

Chapter 4

Rabi‘a the Sufi

“Verily, the Knower of God (*‘arif*) asks God to grant him a heart. So [God] grants it to him from Himself. When he possesses the heart, he then offers it back to his Lord and Master, so that in [God’s] repossession of it he will be protected and will be veiled in its concealment from created beings.”

—Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya in Khargushi, *Tahdhib al-asrar*

“The fruit of true knowledge (*ma‘rifa*) is constant orientation toward God (*iqbal*).”

—Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya in Khargushi, *Tahdhib al-asrar* and Sulami, *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta‘abbidat al-sufiyyat*

I. THE LADY RECONSIDERED: CAN WE SEE THE REAL “RABI‘A THE SUFI”?

In a famous 1998 article titled “The Lady Vanishes,” the scholar of early Christianity Elizabeth A. Clark argued that the depiction of women saints in early Christian hagiography exhibited a “reality effect” that gave these depictions an aura of factuality that was due more to the literary tropes they employed than to actual facts.¹ Hayden White has also argued that the authors

¹ Elizabeth A. Clark, “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *Church History*, 67 (1), 1998, pp. 1–31; the term “reality effect” (*l’effet du réel*) comes from the French literary theorist Roland Barthes. This concept will be taken up again in Chapter 5, in the discussion of Farid al-Din al-‘Attar’s *vita* of Rabi‘a.

of historical works are often more concerned with the moral of the story than with the details of the story, and thus may endow certain events or depictions with special symbolic or ideological significance.² A similar phenomenon can be seen when Muslim hagiographers construct the mythical image of a saint such as Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. As Clark states in her article, "Readers are . . . led to ascribe considerable truth to the account because so many 'effects of the real' have been summoned up."³ The concept of the "reality effect" is similar to the concept of "narrative validity" that was discussed in the Introduction to this book. The mutual reinforcement of the elements of a master narrative and the archetypal characters, relationships and situations they invoke often conspire to give the narrative an aura of validity or factuality that may not be objectively real.

The argument that Elizabeth Clark makes in her article is especially relevant to the study of the Rabi'a narratives because the particular "reality effect" that she focuses on is the tendency of early Christian writers to depict women saints as teachers of wisdom. As we saw in Chapter 1, the trope of Rabi'a as a teacher of wisdom is also a central theme of the Rabi'a narratives. As an example of the "reality effect," Clark examines Gregory of Nyssa's (d. 395 CE) description of his sister St Macrina. Gregory calls Macrina "my teacher," just as Sufyan al-Thawri does for Rabi'a in Sulami's Book of Sufi Women. Like Rabi'a as well, Macrina is depicted as caring for the human condition and the life of the soul, and her approach to God is based on a theology of Love.⁴ Perhaps the most striking similarity between these two figures can be seen in the following observation made by Clark: "Macrina is modeled on Socrates' muse Diotima of the *Symposium*, while her words in the dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection* owe much to Plato's *Phaedo*."⁵

As we have seen in the previous chapter, virtually the same assertion can be made about the trope of Rabi'a the Lover as expressed by Abu Talib al-Makki. Clark argues that the trope of "Wisdom As A Woman" in Christian hagiography originated with the classical Greek concept of *Sophia* (a personified feminine term for wisdom) and *hochmah*, the Hebrew term

2 See Hayden White, "The Fictions of Factual Representation," in idem, *Tropics of Discourse*, pp. 121–34.

3 Clark, "The Lady Vanishes," p. 21.

4 Ibid., p. 23.

5 Ibid., p. 24. I came up with my own theory of the parallels between Diotima and Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya independently, before discovering Elizabeth Clark's article.

for wisdom, which is also feminine.⁶ Since early Christian literary culture drew from both Greco-Roman and Jewish antecedents, it makes sense to suggest that early Christian writers would feminize the concept of wisdom just as their predecessors did. Because of this trope, Clark argues, one could characterize the theology expressed in works such as Gregory of Nyssa's dialogues of Macrina as "Sophialogy."⁷ The wisdom expressed in the tropes of Rabi'ā the Teacher and Rabi'ā the Lover could easily be called "Sophialogy" as well.

However, Elizabeth Clark's article also raises an important historiographical question. She concludes from the literary origins of the Woman as Wisdom trope that the "reality effect" it creates obscures the actual women in early Christian hagiography from view. For Clark, Gregory of Nyssa's depiction of St Macrina says very little about the "real" Macrina. Instead, it reveals Gregory appropriating his sister's voice by "writing as a woman."⁸ Clark sees the Woman as Wisdom trope as merely designed to legitimate the philosophical, theological, or political agendas of male hagiographers. In other words, the trope provides a cover behind which men can "think through various troubling intellectual and theological problems that confronted male theologians."⁹ On this basis, Clark concludes that the female teachers of wisdom in early Christian hagiography are not real women at all; rather, they are figural "women." Rather than a real person, the "wise woman" in such stories is merely the "inversed alter ego" of the male writer.¹⁰ If we apply Clark's theory to the case of Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya, we once again are faced with the key historiographical question discussed at the beginning of this book: Is there any way to see the "real" Rabi'ā behind her figural representation?

I believe that one way to answer this question is to recall a point made by Hayden White but has been overlooked by many of his readers: Just

6 If one were to follow Garth Fowden's suggestion discussed in Chapter 1 and extend the periodization of late antiquity through the first centuries of Islam, then one could also add *hikma*, the Arabic term for wisdom, to Clark's pair of *sophia* and *hochmah*.

7 Clark, "The Lady Vanishes," p. 24.

8 Ibid., p. 27.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 26. The Moroccan scholar of Arabic literature Abdellatif Kilito makes a similar point when he speaks of the need in medieval Arabic literature to attach a statement "to a speaker universally accepted as an authority. A text is thus an utterance both authorized and authoritative, solidly moored to an author." The men who wrote as women in medieval Islamic literature could not speak for themselves. Thus, the "wise women" through whom they spoke became their figurative "doubles." See Kilito, *The Author and His Doubles*, p. 6.

because some historians employ literary tropes and quasi-novelistic forms of representation, this does not necessarily mean that their works are fictional. Fiction is defined more by content than by form. In the essay, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," White stresses the fact that history writing and fiction writing start from different premises:

What distinguishes "historical" from "fictional" stories is first and foremost their content, rather than their form. The content of historical stories is real events, events that really happened, rather than imaginary events, events invented by the narrator. . . The form of the discourse, the narrative, adds nothing to the content of the representation; rather, it is a simulacrum of the structure and process of real events . . . The story told in the narrative is a mimesis of the story lived in some region of historical reality, and insofar as it is an accurate imitation, it is to be considered a truthful account thereof.¹¹

I understand this passage to mean that both reality (in the sense of an accurate representation of an event) and the "reality effect" can coexist in the same narrative. Students of history and hagiography—which, despite the opinion of some positivists, is a genre of history—should not allow the ideal of objectivity to lead them into the blind alley of artificial and overly simplistic "either–or" dichotomies. It is not always the case that historical representation is either true or false. Because historical representation is a matter of interpretation, the actual situation is more often "both–and."¹² According to Hayden White's view of historiography, one can argue that the use of tropes and other literary devices in hagiographical accounts does not necessarily mean that everything said about a "wise woman" such as Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya or St Macrina is untrue. The figurative construction of the narrative does not by itself imply that the content of the narrative is false. Even a trope may have some basis in fact. For example, although the trope of Rabi'a the Lover was developed two centuries after Rabi'a's death by Abu Talib al-Makki, the fact that al-Harith al-Muhasibi cited a statement about love by Rabi'a 150 years

11 Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 27.

12 On the basis of this argument, I disagree with Jawid Mojaddedi's contention that the authors of Muslim hagiographies were not concerned with "the preservation and transmission of material in its original form." As we have seen in the previous chapters, this statement is belied by the reliance on *isnads* by Sufi prosopographers like Ibn al-Junayd and Sulami. See idem, *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism*, pp. 180–1.

before Makki can be taken as evidence that the “real” Rabi’ā probably did practice some kind of Love mysticism. Therefore, we must acknowledge that some element of the real exists in the story, even if it is embellished for narrative purposes. If history is understood to be a matter of representation and interpretation, then the question to be asked of the figural representation of a saint or other half-legendary figure is not only whether it contains anything real at its core but also, if some aspect of reality exists in the representation, how does it relate to the work’s rhetorical form?

Elizabeth Clark bases her argument about the figurative nature of St Macrina on Gregory of Nyssa’s reproduction of her statements in formal, classical styles of rhetoric that she could not have learned without an advanced education. Since she did not have such an education, Clark concludes that what Macrina supposedly “says” in Gregory’s narratives are actually Gregory’s words and not her own. The same can also be said about many of the statements that have been attributed to Rabi’ā al-‘Adawiyya. In the previous chapters, I have noted several instances in which Sufi writers made up statements that were supposedly by Rabi’ā without reference to any original text. However, other accounts about Rabi’ā do not show the same evidence of fictionalized composition. For example, some early prosopographers from both Sufi and non-Sufi backgrounds (such as Ibn al-Junayd and Ibn Abi al-Dunya) cite full or nearly full chains of transmission for their information. This tells us that they based their portrayals of Rabi’ā on oral and/or written testimony. Thus, they saw themselves as traditionists more than storytellers, and their different portrayals of Rabi’ā were not matters of “fact” versus “fiction.”

Although it is true that some accounts of Rabi’ā—like those of St Macrina—were due to men “thinking through various troubling intellectual and theological problems,” we should not automatically dismiss all hagiographical accounts of her as factually unreliable. Doing so would amount to committing the type of category mistake that critical historiography is supposed to avoid. Just because we cannot prove that an account is true does not necessarily mean that it is false. When Makki created the trope of Rabi’ā the Lover to illustrate his theory of Love as a form of knowledge, he was indeed “a man writing a woman,” just as Gregory of Nyssa wrote the trope of St Macrina the Wisdom Teacher. However, as noted previously, the much earlier account of Muhasibi suggests that the trope of Rabi’ā the Lover was partly based on “real” evidence, even if Makki’s representation went beyond the evidence itself. The same process of tropological construction continues in the Rabi’ā narratives today. For this reason, when assessing these narratives, it is important to

make a distinction between the early accounts that recorded her sayings on the basis of oral traditions and later narratives that were designed to make a theoretical point (like Makki's) or that embellished earlier accounts to create a fictional life story (as we shall see with 'Attar).

Despite Elizabeth Clark's useful warning about the unreliability of tropological and gendered discourses, one should not automatically assume that just because a man wrote about a woman, the woman herself could not be seen. Although Rabi'a's female gender may have played a role in her portrayal as a teacher of Love instead of other aspects of Sufi doctrine, it would be a mistake to draw the conclusion that Abu Talib al-Makki made Rabi'a into a love mystic only because she was a woman. Feminist theory on the politics of gender and representation is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it correctly warns women historians not to allow our interest in creating a hermeneutic of remembrance ("the lady must not vanish") to blind us to the fact that what seem to be women's voices are sometimes not women's voices at all.¹³ On the other hand, we must ask ourselves: Were notable women in premodern times always destined to be merely the mouthpieces of male ghostwriters?

