusation, given that the Prophet himself, in a well-authenticated hadith, promised hell for anyone who intentionally lies about him.

The controversy over this hadith demonstrates how the hadith was, and still remains, a focal point in mediating the various doctrinal debates in Islam. One can see from this discussion that the Sufi/Salafi and Barelvi/Deobandi debate is not simply an issue of one group being more or less fideistic toward hadith. Rather, these differences stem from often competing regimes of sense that seek to use hadith to bolster their various claims to authority and legitimacy. For almost a thousand years Sufis have represented entrenched religious authority in Muslim societies (Green 2012, 73). In the modern era, and in response to the challenges of colonization and globalization, Salafism has gained ground among Sunnis, who feel that traditional Sufi institutions have not been successful in defending the cause of Islam. Sufis, on the other hand, see themselves as the inheritors and preservers of the spiritual legacy of the Prophet and the culture and civilization of Islam.

Conclusion

Since earliest times, there has been an ascetic/mystical trend among Muslims. This trend eventually developed into what we call Sufism today, which was the product of a broad mystical synthesis that took place in Khurāsān during the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. The study and dissemination of hadith science developed in parallel to this mystical

trend and played a critical role in its formative development. Many early Sufis were hadith scholars who emphasized the practical aspect of acting upon the hadith they were narrating. The culture of hadith dominance that began in the ninth century CE pushed out the theological and intellectual approach of the Mu'tazilīs. For the *ahl al-ḥadīth* at this time even a weak report from the Prophet was seen as superior to personal judgments based on rational speculation. Sufis were not the only ones who held this view. In fact, the majority of Sunni scholars for the greater part of Islamic history and scholarship have held this to be true. In the modern era, especially in response to the threat of colonialism, some Muslim scholars have called for a reappraisal of Islamic thought based on what they consider to be more rigorous standards for hadith. These Salafis tend to criticize Sufis for the use of weak, or even what they consider forged, hadith; however, this criticism is often disingenuous. Sufis are not uniform in their use of hadiths since they are represented across all segments of Islamic society. Rather, the Salafi challenge is a challenge to the authority structures and traditional religious establishments that were inherited by Muslims from the premodern era. Sufi institutions were of primary importance among these premodern institutions. The Prophetic hadith will continue to be a point of contention among Muslims as they seek to mediate these various differences. As long as the Prophet continues to inspire Muslims to emulate his ways and follow his words, there will always be a continuum of interpretation as Muslims struggle to understand his Prophetic legacy.

Note

- 1 I am using this term from United States constitutional law to indicate a similar interpretive regime with respect to foundational legal documents. United States judges who felt that the US Constitution should be interpreted closely to its original wording were termed "strict constructionists." Ibn Taymiyya might be styled as a "strict constructionist" in that he eschewed legal interpretations that did not follow the original wording and intent of the Qur'an and hadith.

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