When I first began my research for this book I assumed that Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya was only a narrative construct. Like Elizabeth Clark with St Macrina, I did not expect to find an actual person behind the myth. However, I now regard the Rabi'a master narrative as it has developed over the centuries as something like a biographical novel produced by a writer's collective. Evidence suggests that a real woman ascetic from eighth-century Basra lies at the heart of the story but the character constructed through the master narrative is significantly different. Over time, the figure of Rabi'a the ascetic and spiritual mentor of Basra that emerged from oral traditions achieved a more mythical and universal status through the tropes of Rabi'a the Teacher, Rabi'a the Ascetic, Rabi'a the Lover, and Rabi'a the Sufi. However, despite the numerous acts of creative license that have embellished and revised her story, the faint outlines of a distinct person can still be found behind the persona of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. Despite the myth that was created, a "real" Rabi'a of Basra actually did teach, did practice asceticism, and did develop a mystical doctrine that was based (at least in part) on the love of God. This historical figure of Rabi'a is what emerges from the earliest accounts. In

13 For a more detailed discussion of the concept of "hermeneutic of remembrance" and its application to Sufi *tabaqat* literature, see R. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 48–53.

historiographical terms, to assume that Rabi'ā was nothing but a myth would be to deny the very possibility of using tradition as a source for history.

However, the tropes of Rabi'ā the Lover and Rabi'ā the Sufi must be treated differently from the tropes of Rabi'ā the Teacher and Rabi'ā the Ascetic. This is because with these former tropes the ascetic and teacher of oral tradition has been replaced to a significant extent by a “new and improved” Rabi'ā that is the product of Sufi doctrine. This “doctrinal” Rabi'ā is considerably different from the “historical” Rabi'ā of oral tradition. Although we know from Muhasibi that the “real” Rabi'ā most likely spoke of love and spiritual marriage, the trope of Rabi'ā the Lover owes much more to the tenth-century CE interest in Platonically inspired Love theory and Abu Talib al-Makki's Sufi theology of Love. In a similar way, the trope of Rabi'ā the Sufi was created retrospectively by later generations of Sufi writers. During Rabi'ā's lifetime, the appellation, “Sufi,” while not entirely unknown, was seldom used. And when it was used, it did not mean what it means today. Thus, the question to be asked in this chapter is whether there is any empirical validity to the trope of Rabi'ā the Sufi? Could the “real” Rabi'ā have been what I call in this chapter a “Proto-Sufi?” If so, what did it mean to say that Rabi'ā was a “Proto-Sufi?” How was “Proto-Sufism” similar to or different from “Sufism” as it developed in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE?¹⁴

Despite Rabi'ā's reputation as a major figure of early Sufism, such questions are not easy to answer. Margaret Smith avoided them entirely when writing *Rabi'ā the Mystic*. In the chapter “The Sufi Doctrine,” she does not discuss what Sufism meant in Rabi'ā's time. Instead, she provides the reader with an anachronistic discussion of Sufism based on the definitions of Orientalist scholars and Sufi doctrines that were developed long after Rabi'ā's death.¹⁵ When referring to Rabi'ā's Sufism elsewhere in her book, she similarly analyzes Rabi'ā's sayings with concepts formulated by later Sufi writers. Of the five key tropes of the Rabi'ā master narrative that are examined in this study, only Rabi'ā the Lover and Rabi'ā the Ascetic receive significant attention in *Rabi'ā the Mystic*.

14 In *Islamic Mysticism* Alexander Knysh also uses the term, “proto-Sufi” (p. 9ff.). However, apart from associating the term vaguely with Love mysticism, he does not define it, as I attempt to do in this chapter.

15 See Smith, *Rabi'ā* (Oneworld), pp. 71–6 and (Rainbow Bridge), pp. 47–52. Instead of using Rabi'ā's own statements, Smith uses quotations from the later Sufis Makki (d. 996 CE), Munawi (d. 1621 CE), Abu Sa'id Abu al-Khayr (d. 1041 CE), Rumi (d. 1273 CE), and Mahmud al-Shabistari (d. 1320 CE). She also uses quotations from the Orientalists R.A. Nicholson and E.J.W. Gibb, and even an early Christian mystic.

Smith's tendency to discuss Rabi'a's Sufism anachronistically and on the basis of later doctrines is by no means unique. Most medieval Sufi hagiographers and almost everyone who has written about Rabi'a after Smith have done the same thing. When Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami called Rabi'a a Sufi at the beginning of the eleventh century CE, he assumed that his readers already knew what the term meant. However, recent scholarship has demonstrated that many of the doctrines that characterized Sufism for Sulami were not developed until the ninth and tenth centuries CE, long after Rabi'a's death. Most contemporary historians of Sufism agree that one cannot speak meaningfully about Sufism as a tradition until at least the second half of the ninth century CE.¹⁶

In this chapter, I shall argue that the essential asceticism ascribed to Rabi'a and some of her contemporaries provided an important bridge between the ascetic pietism of her era and Sufism as it was developed doctrinally in the ninth and tenth centuries CE. Essential asceticism was a key practice of Proto-Sufism. As we saw in the previous chapter, the essential ascetic's devotional focus on God is similar to that of the Love mystic. In addition, the goals of the essential ascetic and the Love mystic are much the same: both strive to attain a close relationship with God. This connection highlights an important aspect of the early Rabi'a narratives. Rather than leading from one trope to another serially as in a teleological chain of development, the tropes of the Rabi'a narrative are more like a cluster or a bundle. It is difficult to conceive of Rabi'a as characterized by any one trope without the others. The tropes of Rabi'a the Ascetic, Rabi'a the Teacher, and Rabi'a the Lover all share important characteristics in common. As this chapter will demonstrate, these tropes also had an intertextual role to play in the development of the trope of Rabi'a the Sufi. Although it is too reductionistic to derive from this intertextuality a "transition theory" from asceticism to Sufism, the phenomenon is significant nonetheless.¹⁷

16 See, for example, Bernd Radtke, "Tasawwuf" in *EP*; Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, p. 1; Christopher Melchert, "Origins and Early Sufism"; and Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 43–67. Nile Green does not see Sufism becoming a tradition or even a coherent movement until well into the tenth century CE. Idem, *Sufism, A Global History* (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 22.

17 For "transition theories" of the development of Sufism, see for example, Peter J. Awn, "Sufism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition*, ed. Lindsay Jones and Charles J. Adams (Mircea Eliade), 15 vols. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 13:8809–8825; Radtke, "Tasawwuf" in *EP*; and Melchert, "Origins and Early Sufism," *op. cit.*

However, there is also another way to view this intertextuality that is less literary and more focused on the relationship between the concept of knowledge and ascetic practices. From an epistemological perspective, essential asceticism, Love mysticism, and Sufism can all be seen as ways of knowledge. On the path to knowledge that begins with essential asceticism, the servant-devotee of God is led by her devotion to focus on God exclusively. As an essential ascetic, all of her practices are for the sake of God, the object of her devotion. Because she is not distracted by instrumental goals, the focus of her asceticism shifts from renunciation of the World to detachment from the World. She comes to realize that any involvement with the World—even to renounce it—is a distraction from God. As her goals change from renunciation for the sake of eschatological rewards (instrumental asceticism) to closeness or intimacy with God (essential asceticism), the rhetoric of Love becomes more appropriate as a form of expression for her asceticism. When her essential asceticism becomes combined with Love mysticism, she takes on a new identity and becomes a “gnostic” or “knower” of God (*al-‘arifa bi-llah*). In an aphorism related by Sulami, Rabi‘a describes this state as follows: “For everything there is a fruit and the fruit of knowledge is constant orientation [toward God] (*li-kulli shay’in thamaratun wa thamarat al-ma‘rifa al-iqbal*).”¹⁸ In this statement, the Arabic term *iqbal* stands both for the ascetic’s “turn” toward God and God’s “turn” toward the ascetic. In the terminology of Love mysticism, one could say that both lover and Beloved are equally present for each other. Another story that reflects this state describes Rabi‘a’s comment on the famous aphorism of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: “Knock and the door will be opened” (Matt. 7:7–8). “The door is already open,” says Rabi‘a. “But the question is, who wishes to enter?”¹⁹ Rabi‘a’s knowledge that the door to God is always open comes from the intimate knowledge of God (*ma‘rifa*) that is the goal of both essential asceticism and Love mysticism. It is a special form of knowledge that goes beyond the traditional knowledge associated with the Shari‘a or religious dogma (*‘aqida*).

I will argue in this chapter that the interrelationship between essential asceticism, Love mysticism, and knowledge of God is the key to understanding the trope of Rabi‘a the Sufi. It is also a key part of the concept of Proto-Sufism. As such, it implies that Sufism is most accurately described as a way of knowledge and that this has been the case from its very foundation. This theory is not new, nor is it restricted to Western scholarship. The late

18 Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 76–7.

19 Ibid., p. 80.

tenth-century CE Sufi Abu Nasr al-Sarraj made the same assertion in *Kitab al-luma' fi-l-tasawwuf*. In this work, Sarraj argues that the Sufis have a special status among the scholars of Islam because of their distinctive approach to knowledge (*wa li-l-sufiyya aydan takhsisun min tabaqat ahl al-'ilm*). Unlike more conventional “knowers of God” (*'ulama'*), they seek out the noblest virtues, conduct research into the loftiest spiritual states and the most excellent practices, and delve deeply into (*mustanbatat*) the most difficult matters of doctrine.²⁰ According to Sarraj, Sufism was a legitimate doctrinal counter-current in Islam, in which the specialized knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of the Sufis was contrasted with the more traditional forms of knowledge (*'ilm*) held by exoteric Islamic scholars. Viewing Sufism like Sarraj as a sort of “loyal opposition” or legitimate countercurrent to conventional Islam provides a way for contemporary scholars to take the countercultural aspects of both early Sufism and early Islamic asceticism seriously without necessarily branding these movements as dissident or antinomian.²¹

II. LOCATING RABI'Ā THE SUFI: WHAT WAS A “SUFİ” IN EIGHTH-CENTURY ISLAM?

In a recently published introduction to Sufism Nile Green observed, “It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that more academic ink has been spilt over the origins of the Sufis than over any other question in Sufi history.”²² A lively debate over Sufi origins has continued in Western scholarship from the beginning of the twentieth century until today. One reason for this debate is because etymological theories of the origin of the term, *Sufi*, do not provide a clear answer to this question. A common theory states that the term originally referred to ascetics who wore woolen (*suf*) garments; another claims that it referred to religious devotees who patterned their lifestyle after the “people of the porch” (*ahl al-suffa*), early Muslim ascetics who prayed and invoked God at the Prophet Muhammad’s mosque in Medina; other theories

20 Sarraj, *The Kitab al-Luma'*, pp. 13–14.

21 See, for example, Radtke, “Tasawwuf” in *EP*, who views the *al-sufiyya* of the eighth century CE as a fringe group: “A fringe group of the movement was called *Şūfiyya* in the 2nd/8th century. As opposed to the *religiosi*, antinomian, antisocial and anti-governmental tendencies became noticeable among them.” Christopher Melchert (“Origins and Early Sufism,” p. 13) characterizes the *al-Sufiyya* as “disreputable, marginal figures, often involved with political opposition and certainly not demonstrably mystics.”

22 Green, *Sufism, A Global History*, p. 16.

claim that it referred to those who followed a path of moral and ethical purity (*safa*), or that it referred to those who patterned their spirituality on the Greek philosophical concept of wisdom (Gr. *Sophia*).²³ Not only have Western writers advanced such theories but they can also be found in premodern Muslim works as well, both inside and outside of the Sufi tradition.²⁴ Even the *Sophia-Sufiyya* etymology, which many contemporary Muslims assume to have been the creation of Western Orientalists, was first thought up by a Muslim: its origin can be traced to Abu Rayhan al-Biruni's (d. 1048 CE) *Kitab al-Hind (Book of India)*.²⁵

Modern attempts to clarify the meaning of the term "Sufi" by relying on generalized definitions of Sufism have also been of little help. For example, Annemarie Schimmel defines early Sufism in *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (1975) as follows: "Sufism meant, in the formative period, mainly an interiorization of Islam, a personal experience of the central mystery of Islam, that of *tawhid*, 'to declare that God is One.'"²⁶ One problem with Schimmel's definition is that she does not explain what she means by the "formative period." Another problem is that her notion of the interiorization of *tawhid* relies on a theological definition of Sufism that was not developed until relatively late—around the beginning of the tenth century CE.²⁷ A third problem is that the term "Sufism" is itself a Western concept, being a translation of the Arabic word *tasawwuf*, which has its own problematic genealogy.²⁸

23 See, for example, Göran Ogén, "Did the Term 'ṣūfī' Exist before the Sufis?," *Acta Orientalia*, 43, 1983, pp. 33–48. Ogén demonstrates from Syriac texts that the wearing of wool was a common pietistic practice in late antique Christian communities.

24 R.A. Nicholson claimed to have found 78 etymologies for the term "Sufi" in Muslim sources. See R.A. Nicholson, "A Historical Inquiry Concerning the Origin and Development of Sufism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1906, pp. 303–48.

25 According to Biruni, the term "Sufi" was derived from an incorrect understanding of the Greek word *sophia*, which Muslims linked etymologically to the Arabic terms *suf* and *al-suffa*, explained above. See Ainslee Embree (ed.), *Alberuni's India*, trans. Edward C. Sachau (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), pp. 33–4.

26 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, p. 17.

27 The notion that Sufism involves the internalization of *tawhid* as a mystical experience is commonly associated with the figure of Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd (d. 910 CE), who is often credited with being the first Sufi theologian. It can also be found in the contemporaneous doctrines of Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896 CE), a resident of Basra whose teachings influenced Abu Talib al-Makki. In his writings, Tustari speaks of the mystic's encounter with God as a recompense for the internalization of *tawhid*. See Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur'anic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl At-Tustari (d. 283/896)* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), pp. 172–5.

28 See Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston and London: Shambhala Books, 1997), pp. 1–31, especially the section, "The Orientalist 'Discovery' of Sufism," pp. 8–17. One should also point out that the term *tasawwuf*, which in Arabic literally

The concept of mysticism has a problematical genealogy too, especially when compared with asceticism.²⁹ Finally and most importantly, Schimmel's definition is not supported by the earliest references to the term "Sufi" in Islamic sources. Although Schimmel's theological definition of Sufism is shared by many Sufis and scholars today, it is not accurate when applied to the origins of Sufism.

Among the earliest extant treatises on Sufism, Sarraj's *Kitab al-luma'* is the most explicit in affirming the problematic genealogy of the term "Sufi." After a section detailing some of the etymologies mentioned above, Sarraj adds another section, "Refutation of one who says that we have not heard mention of [the term] *al-Sufiyya* in the past because it is a neologism" (*al-Radd 'ala man qala lam nasma' bi-dhikri al-sufiyya fi-l-qadim wa huwwa ismun muhdath*).³⁰ The very presence of this discussion proves that the authenticity of Sufism was called into question early in its history. Sarraj acknowledges that the term *al-sufiyya* did not exist in the first two generations of Islam. However, he maintains that the practice of *tasawwuf* in his time was dependent on the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad, his Companions, and their Successors. As for the term *al-Sufiyya* being a neologism, he says that some people claimed that this term was first coined in Baghdad. Sarraj refutes this assertion by claiming that the early Basra theologian al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 726 CE) once reported seeing a "Sufi" at the Ka'ba in Mecca. When he tried to give the man some money, the "Sufi" refused the gift, saying, "I have four *dawaniq* (3/4 of a dirham) with me and this is sufficient."³¹

This story is important because it indicates that early systematizers of Sufism such as Sarraj dated the first use of the term "Sufi" to the eighth century CE, the same period in which Rabi'ā al-ʿAdawiyya lived. In addition, Sarraj

means "doing *suf*" or "practicing wooliness," is meaningless when taken out of the context of Sufism as a tradition. Due to the modern influence of the Western academic field of Religious Studies, today *tasawwuf* is used in Arabic to mean "mysticism" in general.

29 See Gert H. Mueller, "Asceticism and Mysticism: A Contribution Towards the Sociology of Faith," in *International Yearbook for the Sociology of Religion 8: Sociological Theories of Religion/Religion and Language*, ed. Günter Dux, Thomas Luckman and Joachim Matthes (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1973), pp. 68–132, cited in Melchert, "Origins and Early Sufism," p. 14 n. 70. For an essay that links the terms *zuhd* and *nusk* (discussed in Chapter 2) with the term "*Sufi*," see Bernd Radkte, "Von den hinderlichen Wirkungen der Extase und dem Wesen der Ignoranz" (On the Debilitating Effects of Ecstasy and the Essence of Ignorance), *Neue kritische Gägne. Zu Stand und Aufgaben der Sufikforschung / New Critical Essays: On the Present State and Future Tasks of the Study of Sufism* (Utrecht: M. Thn. Houstma Sichting, 2005), pp. 251–92.

30 Sarraj, *The Kitab al-Luma'*, Arabic text pp. 21–2.

31 Ibid., p. 22.

associates the earliest Sufis with an ascetic lifestyle, which is well established for Rabi‘a. Sarraj further confirms this indirect connection to Rabi‘a when he cites a tradition in which Rabi‘a’s student Sufyan al-Thawri states, “Were it not for Abu Hashim the Sufi, I would not have learned about the worthlessness of ostentation (*daqiq al-riya*).”³² This tradition tells us that Sarraj also associated the early “Sufis” with ethical and moral training. It also recalls Rabi‘a’s pedagogy of *ta’dib*, which formed the basis of the trope of Rabi‘a the Teacher discussed in Chapter 1.

Thawri’s reference to Abu Hashim “al-Sufi” (d. ca. 776 CE) identifies perhaps the earliest ascetic in Islam to refer to himself as a Sufi. According to Louis Massignon, Abu Hashim was the first person in Islam to refer to himself as a Sufi.³³ This person also appears in Jahiz’s treatise *al-Bayan wa-l-tabyin*, which was written nearly 150 years before Sarraj’s *Kitab al-luma’*. In Jahiz’s book, Abu Hashim is mentioned along with other Sufis named Kilab, Kulayb, Hashim al-Awqas and Salih ibn ‘Abd al-Jalil.³⁴ Jahiz, who was not a Sufi himself, refers to these individuals as ascetic ritualists (*nussak*) and includes them in his book because of the eloquence of their speech.³⁵ In Chapter 1 it was noted that Jahiz regarded Rabi‘a in much the same way, although he did not call her a Sufi. Other information on Abu Hashim can be found in the hagiographical anthology *Hilyat al-awliya’* (*The Ornament of the Saints*) by Abu Nu‘aym al-Isfahani (d. 1037 CE). Among the sources that Isfahani consulted were two of the earliest Islamic works on ascetics: *Kitab al-ruhban* by Muhammad ibn al-Husayn al-Burjulani (d. 852 CE) and *Tabaqat al-nussak* by Abu Sa‘id ibn al-A‘rabi (952–3 CE).

Abu Hashim appears under two different headings in *Hilyat al-awliya’*, which indicates that Isfahani was not sure whether both sets of accounts referred to the same person. In neither entry, however, is he called a Sufi. In one notice, which is based on Ibn al-A‘rabi’s *Tabaqat al-nussak*, he appears

32 Ibid.; Sarraj also reports that before the Prophet Muhammad began to preach Islam, a person known as a “Sufi” once came in from the desert to visit Mecca outside of the normal pilgrimage season; he performed the ritual of circumambulating the Ka‘ba and then went back into the desert. This pattern of behavior recalls a common trope in the stories of early Christian anchorites. By recording this story Sarraj seems to suggest that before Islam the term *Sufi* was regarded as a synonym for *hanif* (unaffiliated monotheist).

33 Massignon, *Essay*, p. 105; Massignon reports that Abu Hashim was born in Kufa. Kufa was also the home of Sufyan al-Thawri, Fudayl ibn ‘Iyad, and Sufyan ibn ‘Uyayna (see Chapter 1). Perhaps for this reason Massignon also assumes that Kufa was the first place where the term “Sufi” was used.

34 Jahiz, *al-Bayan*, vol. 1, p. 195.

35 Ibid., p. 194.

as “Abu Hashim Fadim.” In the other notice, which is based on Burjulani’s *Kitab al-ruhban*, he appears as “Abu Hashim the Renunciant” (*al-Zahid*). As an ascetic and renunciant, Abu Hashim was a firm believer in the World/Nonworld Dichotomy discussed at the beginning of Chapter 2. This is clearly visible in the following statement of Abu Hashim, which originally came from Burjulani: “God Most High has characterized the World as desolate (*inna Allaha wasama al-dunya bi-l-wahsha*) so that those who seek Him will find solace in its opposite and that those who find satisfaction in Him will reject it. The Folk of the Knowledge of God are alienated [from the World] and are desirous of the Hereafter” (*fa-ahl al-ma’rifa bi-llah fi-ha mutawahhishun wa ila al-akhira mushtaqun*).³⁶ Abu Hashim is also reported to have said, “If the World is all palaces and gardens and the Hereafter is nothing but caves, the Hereafter would still be more desirable than the World because of its permanence compared with the impermanence of the other.”³⁷ Abu Hashim’s use of the term *ahl al-ma’rifa bi-llah*, “The Folk of the Knowledge of God,” is significant. Besides providing support for Sarraj’s contention that a defining characteristic of Sufism was a distinctive approach to knowledge, it tells us that a group that identified themselves as possessing this type of knowledge existed in Rabi’ā’s time.

In contrast to Sarraj and Isfahani, al-Harith al-Muhasibi (d. 857 CE) focuses less on knowledge and more on practice when discussing early ninth-century Sufis in *Kitab al-makasib* (*The Book of Outcomes*). This treatise, which was written only a generation or so after Rabi’ā’s death, is one of the earliest extant works to mention the Sufis as a distinct group. In this work, Muhasibi uses two different terms for the Sufis: *al-sufiyyin*, the plural of *al-sufi*, and *al-mutasawwifa*, literally, “practitioners of *tasawwuf*.”³⁸ The use of this latter term indicates that a distinctive set of “Sufi” doctrines and/or practices had already been conceptualized by the first half of the ninth century CE. Together, both terms tell us that a group of people called “Sufis” existed in the early ninth century and that Muhasibi singled them out from other groups for acting and/or thinking “Sufistically.” Muhasibi’s reference is of great importance to the historical question of Sufi origins because most recent scholarship has tended to dismiss earlier theories that traced the development of Sufism to this period. For example, Nile Green asserts forcefully in his history of Sufism that “[What]

³⁶ Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 10, p. 225.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See, for example, Muhasibi, *Kitab al-makasib*, pp. 205–12. On p. 205 Muhasibi mentions “organized groups of scholars, Hadith transmitters, Qur’an reciters, and practitioners of Sufism” (*asnaf min al-‘ulama’ wa ahl al-hadith, wa-l-qurra’ wa-l-mutasawwifa*).

we do not have yet [in the mid-800s] is a Sufi movement, a characteristic set of doctrines and still less a tradition, all of which would develop only later. For this reason, it makes little sense to speak of ‘Sufism’ as though such an entity had any meaningful existence at this time.”³⁹ But if this were the case, and Sufism had no meaningful existence in the early 800s, then how could Muhasibi speak of the doctrines and practices of *al-mutasawwifa*?

For Muhasibi, the term “Sufi” referred to renunciants and ascetic ritualists (*zuhhad* and *nussak*), who also specialized in ethical precaution (*waraʿ*). *Kitab al-makasib* was written as a treatise on ethical precaution and Muhasibi’s references to the Sufis mostly appear in the section titled, “Practices of Ethical Precaution among the Predecessors” (*Madhahib al-salaf fi-l-waraʿ*).⁴⁰ A key attribute of the Sufis described in this section is the pursuit of both outward and inward purity. This indicates that the notion of a difference between outward (*zahir*) and inward (*batin*) ascetic practices also existed in the early-ninth century CE. Recent scholars of Sufism have suggested that an “inward turn” or a turn toward “the inward life” was a major token of distinction between the “ascetics” and the early “Sufis.”⁴¹ Muhasibi’s focus on purity also suggests that he was more inclined to link the etymology of the term “Sufi” to *safa*, the Arabic word for purity, than to *suf*, the Arabic word for wool.

In *al-Makasib* Muhasibi identifies three types of ethical precaution (*waraʿ*) that conform to the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions: (1) a purely social form of *waraʿ* that entails avoiding all discussion of people and their affairs; (2) a more symbolic form of *waraʿ* that requires the ascetic to avoid everything that is not unambiguously licit or illicit (*halal* or *haram*) or about which there is moral or ethical doubt (*shubuhah*); (3) a more subtle form of *waraʿ* that is based on the following hadith of the Prophet Muhammad: “You will not be among the truly God-fearing until you leave aside everything in which there is no harm, out of fear of the harm that may be in it.”⁴² Those who followed one or more of these practices, says Muhasibi, included an elite group of religious scholars, specialists in Hadith, devotees of the Qur’an, and the “Sufis.” He also notes that some sects (*tawaʿif*) of Muslims in the city of Basra made the avoidance of morally doubtful things (option 2 above) the basis of their asceticism.

39 Green, *Sufism, A Global History*, p. 16.

40 Muhasibi, *Kitab al-makasib*, pp. 205–12.

41 See, for example, Karamustafa, *Sufism, the Formative Period*, p. 2; Melchert calls this inward turn the “Protestant solution.” Melchert, “Origins and Early Sufism,” p. 13.

42 Muhasibi, *Kitab al-makasib*, p. 205.

Because Muhasibi does not mention Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya in *al-Makasib*, it is not possible to determine which of these practices she may have followed. However, most of the “Sufis” that he identifies followed the third, most inward and subtle form of *wara'*. This practice corresponds to what the Sufi and theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali would later refer to as “the renunciation of the permissible” (*al-zuhd fi-l-halal*).⁴³ Muhasibi particularly liked this form of ethical precaution because it forbade mendicant begging. In his book he associates begging, of which he strongly disapproves, with Rabi'ā's eastern contemporary Shaiq al-Balkhi (see Chapter 1).⁴⁴ In fact, many of the individual practices of *wara'* discussed in *al-Makasib* concern the prohibition of actions (like begging) that are deemed inappropriate but are not legally forbidden in Islam. Muhasibi refers to this type of *wara'* as “avoiding that in which there is no explicit harm” (*tark ma la ba's bi-hi*).

Although Muhasibi does not provide a definition of Sufism in *al-Makasib*, it is evident from his references to *al-sufiyyin* and *al-mutasawwifa* that he considered early Sufis to be devoted to the pursuit of both outward and inward purity. This can be seen both in his critiques and in his approval of certain “Sufi” practices. Much of Muhasibi's ethical concern is with the subject of spiritual arrogance. For example, he criticizes as “great ignorance and error” the refusal of some Sufis to take alms if this could be understood as profiting the recipient in any way. The point of his criticism is that these individuals considered themselves too morally pure to accept assistance from anyone.⁴⁵

Muhasibi's portrayal of early Sufis as advocates of ethical purity fits the image of another figure who is often identified as one of this group, Salih ibn 'Abd al-Jalil. Although there is no clear death date for this individual, traditions make him a contemporary of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi, who ruled from 775–85 CE. This would also make Salih a contemporary of Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya, who is alleged to have associated with Sufyan al-Thawri during

43 Ibid., pp. 205–6; see also, Ghazali, *Ihya'*, vol. 4, p. 229 (Kitab al-faqr wa al-zuhd); Ghazali attributes the origin of this concept to Ibrahim ibn Adham (d. 778 or 790 CE), an ascetic who also appears prominently in *al-Makasib*. Ghazali's approach to Sufism was strongly influenced by Muhasibi's ethics. For a discussion of this influence, see Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad*, pp. 269–91.

44 According to Muhasibi, Shaiq al-Balkhi taught that striving to earn a living was forbidden (*haram*) for ascetics because it implied a lack of trust in God. See idem, *al-Makasib*, pp. 194–9.

45 Ibid., p. 207.

the first three years of al-Mahdi's reign (see the discussion in Chapter 1). In fact, an account in Ibn al-Jawzi's *Sifat al-safwa* depicts Salih as visiting Rabi'a, although the lack of a chain of transmission makes it impossible to consider this account as a reliable source.⁴⁶ In *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, Louis Massignon mentions a group of "Shiite Sufiyya" from Kufa, who included the figures Kilab and Kulayb. These same individuals are also identified as "Sufis" by Jahiz along with Abu Hashim al-Sufi and Salih ibn 'Abd al-Jalil.⁴⁷ In *Kitab al-bayan wa-l-tabyin* Jahiz reproduces an address by Salih to the Caliph al-Mahdi. This address is worth reproducing in full because some of the terminology that is used seems to confirm Massignon's hypothesis about a group of "Shiite Sufiyya."

Salih ibn 'Abd al-Jalil came to see the Caliph al-Mahdi and asked him if he could be allowed to speak. "Speak," al-Mahdi said. Salih said: "Since access to you has been made much easier for us than it has been for others, I will take this opportunity to speak on their behalf as well as on behalf of the Prophet. This is by virtue of the burden around our necks that requires us to command the good and forbid evil, and because the excuse of concealing the truth (*taqiyya*) no longer applies to us, and especially because you seem to be a person of humble demeanor and have vowed to God and those who bear His word that you will privilege the truth above everything else. You and I have been brought together in this inquest in order to fulfill what we have promised God we would deliver. We are bound to accept the consequences of our promise; otherwise, God will look into our inner and outer intentions and see that we are clothed in garments made of lies. The Prophet's Companions used to say: 'When God conceals His knowledge from someone, such a person is tortured by ignorance.' However, an even worse torture is reserved for one who is given the opportunity to take knowledge from God, but turns his back on it. When God grants knowledge to a person and he neglects to put what he has been given to use, he has indeed ignored God's gift to him and has belittled it. Therefore, accept the gift that God has given you

46 See Ibn al-Jawzi, *Sifat al-safwa* in Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 278–9.

47 Massignon, *Essay*, p. 116. According to Massignon, Kulayb wrote a book titled *Kitab al-mahabba wa-l-waza'if* (Book of Love and Invocations). According to Ibn al-Jawzi (*Sifat al-safwa*, vol. 3, p. 381), he was also one of the "weepers" (*bakka'un*) of Basra. Kulayb also accompanied Salih on the visit to Rabi'a cited above.

through our speech truly and sincerely, but not as an excuse to boost your vanity and promote your reputation. Rest assured that we will not condemn you for what you do not know, and we will not belittle what you do know or remind you of what you have forgotten. For God granted the Prophet peace and security in the face of what befell him, and protected him from overstepping the limit, for He always shows the way to every exit. God said: 'If [at any time] an incitement to discord is made to you by the Evil One, seek refuge in God, for He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing' (Qur'an 41:36). So let God be the watcher over your heart so that by means it other hearts may be enlightened through your privileging the truth and disavowing the passions. If you do not do this it will not only result in your actions being exposed as a failure, but it will also reveal the effects of God's command on you as well. There is no strength and no power other than through God!"⁴⁸

Because Jahiz does not provide background information for this anecdote, it is not clear whether Salih had been brought to al-Mahdi's inquest under duress or came of his own accord. However, the very fact that he appeared before a formal tribunal, along with his reference to *taqiyya*—a practice associated with Shi'ism in which one conceals one's true beliefs out of fear of harm to oneself or one's family—supports the possibility that he was one of the "Shiite Sufiyya" mentioned by Massignon.

In *Hilyat al-awliya'*, Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani similarly portrays Salih ibn 'Abd al-Jalil as a person who was not afraid to speak his mind. He quotes him as saying, "The people of insight (*ahl al-basa'ir*) look upon the kings of the World disparagingly, whereas the folk of the World look upon them adoringly and with awe."⁴⁹ Unlike Jahiz, however, Isfahani does not call Salih a Sufi. Instead, he characterizes him as one who takes pleasure in obedience to God (*al-mustaladhdh bi-l-ta'a*) and adds that he was noted for his unquestioning acceptance of God's will (*tawakkul*). He also states that a group called "God's Obedient Ones" (*al-muti'un li-llah*) were to be found in Iraq in the second half of the eighth century CE. Could this group have been Massignon's "Shiite Sufiyya"? In support of this possibility, the

48 Jahiz, *al-Bayan*, vol. 2, pp. 222–3.

49 Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 8, p. 317; this statement also recalls Marshall Hodgson's concept of the Piety-Minded.

following statement by Salih may indicate that he was a member of such a group: "God's Obedient Ones have lost their taste for both the life of the World and the Hereafter. God will say to them on the Day of Judgment, 'I have caused you to suffer for my sake in the World on account of your desires and have made this known to you today. By my glory, I created the Heavenly Garden (*al-jinan*) only for you!'"⁵⁰

The notion that "God's Obedient Ones" have lost their taste for both the World and the Hereafter because of their love for God recalls two of the best-known statements attributed to Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya. In a statement that first appears in Makki's *Qut al-qulub*, Rabi'ā says: "I do not worship God out of fear of God. If I did, I would be like the disobedient slave-girl who only works when she is afraid. Nor [do I worship God] out of love for heaven. If I did, I would be like the disobedient slave-girl who only works when she is given something. Instead, I worship God out of love for him alone and out of yearning for him."⁵¹ In a statement that first appears in 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-awliya*', Rabi'ā says: "Oh Lord, if I worship you out of fear of Hell, burn me in Hell. If I worship you in the hope of Heaven, forbid it to me. But if I worship you for your own sake, do not deprive me of your eternal beauty."⁵² Because neither of these statements appears in the earliest sources on Rabi'ā, it is impossible to determine if the "real" Rabi'ā actually said them. However, they reflect the essential asceticism and devotionism that characterized the practices of both Rabi'ā and the early "Sufis" of Abbasid Iraq.⁵³

Although references to individuals and groups called "Sufi" before the late ninth century CE are scattered and inconsistent in Islamic sources, the meaning of this term nonetheless seems to have revolved around a common and identifiable set of spiritual attitudes and practices. Because of this, one can use early accounts in the works of Muhasibi, Jahiz, Isfahani and other Sufi and non-Sufi writers to draw a rough outline of what I shall call "Proto-Sufism." This set of beliefs and practices in Rabi'ā's time formed the foundation for what would become a more theologically oriented Sufism

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 94.

⁵² 'Attar, *Tadhkirat al-awliya*, p. 74; see also, Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 169.

⁵³ Christopher Melchert has also remarked on the possibility of "a single-minded concentration on God" as providing a bridge between asceticism and mysticism for early Sufis. See idem, "Origins and Early Sufism," p. 15.

in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE. These beliefs and practices can be summarized as follows:

1. The Proto-Sufis were ascetics, whose worldview was defined by the World/Nonworld Dichotomy.
2. The Proto-Sufis were dedicated to the pursuit of outward and inward purity.
3. Because the path of the Proto-Sufis was based more on practice than on theology, some but not all of them, were also practitioners of ascetic ritualism (*nusk*).
4. The Proto-Sufis internalized their ascetic practices through essential asceticism and Love mysticism.
5. The social practices of the Proto-Sufis were characterized by moralism and ethical precaution (*wara'*), which were combined with a highly disciplined regime of moral and spiritual training (*ta'dib*).
6. The practice of ethical precaution (*wara'*) led many Proto-Sufis to criticize the pursuit of worldly gain, although most do not appear to have been political dissidents.

When viewed in light of this set of Proto-Sufi beliefs and practices, the earliest accounts of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya suggest that she could be considered a Proto-Sufi, even if she was not called a "Sufi" in the earliest sources. The most historically verifiable tropes of the Rabi'a narrative—Rabi'a the Ascetic and Rabi'a the Teacher—conform closely to the beliefs and practices outlined above. The trope of Rabi'a the Lover can also be seen to fit this model, so long as one confines it to what appears prior to Makki's theological depiction of Rabi'a's Love mysticism in *Qut al-qulub*. With respect to the debate over Sufi origins, this summary of beliefs and practices suggests that the difference between asceticism and Proto-Sufism was not based on the interiorization of theology, as Annemarie Schimmel supposed; rather, it was based on the interiorization of ascetic practice. This emphasis on practice over theory is reflected in an account of Rabi'a that appears in Jahiz's *al-Bayan wa-l-tabyin*. In this account Rabi'a is asked, "Have you ever performed any action that you knew would be accepted by God?" She replies, "If there were anything, it would be my fear that my works would be held against me."⁵⁴ As this saying indicates, Rabi'a's asceticism was "essential" because it involved the interiorization of ascetic attitudes and practices. In essential asceticism,

⁵⁴ Jahiz, *al-Bayan wa al-tabyin*, vol. 3, p. 108.

renunciation of the World is transformed into detachment from the World and ascetic practices are interiorized because the ascetic has come into sight of the ultimate goal of asceticism: this is to attain what Walter O. Kaelber described in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* as “a more thorough absorption in the sacred.”

From the perspective of essential asceticism, the goal of the essential ascetic is much the same as the goal of the mystic. This is because asceticism and mysticism are both approaches to God. The essential ascetic seeks proximity to God and the mystic seeks union with God. The difference between these two approaches depends on how one defines the concept of “closeness.” As discussed in Chapter 3, proximity—the goal of the ascetic—is different from union—the goal of the mystic—although the two concepts are closely related. Proximity maintains a measure of social distance through a master-servant or patron-client relationship whereas in union the relationship between the lover and the Beloved is more egalitarian. In both cases, however, once the ascetic’s relationship with God has become close enough, there is no longer any need to conceive of asceticism as instrumental renunciation because the World has lost its importance. All that matters is the relationship with God. This attitude is reflected in Rabi’ā’s famous statement that her asceticism entailed “leaving aside all that does not concern me and cleaving to the One that always is.”⁵⁵ A generation later, Abu Sulayman al-Darani (d. 830 CE) would critique the practices of asceticism in his time in similar terms: “Some say [*zuhd*] is leaving off meeting people, some say it is leaving off desires, and some say it is leaving off satiety. Their definitions are similar to one another. I think that renunciation (*zuhd*) is leaving off whatever distracts you from God.”⁵⁶ Besides expressing essential asceticism, both of these statements illustrate how the path of asceticism can be seen as related to the mystical path of Love. Rabi’ā’s phrase, “cleaving to the One that always is,” expresses the ascetic’s devotion to God in terms of the more egalitarian relationship of Love mysticism. This statement also alludes to the fact that the end of the path of asceticism involves a spiritual reorientation, which is central to the notion of Sufism as a path of knowledge. In the next section of this chapter we shall see how for Rabi’ā and her fellow Proto-Sufis the heart was conceived as the meeting-place of love and knowledge and the site where the transformation of self that is essential to spiritual realization takes place.

55 Khargushi, *Tahdhib al-asrar*, p. 81 and Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 10, p. 108.

56 Melchert, “Origins and Early Sufism,” p. 15 (quoting Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 9, p. 258).

III. THE HEART AS A METAPHOR IN EARLY ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

a. Scriptural Antecedents

For Abu Nasr al-Sarraj and the Sufi writers who came after him, knowledge, love and wisdom find their meeting place in the heart. In *Kashf al-mahjub* (*Unveiling the Veiled*), an influential manual of Sufism from the second half of the eleventh century CE, the Persian Sufi 'Ali al-Hujwiri quotes 'Ali al-Isfahani, an associate of the famous Baghdad Sufi and theologian Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd (d. 910 CE), as saying about the heart: "From the time of Adam to the Resurrection people cry, 'The heart, the heart!' I wish that I might find someone to describe what the heart is or how it is, but I find no one. People in general give the name of 'heart' to that piece of flesh, which belongs to madmen and ecstasies and children, who really are without heart. What, then, is this heart, of which I hear only the name?" Hujwiri explains, "That is to say, if I call intellect the heart, it is not the heart; and if I call spirit the heart, it is not the heart. All the evidences of the Truth subsist in the heart, yet only the name of it is to be found."⁵⁷

The word "heart" (*qalb*) in either its singular or plural form is mentioned 134 times in the Qur'an. It is also used frequently in the Hadith, and since Rabi'a's time it has become one of the most important spiritual symbols of Sufism. The fact that the Sufi heart is primarily a symbol, and not a physical "thing," lies at the root of 'Ali al-Isfahani's frustration in the quotation from *Kashf al-mahjub*. This is because a symbol has no essential meaning. As Hujwiri explains, one can summarize the ways in which the word "heart" is used; however, because it is a symbol one can never find a single, essential definition for the concept.⁵⁸

However, the heart is not just a Sufi symbol; it is also an important symbol in the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, the heart most often symbolizes the seat of the conscience or moral and emotional states: it may be haughty and tyrannical (*qalb mutakabbir jabbar*, Qur'an 40:35); it may be repentant (*qalb munib*, Qur'an 50:33); it may be hardened (*qasat qulubuhum*, Qur'an 2:74); it may

⁵⁷ Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, p. 144.

⁵⁸ Most accurately, the Sufi heart is both a symbol and a synecdoche; as a synecdoche the term is understood immediately to mean the whole person or the essential self. Roland Barthes would call the Sufi concept of the heart a *global sign*, "the first term of a greater system which it builds and of which it is only a part." Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in idem, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), pp. 114–15.

be diseased (*fi qulubihim marad*, Qur’an 33:12); it may be anxious or fearful (*fi qulubihim al-ru‘b*, Qur’an 33:26); it is at peace when it possesses faith (*qalbuha mutma’inun bi-l-iman*, Qur’an 16:106). The Qur’an also describes the heart of the Prophet Muhammad as the site of divine revelation, whether through the agency of the angel Gabriel (Qur’an 2:97), or through a spiritual being called “The Trustworthy Spirit” (*al-Ruh al-Amin*, Qur’an 26:194). The heart may also be described, like the human being in general, as God-fearing (*taqwa al-qulub*, Qur’an 22:32); also like the human being, it is capable of remembering God’s teachings (*lahum qulubun ya’qiluna bi-ha*, Qur’an 22:46). Conversely, when reflecting the negative aspect of humanity, the heart may be blind (Qur’an 22:42) or otherwise veiled from the truth (Qur’an 4:155). Often the heart is described as the seat of knowledge and understanding; because it is the site of the person’s most secret feelings and thoughts (Qur’an 32:51), it is predisposed to recall eternal truths (*dhikra li-man lahu qalb*, Qur’an 50:37). For the ordinary Muslim, just as for the Prophet Muhammad, a heart that is purified is potentially a receptacle for the divine presence: “[God] it is who has revealed His presence to the hearts of the believers (*anzala al-sakinata fi-l-qulub al-mu’minin*), that they may add faith to their faith” (Qur’an 48:4).

All of these examples allude to the heart as symbolizing the place where the conventional or ordinary self is united with the transcendental Self. It is the place where God “inscribes” faith on the believers and strengthens them with His spirit (*kataba fi qulubihim al-iman wa ayyadahum bi-ruhin minhu*, Qur’an 58:22). When the Qur’an states, “God did not create two hearts in a man’s body” (*ma ja’ala Allahu li-rajulin min qalbayni fi jawfihi*, Qur’an 33:4), it is saying that all notions of the “divided self” are either false or deluded. The true human self is not only unified metaphorically; rather, it is an integral unity, undivided within itself and spiritually united with God.⁵⁹

The use of the heart as a symbol in the Qur’an is similar in many ways to its use in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In these earlier scriptures the heart also symbolizes the self and is the site of the deepest thoughts, feelings and intentions of the human being. In Hebrew, the word “heart” (Heb. *lev*) can refer both to the physical heart and to the concepts

59 This interpretation is borne out by the remainder of the discourse in Qur’an 33:4, which compares the metaphor of two hearts in one body with legal fictions that were accepted as realities by the pagan Arabs, such as the *zihar* divorce, in which a husband’s wife is called his “mother” to prevent remarriage and the practice (common in the West today but forbidden in Islam) of calling one’s adopted children one’s “own,” i.e., children by blood.

of emotion and understanding.⁶⁰ The word “heart” is used 833 times in the Hebrew Bible.⁶¹ Its most frequent use is in the Book of Psalms, where it appears 125 times in 121 verses. In the Psalms, the heart appears not only as the seat of the emotions, but also as the speaker’s alter ego and as a metaphor for the personality. In this sense, the Hebrew word *lev* is similar in meaning to the Arabic term *lubb* or “kernel,” which in Sufi usage denotes the spiritual self or the inner essence of the personality. Thus, it is not surprising to find that virtually all of the metaphors for which the heart is used in the Qur’an can also be found in the Psalms. In the Psalms, as in the Qur’an, one finds the unitary heart used as a metaphor for the unified self: “Teach me your way, oh Lord; I will walk in your Truth; unite my heart to fear your Name” (Ps. 86:11). One can also find in the Psalms a foreshadowing of the Sufi symbolism, in which the heart stands for all aspects of the human personality, including both body and soul: “My soul longs, even faints for the presence of the Lord, and my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (Ps. 84:2).

In the Christian New Testament the heart (Gr. *kardia*, Aramaic *lebba*) is described as something that can think (Mark 2:8), reflect (Luke 2:19), and understand (Matt. 13:15). The New Testament also describes the heart as the seat of the morals and the conscience. When the heart is pure, the believer’s morals are pure; when the heart is sullied, the moral life is sullied as well: “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of his heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). Matthew 5:8 states, “Blessed are the pure in heart.” In Paul’s Letter to the Romans there is even a reference to God inscribing or “writing” on the heart as in the Qur’an: “They show that the work of the Law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (Romans 2:15). Also as in the Qur’an, Paul of Tarsus describes the heart as the place where the Holy Spirit resides: “He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Romans 8:27).

60 *Biblical Hebrew E-Magazine*, <http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/emagazine/009.html>. (Accessed November 2004.)

61 *Strong’s Concordance with Hebrew and Greek Lexicon*, <http://www.eliyah.com/lexicon.html>. (Accessed June 2016.)

b. Possible Paths of Transmission

When Islam first came on the scene in the Middle East, the region of Iraq had large Jewish and Christian populations. Most scholars of rabbinic Judaism date the Babylonian Talmud to the sixth century CE, about a century before the coming of Islam. Besides talking with Jews, Muslims in Rabi'a's time may also have "compared notes" on the heart with Christian interlocutors who read the Aramaic Gospels.⁶² Starting in the seventh century CE, Christian mystics in Iraq, Palestine, Egypt and Syria began to make symbolic use of the heart in ways that recall the aphorisms of Muslim ascetics and Proto-Sufis. The Christian ascetic Hesychios of Sinai (fl. late sixth or early seventh century CE) stated, "When the heart has acquired stillness, it will look upon the heights and depths of knowledge, and the intellect, once quieted, will be given to hear wonderful things from God."⁶³ Similar correspondences with Sufi statements about the heart can be found in the aphorisms of "Makarios" the Great, an anonymous monk and mystic who lived in Syria sometime between the fourth and sixth centuries CE.⁶⁴ Much like Rabi'a's alleged teacher Hayyuna, Makarios conceived of the heart as a bridal-chamber where the soul of the ascetic lover of God unites with the divine Beloved. In the following passage, he describes the heart as a place of spiritual transformation where the soul of the perfected or purified believer is enabled to "see" God:

What did the Lord mean when he said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God?" Or again when he said, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect?" Did he not promise to us in these words a state of final purification from all wickedness? And is this not the final setting aside of our ignoble obsessions and our ascent to the perfections of the highest plane of virtues, which is itself the ultimate purification and sanctification of our heart by means of its communion with the divine and perfect spirit of God?"⁶⁵

62 See Emran El Badawi, *The Qur'an and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions* (London: Routledge, 2013).

63 McGuckin, *Book of Mystical Chapters*, pp. 118–19.

64 Massignon, *Essay*, p. 39; unlike Tor Andrae and Margaret Smith, Massignon considered most correspondences between Christian and Muslim mystical doctrines and practices to be fortuitous. Although he recognized that a "genealogical kinship" might exist between Christian and Muslim practices, he felt that specific instances had to be proven rather than assumed.

65 McGuckin, *Book of Mystical Chapters*, pp. 155–6; "Makarios" also said with respect to the doctrine of Love, "It was God's own desire to have communion with the human

Of particular relevance to the mystical language of Sufism are the teachings of Isaac of Nineveh, a Nestorian Christian monk from Beth Qatreyā (in modern Abu Dhabi), who briefly served as Bishop of Nineveh sometime between the years 660 and 680 CE. The teachings of Isaac are important because he lived through the Muslim conquest of Iraq and flourished under the Rightly Guided Caliphs and the first Umayyads. Often, both the form and content of his lessons and aphorisms appear suggestive of Sufi teachings. For Isaac, as it was for Rabi'a and her Proto-Sufi contemporaries, the heart was the locus of the spiritual intellect and the source of wisdom that transcends the limitations of normal thought. The transparency or clarity of the purified heart—*shafyut lebba* in Aramaic—was an important subject of discussion for ascetics of the Syrian Christian tradition, both for the Orthodox and for Nestorians like Isaac. For Isaac, the heart that is cleansed of impurities makes visible the forms of divine truths that are obscured by the rational mind and the material world. For this early Christian Neo-Platonist, the heart took the place of the head in the Greek philosophical tradition. The head, which contains the rational faculty, is the highest part of the body; however, the heart, as a metaphor for the deepest part of the soul, is more profound and thus “higher” than the head, just as the immortal soul, which is located in the body, is both “deeper” and “higher” than the mortal body. As the following passage from Isaac's *Third Discourse* demonstrates, the depth of the heart allows it—through the mediation of ascetic practices—to protect itself from the impurities that would otherwise affect the soul through the body:

Of what does the difference between purity of mind and purity of heart consist? Purity of mind is different from purity of heart, just as there is a difference between a member of the body and the whole body. The mind is indeed one of the senses of the soul. But the heart is the ruler of the internal senses; that is, the sense of senses, which is the root. If the root is holy, so also are all the branches. But the root is not holy even if in one of the branches there is holiness. The mind indeed with a little study of the Scriptures and a little labor in fasting and stillness forgets its former musing and is made pure, in that it becomes free from alien habits. The heart, however, is purified with great sufferings and by being deprived of all mingling with the world, together with complete mortification in everything. When it has been

soul, and this was why he espoused it to himself as a royal bride and why he purified it from all uncleanness” (p. 155).

purified, however, its purity is not defiled by contact with inconsequential things. That is, it is not afraid of violent battles, for it has a strong stomach which easily digests all foods hard for others who are ill in their abdomens. . . . Every purification which is achieved easily, quickly, and with little labor is easily defiled. But the purity acquired with great troubles over a long period and by the highest part of the soul does not fear insignificant contact with worldly things.⁶⁶

The trope of the heart as the ruler of the senses and the seat of the personality goes back to Greek philosophy, where it can be observed in the works of Plato.⁶⁷ In the ascetic tradition of Islam, the use of the heart as a metaphor for the personality has traditionally been traced to al-Hasan al-Basri. Hasan was a gifted orator and Jahiz's *al-Bayan wa-l-tabyin* contains a number of selections from his sermons. Among these selections, two statements on the heart are particularly noteworthy. In the first statement, Hasan despairs of humankind, much like Diogenes the Cynic centuries before him: "Ah! If only I could find life in your hearts! Men have become like specters; I perceive a murmur, but I see nothing that loves. Tongues are brought to me in abundance, but I am looking for hearts. Your intellects go astray, seeking the butterflies of hell and the flies of covetousness!"⁶⁸ In the second statement recorded by Jahiz, Hasan's advice sounds more like Rabi'a's: "Converse with your hearts and maintain them, for they are quick to rust. Humble your carnal souls, for they tend to raise themselves up!"⁶⁹

Sufi traditions claim that al-Hasan al-Basri's teachings on the heart were passed on to later generations by his disciple Malik ibn Dinar (d. 745 CE). Since Ibn Dinar lived in Basra during the first half of Rabi'a's life, it is not unreasonable to speculate that he was influential in establishing the heart as a symbol for Rabi'a and her contemporaries. In Chapter 2 it was noted that 'Ubayda bint Abi Kilab, a woman ascetic and weeper from the Basra region, is alleged to have been a disciple of Malik ibn Dinar. Ibn Dinar was also an early teacher of Love mysticism and some later hagiographers, such as Ibn

66 St. Isaac of Nineveh, *On Ascetical Life*, trans. Mary Hansbury (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Monastery Press, 1989), pp. 50–1.

67 In the *Republic*, Plato states, "The good, then, is the end of all endeavor, the object on which every heart is set, whose existence it divines, though it finds it difficult to grasp just what it is; and because it can't handle it with the same assurance as other things it misses any value those other things have." Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Group, 1955), p. 230.

68 Massignon, *Essay*, p. 133, citing Jahiz, *Bayan*, 3:69.

69 Ibid., citing Jahiz, *Bayan*, 1:162.

al-Jawzi and 'Attar, suggested that Rabi'ā knew him.⁷⁰ This is theoretically possible, since their lives overlapped enough for Rabi'ā to have encountered Ibn Dinar early in her career as an ascetic. If they did know each other, Ibn Dinar might have been an important influence on Rabi'ā, both in her doctrine of Love mysticism and in her use of the heart as a symbol. In addition, this might also suggest why Sufi legends place Rabi'ā anachronistically together with al-Hasan al-Basri more often than with Ibn Dinar, who was her more probable associate. Since Ibn Dinar was reputed to be an exceptionally faithful transmitter of al-Hasan al-Basri's doctrines, it is understandable that traditionists and storytellers would conflate the identity of the lesser-known pupil with his more famous teacher.

The same situation might also explain why some statements that were originally attributed to al-Hasan al-Basri later ended up as "Rabi'ā's" statements. For example, in Ibn al-Jawzi's biographical dictionary *Sifat al-saḥwa*, we are told that Rabi'ā said to Sufyan al-Thawri, "You are but a set number of days. When one day goes, a part of you goes as well."⁷¹ Although this aphorism seems to be authentic because its purported transmitter, Abu Sulayman al-Dab'i, related accounts about Sufyan al-Thawri's encounters with Rabi'ā, there is no chain of transmission to support it. This lacuna is important because a century and a half before Ibn al-Jawzi, Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani attributed the same aphorism to al-Hasan al-Basri in *Hilyat al-awliya'*.⁷² In this earlier version the reporter of the story is Salih al-Murri, another ascetic who has been linked to Rabi'ā. Although Isfahani also fails to provide a chain of transmission, his attribution is corroborated by the earlier account of Jahiz, who attributes this aphorism to al-Hasan al-Basri in *al-Bayan wa-l-tabyin*.⁷³ Because of Jahiz's greater proximity in time and place to both Rabi'ā and

70 See, for example, Ibn al-Jawzi in Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 278–9. Farid al-Din al-'Attar's accounts of meetings between Rabi'ā and Ibn Dinar should only be taken as rhetorical constructs. In one account, 'Attar has Ibn Dinar relating a tradition about Rabi'ā. This would have been highly improbable, since at the time of his death, Ibn Dinar would have been much more famous than Rabi'ā, who was then only in her twenties. In another account, 'Attar has al-Hasan al-Basri, Ibn Dinar, and Shaiq al-Balkhi all visiting Rabi'ā at the same time. In actuality, Balkhi died nine years after Rabi'ā and Hasan died when Rabi'ā was only eleven years old. Therefore, it would have been impossible for such a cast of characters to assemble at the same time. See Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 167–8.

71 Ibid. See also, Chapter 2 above, where this statement is used to illustrate instrumental asceticism.

72 Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 2, p. 148.

73 Jahiz, *al-Bayan*, p. 94.

Hasan, one must conclude that if either of these two figures actually made this statement, it is much more likely to have been Hasan than Rabi'ā.

Besides providing a possible doctrinal connection between Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya and al-Hasan al-Basri, Malik ibn Dinar is also important because he was a transmitter of aphorisms and wisdom traditions from Christian and Jewish sources. For example, the section devoted to his memory in Isfahani's *Hilyat al-awliya'* contains numerous references of this kind. The most interesting of these refer to Ibn Dinar "reading" Christian or Jewish texts. In one account he states, "I read in the Torah: 'Oh Son of Adam! Do not be discouraged to stand weeping in my presence while you pray; for I am the God that is close to your heart and through the unseen you saw my light!'"⁷⁴ In another account he says, "I read this in the Psalms (*al-Zabur*): 'With the arrogance of the hypocrite the poor person is burned.'" ⁷⁵ Elsewhere he says, "I was informed that Jesus (peace be upon him) said, 'Make your bodies endure hunger, thirst, nakedness, and exposure to the elements, so that your hearts might come to know [God].'" ⁷⁶ What might Ibn Dinar have been "reading" to come up with such aphorisms? If he read Christian or Jewish texts, the language in which he read them would have been Aramaic—either Syriac or Hebrew Aramaic. However, it is important to note that for the most part Ibn Dinar's quotations are not actually from the Torah, the Psalms, or the Gospels. Instead, they are apocryphal traditions that probably circulated orally among the indigenous non-Muslim inhabitants of southern Iraq. As such, Ibn Dinar could just as likely have learned them in Arabic instead of Aramaic.

Another early transmitter of Christian traditions was Ahmad ibn Abi al-Hawari (d. 845 CE), a student and disciple of the Sufi Abu Sulayman al-Darani (d. 830 CE).⁷⁷ In the previous chapter it was noted that Darani originally lived in Basra but later moved to a village outside of Damascus in Syria.⁷⁸ Ibn Abi al-Hawari was also from Basra and moved to Syria with his teacher. After his arrival in Syria, he married the wealthy woman of Damascus, Rabi'ā bint Isma'il (d. before 845 CE), who appears in Sufi hagiography as the most famous namesake of Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya. In exchange for giving her wealth

74 Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 2, p. 357.

75 Ibid., p. 376.

76 Ibid., p. 370.

77 For information on Ahmad Ibn Abi al-Hawari see Sulami, *Tabaqat al-sufiyya*, pp. 98–102; Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 10, pp. 5–33; Ibn al-Jawzi, *Sifat al-safwa*, vol. 2, pp. 836–7; and Massignon, *Essay*, pp. 152–8.

78 Abu Sulayman's *nisba*, "al-Darani," came from the name of this village. See Sulami, *Tabaqat al-sufiyya*, pp. 75–82, Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 9, pp. 254–80, and Ibn al-Jawzi, *Sifat al-safwa*, vol. 2, pp. 828–34.

away to Darani and his disciples, she compelled her husband to practice a celibate form of marriage that was popular among the lay ascetics of early Syrian Christianity.

Darani and Ibn Abi al-Hawari are significant historically because they were connected in various ways to the most important centers of early Sufism in Iraq, Syria and Khorasan (present-day eastern Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia). Circumstantial evidence also suggests that when they lived in Basra, they were aware of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya and her associates. For example, in his *Book of Sufi Women* Sulami cites Ibn Abi al-Hawari as the source of an account about Maryam of Basra, an alleged disciple of Rabi'a who was noted for her practice of Love mysticism.⁷⁹ Both Sulami and Ibn al-Jawzi also cite accounts from Ibn Abi al-Hawari about Bahriyya, a piety-minded woman ('*abida*) and "knower of God" ('*arifa*) from Basra who was a disciple of Shaqiq al-Balkhi.⁸⁰

In *Hilyat al-awliya'*, Isfahani claims that Abu Sulayman al-Darani was a teacher of the famous early Egyptian Sufi Dhu'l-Nun al-Misri (d. 859 CE).⁸¹ Darani was also a close associate of Salih ibn 'Abd al-Jalil, who was discussed above as one of the first ascetics to call himself a "Sufi." In the *Hilya*, Darani is cited as the source of a statement by Ibn 'Abd al-Jalil (different from the statement quoted above), concerning God's blessings on "God's Obedient Ones."⁸² Might this reference lend credibility to the suggestion that Massignon's "Shiite Sufiyya," "God's Obedient Ones," and Muhasibi's "Pure Ones" were all from the same group? At this point, there is not enough evidence to say. However, genealogical connections such as these demonstrate that more research needs to be done on the links between Proto-Sufis and self-designated "Sufis" in the eighth and ninth centuries CE.

A number of accounts attributed to Ahmad ibn Abi al-Hawari also describe personal encounters with Christian monks or relate traditions that could only have come from Jewish sources. In *Hilyat al-awliya'* Ibn Abi al-Hawari relates the following teaching on renunciation from a monk at the Syrian monastery of Dayr Harmila: "We find in our books that the body of the Son of Adam is created from earth but his soul is created from the heavenly realm (*malakut*

79 See Chapter 1 and Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 84–5.

80 Ibid., pp. 148–9 and Ibn al-Jawzi Appendix to *ibid.*, pp. 296–7; Ibn al-Jawzi claims without attribution that Bahriyya led gatherings of invocation at her house in Basra (*wa kana laha majlisun tudhakkiru fih*).

81 If this report were true, Dhu al-Nun would have studied with Darani in Syria. See Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 9, pp. 254–5.

82 Ibid., p. 255.

al-sama'). When the body is made hungry and naked and suffers deprivation, the soul is freed to go back up to the place from which it came. However, when the body has food, water, sleep and rest it fixes itself permanently in the place in which it was born, for there is nothing more beloved to it than the World."⁸³ In another account, Ibn Abi al-Hawari relates a saying from the Prophet Joseph: "My God, verily I turn toward you with the righteousness of my father Abraham Your Friend, Isaac Your Sacrifice, and Jacob Your Israel." Then God revealed to him: "Oh Joseph, did you turn toward me with the grace that I bestowed on all of them?" Because Ibn Abi al-Hawari is unclear about the meaning of this tradition, he takes it to his teacher to inquire about it. Darani explains the tradition in the following way: "Verily God approaches him first with the love of His friends, then He comes to him according to the spiritual station with which his heart is occupied."⁸⁴

c. The Metaphor of the Heart for Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya and Her Contemporaries

The use of the heart as a metaphor for the self in the explanation recounted above illustrates a motif that appears repeatedly in the notices on Abu Sulayman al-Darani in *Hilyat al-awliya'*. Among the Sufis of his generation, Darani is most often associated with statements about the heart in Isfahani's book. Although he was not the only early Sufi to use the heart as a metaphor, his prominence in the *Hilya* indicates that Isfahani regarded him as one of the most important specialists on the heart in early Sufism.⁸⁵ Abu Sulayman al-Darani's statements about the heart can be seen as an early form of personality theory, in which the heart stands for the self and the states of the heart correspond to what we today would call personality traits. As such, his doctrine of the heart can be seen as a possible precursor to the more fully

83 Ibid., vol. 10, p. 5; the doctrine of the soul as expressed by this Christian monk is Platonic in origin. According to Pierre Hadot, early Christian teachers frequently borrowed ideas from the writings of pagan Neo-Platonists, such as in the following statement by St. Ambrose of Milan: "A blessed soul it is which penetrates the secrets of the Word. For awakening from the body, becoming a stranger to everything else, she seeks within herself and searches, so as to find out whether she can, in some way, reach divine being." Hadot, *Plotinus*, p. 25 n. 5.

84 Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 10, p. 9.

85 The section on Abu Sulayman al-Darani in the most recent edition of the *Hilya* comprises 26 pages and is one of the longer sections in the volume in which it appears. See *ibid.*, vol. 9, pp. 254–80.

developed personality theory of al-Harith al-Muhasibi, a fellow native of Basra, whose “science of hearts” (*‘ilm al-qulub*) was to have a long-lasting influence on Sufism through the writings of Ghazali.⁸⁶

Based on Isfahani’s record of his teachings, Darani’s doctrine of the heart was based on three central themes or motifs:

1. *The preoccupation of the heart*, expressed by the metaphors of “filling” the heart (*‘imarat al-qalb*) and “emptying” the heart (*khawa’ al-qalb*).
2. *The condition of the heart*, expressed by metaphorical references to the “place” or station of the heart (*manzilat al-qalb*) and the cohesiveness of the heart (*ijma’ al-qalb*).
3. *The knowledge of the heart*, expressed by metaphorical references to the “awareness” of the heart (*ittila’ al-qalb*), the “vision” of the heart (*basar al-qalb*), and the “light” of the heart (*nur al-qalb*).

The first of Darani’s themes, the “preoccupation of the heart,” closely accords with the concept of asceticism as renunciation. Here, “filling” the heart does not mean that the heart is filled with God, as in essential asceticism; instead, it means being preoccupied with material concerns or passions. This metaphor reflects a Platonic ethic and is also reminiscent of early Christian teachings, in which renunciation or “emptying the heart” is equated with purification. Darani explains this metaphor in the following way: “Sinful suggestions (*al-wasawis*) only come to a heart that is full. Have you ever seen a thief going to empty ruins, scrutinizing them and entering them from any door that he wishes? No. A thief only comes to houses with material goods locked inside of them, seeking to open them so that he might steal what is in them.”⁸⁷

In another account Darani describes the preoccupation of the heart in terms of the World/Nonworld Dichotomy. Here the dichotomy between the World and the Nonworld is described in terms of a fundamental moral opposition: “When the World (*al-dunya*) comes to the heart, the Nonworld (*al-akhira*) moves away from it; and if the World is in the heart, the Nonworld

86 See Gavin Picken, *Spiritual Purification and Islam: The Life and Works of al-Muhasibi* (London: Routledge, 2009).

87 Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 9, p. 257.

will never come to it. This is because the World is depraved (*la'ima*) whereas the Nonworld is honorable (*'aziza*)."⁸⁸

In yet another account, Darani explains the metaphor of emptying the heart in terms of the heart's "hunger" and "thirst": "When the heart is made hungry or thirsty, it is purified and made valuable; but when it is satiated, it is rendered blind and worthless."⁸⁹ This reference to the purifying effects of hunger and thirst allude to the practice of systematic fasting as a form of bodily mortification which, as we have seen in Chapter 2, was more representative of Christian than early Muslim asceticism. Although Darani's reference to the "hunger" and "thirst" of the heart may refer to a regime of inward purification, it more likely indicates that he and his followers practiced fasting as part of their ascetic disciplines.⁹⁰

This last statement by Darani also links the "preoccupation of the heart" with the "condition," "station," and "knowledge" of the heart described in other aphorisms. For Darani, it is not enough just to empty the heart of the World; each stage of filling the heart with the divine presence calls for greater responsibilities for the ascetic and hence a greater risk of earning God's displeasure: "For each level that the station (*manzila*) of the heart is raised, the opportunity for divine punishment increases."⁹¹ In order not to fail in these responsibilities, one must maintain strict ascetic discipline and associate only with those whose company strengthens one's resolve on the path to God. The "cohesion of the heart" (*ijma' al-qalb*) or coherence of the self depends on the complete transformation of the personality. This is to be accomplished with the help of one's brethren among the Piety-Minded and the pursuit of illuminative knowledge through the practices of meditation

88 Ibid., p. 260.

89 Ibid., p. 266.

90 The frequent references to hunger by Darani in the *Hilya* might suggest that the statements about hunger attributed to Rabi'ā by the Andalusian Sufi Abu Madyan originated among the Sufis of Syria. As noted in Chapter 2, the statements about hunger in Abu Madyan's *Bidayat al-murid* are unique in the Rabi'ā narratives. Throughout the period of Umayyad rule in Spain (755–1031 CE), Andalusian Islam was strongly influenced by Syrian doctrines and practices. Since Darani and Ibn Abi al-Hawari were major Sufi figures in Syria, it is possible that when reports about Darani reached Muslim Spain, they were conflated with reports about Rabi'ā bint Isma'il of Damascus, who Andalusian transmitters thought was Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya. The doctrinal and *tabaqat* works of Abu Sa'id ibn al-A'rabi, a student of Ibn Abi al-Dunya, were well known and influential in Islamic Spain and would likely have been a source for these traditions. See Manuela Marin, "Abû Sa'id Ibn al-A'rabi et le développement du soufisme en al-Andalus," *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée: Minorités religieuses dans l'Espagne médiévale*, 63/64, 1992, pp. 28–38.

91 Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 9, p. 257.

and retreat: "Reject all pride in the mind's knowledge (*radd sabil al-'ajab bi-ma'rifat al-nafs*)," says Darani. "Instead, dedicate yourself to the cohesion of the heart by committing few errors, seek the flawlessness of the heart (*riqqat al-qalb*) by sitting with the God-fearing, procure the illumination of the heart through constant sorrow, seek the way to sorrow through constant meditation (*tafakkur*), and seek the presence of meditation through the practice of retreat (*khalwa*)."⁹²

Many of the metaphors that were used by Darani to speak about the heart can also be found in statements attributed to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya. For example, Kalabadhi cites the following statement by Rabi'a in *al-Ta'arruf*: "A group of people came to visit Rabi'a in order to console her for some complaint. They said to her, 'What is your condition?' She replied, 'By God! I know of no cause for my illness, except that Paradise was revealed to me, and my heart was drawn toward it. I think that my Lord was jealous of me, so He reproached me; for only He can make such a reproach.'"⁹³ In this tradition, Rabi'a's physical condition is analogous to the condition of her heart. Echoing Darani's concern for the heart's purity, she likens her heart's preoccupation with Paradise (a reference to instrumental asceticism) to baser and more material preoccupations with the World. Her "illness" comes from the realization that even Paradise is a created thing; therefore, the only proper approach for the ascetic is toward God Himself, without regard for anything else, including Heaven (a reference to essential asceticism). God, as the jealous Beloved, reproaches Rabi'a, troubling her heart and leaving her soul in an agitated state. This state is comparable to *al-nafs al-lawwama*, the "self-blaming soul" that would become an important part of Muhasibi's Sufi psychology.

A similar depiction of the heart as a metaphor for the self can be found in an account from *Hilyat al-awliya'* about Rabi'a's contemporary Ibrahim ibn Adham. In this account Ibn Adham states: "View all of creation in your heart without discrimination: preoccupy yourself with your sins instead of judging others for their sins and make sure to utter beautiful words from a humble heart for the sake of God Most High. Reflect on your sins and repent them to your Lord. Doing so will establish ethical precaution (*wara'*) in your heart, so do not be greedy for anything other than your Lord."⁹⁴ For Ibn

⁹² Ibid., p. 266.

⁹³ Kalabadhi, *al-Ta'arruf*, p. 121; Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, p. 159.

⁹⁴ Isfahani, *Hilya*, vol. 8, p. 16; a later version of this account can be found in Qushayri's *Risala* (p. 258), where Rabi'a states, "I looked with my heart at Heaven (*nazartu bi-qalbi*

Adham, just as it was for Rabi'ā and Darani, the heart is the seat of spiritual judgment and its condition affects the ability of the ascetic to “see” spiritual realities. However, in this account the heart is also depicted as the site of moral judgments; thus, it requires the ethical precaution of *wara'* in order to become properly oriented toward God as the ultimate reality. For Ibn Adham, essential asceticism is the perfect realization of *wara'* because it empties the heart of all things but God.

In his Book of Sufi Women, Sulami mentions a group of people that he calls *arbab al-qulub*, “The Masters of Hearts,” or specialists in the doctrine of the heart.⁹⁵ Just as with his references to “weepers” and “those who cause others to weep” discussed in Chapter 2, this reference to early Sufi “heart specialists” indicates that when Sulami and other systematizers of Sufi doctrine looked back on the Proto-Sufis and ascetics of Rabi'ā's generation, they noticed that some individuals relied more heavily than others on the heart as a metaphor in their teachings. One of the early Sufi women that Sulami highlights as a “Master of Hearts” is Hukayma of Damascus, who was the teacher of Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya's Syrian namesake, Rabi'ā bint Isma'il. In a teaching that anticipates Darani's metaphor of the “empty” heart, Hukayma interprets the Qur'anic passage, “Except one who comes to God with a sound heart” (Qur'an 26:89), in the following way: “It means that when one encounters God, there should be nothing in his heart other than Him.”⁹⁶ Darani is said to have approved of this statement because he felt that the only truly “healthy” heart (*qalb salim*) was one that had been emptied of the World and was thus ready to receive knowledge directly from God. Hukayma's teaching also expresses a similar sentiment to one of the most famous statements attributed to Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya: “Love for the Creator (*al-Khaliq*) has preoccupied me from love for created beings (*al-makhluqin*).”⁹⁷ For both Rabi'ā and Hukayma, a heart that is spiritually sound is empty of all but God and is oriented toward God alone.

One of the most important Sufi sources for Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya's teachings and aphorisms is *Tahdhib al-asrar* (*The Primer of Secrets*) by 'Abd al-Malik

ila-l-janna) and [God] corrected me, for He is the only one to do so. Therefore, I will never do this again.”

95 See, for example, the notice on Sha'wana of al-Ubulla in Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 106–7.

96 Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 126–7.

97 Khargushi, *Tahdhib al-asrar*, p. 60; see also Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 78–9. Later versions of this tradition changed the key phrase from *hubb al-makhluqin* (“love for created beings”) to *hubb al-makhluq* (“love for creation or that which is created”). This opened the statement to more abstract and theological interpretations.

al-Khargushi (d. 1016 CE). As we saw in the previous chapter, Khargushi lived in Nishapur at the same time as both Sulami and al-Hasan al-Nisaburi, the author of *'Uqala' al-majanin*. Taken together, the works of Khargushi, Sulami and Nisaburi provide some of the most important information currently available on eighth-century Proto-Sufism and the circle of women around Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya. Like Sulami's Book of Sufi Women, Khargushi's *Primer of Secrets* portrays Rabi'ā as a Sufi. In the following account from this work, which is also one of the epigraphs to this chapter, Rabi'ā describes the heart and the knowledge it contains as God's personal possessions: "Verily, the Knower of God (*'arif*) asks God to grant him a heart. So [God] grants it to him from Himself. When he possesses the heart, he then offers it back to his Lord and Master, so that in [God's] repossession of it he will be protected and will be veiled in its concealment from created beings."⁹⁸

Unfortunately, no chain of transmission is given for this account, so there is no way to verify whether it is reliable. However, if it did come from Rabi'ā, it would be significant because theologically it goes beyond other expressions of the heart as a metaphor, including those of Darani, who also spoke of the heart's knowledge. Its closest analogue among the sayings of other Proto-Sufis is a tradition from Nisaburi's *'Uqala' al-majanin* that is attributed to Hayyuna. In this account, Hayyuna asks God to grant her stillness of heart and bestow divine acceptance upon her: "Oh God, grant me stillness of heart through the contract of my complete trust in you (*hab li sukun al-qalb bi-'aqd al-thiqa bi-ka*). Make all of my thoughts, ideas, and inclinations accord with your acceptance of me. Do not make my fate deprive me of you. Oh hope of those who seek hope!"⁹⁹

In these statements by Rabi'ā and Hayyuna, the heart is portrayed as God's property and the ascetic possesses her heart on loan from God as the result of a binding agreement or contract. Hayyuna refers to a contract of trust (*'aqd al-thiqa*), whereas Rabi'ā speaks of giving the heart back to God as if it were the repayment of a loan. Both statements refer to the concept of complete trust in God (*tawakkul* or *al-thiqa bi-llah*), which, as we saw in Chapter 2, was an important spiritual attitude for early Islamic ascetics. Since both Hayyuna and Rabi'ā combined their asceticism with Love mysticism, it is possible to think of Hayyuna's metaphor of a contract as based on the Islamic contract of marriage (*'aqd al-zawaj*), and to think of Rabi'ā's metaphor of a loan or a gift as alluding to the female lover's gift of her heart to her male beloved. In

⁹⁸ Khargushi, *Tahdhib al-asrar*, p. 53.

⁹⁹ Nisaburi, *'Uqala' al-majanin*, p. 150.

both of these cases, the relationship between the ascetic and God is analogous to a spiritual marriage. The metaphor of marriage and the portrayal of the ascetic devotee as God’s “bride” are further supported by references to veiling (*hijab*) and concealment (*sitr*) in Rabi‘a’s statement and by the desire for God’s pleasure (*rida’*) in Hayyuna’s prayer. In both traditions the heart is a type of spiritual domicile. Just as in an Islamic marriage, the bride takes up residence in the husband’s home, where she is concealed and protected from the gaze of outsiders. By virtue of the contracted relationship between husband and wife, she becomes “Mistress of the House,” although the real owner of the house is her husband. Just as the bride knows that her status is dependent on her husband’s pleasure, the “knower” of God (*al-‘arif bi-llah*) is aware that the condition of the heart as a home for the spirit similarly depends on God’s pleasure. This is why Hayyuna asks God to ensure that the preoccupations of her heart are in agreement with the desires of her heavenly bridegroom. Rabi‘a’s statement is more altruistic than Hayyuna’s but the meaning of it is more or less the same. Just as a successful marriage depends on mutual trust between husband and wife and the maintenance of a quiet and peaceful home, so the gift of God’s knowledge depends on a devoted and trusting heart.

IV. RABI‘A THE “KNOWER OF GOD”

Amy Hollywood, a major scholar of medieval Christian hagiography, has observed that in hagiographical accounts, when God is represented as the male Beloved in contrast to the ardent female soul, “the cultural association of women with eroticism is accepted, spiritualized, and, in part, subverted.”¹⁰⁰ The marital motifs in the statements of Hayyuna and Rabi‘a given above can be seen as an Islamic version of this trope. However, as Hollywood also notes, the presence of Love mysticism or erotic imagery in a hagiographical text does not necessarily mean that women are really speaking. Often, the use of such imagery turns out to be an example of “men writing women,” as Elizabeth Clark observed with Gregory of Nyssa and his sister St Macrina. As Catherine M. Mooney has noted about the hagiographic depiction of Christian women saints in the Middle Ages, the presence of erotic imagery in

100 Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame, IN and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 7.

“male hagiographic texts describing women’s relationship with God appears to reflect a particularly male concern that is not similarly echoed in many women’s self-representations.”¹⁰¹ According to Mooney’s research, domestic imagery is much more representative of the voices of actual women than erotic imagery.¹⁰² This observation is echoed by Caroline Walker Bynum, who claims that in the writings and statements of medieval Christian women, “all women’s central images turn out to be continuities [with domestic life].”¹⁰³ In other words, rather than rejecting the values of the dominant society as Leila Ahmed has claimed for Sufi women mystics, medieval Christian women mystics were more likely to frame their depictions of spiritual life in terms of ordinary life experiences.¹⁰⁴

The use of marital imagery in the statements of Rabi’a and Hayyuna suggests that in Sufi hagiographies as well, male authors may have been speaking through the voices of famous women. In the statements reproduced above, it is possible that we are hearing Khargushi’s and Nisapuri’s interpretations of the Sufi doctrine of the heart as much as Rabi’a’s or Hayyuna’s. One of the most important contributions of Amy Hollywood’s research to the feminist study of hagiography has been to demonstrate that not only the affirmation but also the subversion of women’s stereotypes in hagiographical texts often has more to do with men than with women. We shall see a major example of this in ‘Attar’s *vita* of Rabi’a in the next chapter. At times, male writers have found it useful to subvert gender stereotypes in order to make a doctrinal point. Famous examples of this practice include the Andalusian Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi and the German mystic Meister Eckhart.¹⁰⁵ Such twists and turns of rhetorical form make it hard to draw conclusions about authentic women’s voices, either from the statements of female Christian saints or from Sufi women. As Hollywood’s analyses of hagiography and feminist theory demonstrate, to indulge in “universal claims [about gender and

101 Catherine M. Mooney, “Voice, Gender, and the Portrayal of Sanctity,” in C.M. Mooney (ed.), *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 12.

102 Ibid.

103 Caroline Walker Bynum, “Women’s Stories, Women’s Symbols,” in idem, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), p. 48.

104 Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 96.

105 On Ibn ‘Arabi see Sadiyya Sheikh, “In Search of *al-Insan*: Sufism, Islamic Law, and Gender,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 77 (4), 2009, pp. 781–822. On Eckhart, see Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*.

voice] made with regard to particular historical places, times, and evidence, is dangerous both to scholarship and to feminist political and ethical aims, for it works to obscure crucial differences between women themselves, as well as between men.”¹⁰⁶

This warning is especially important for the study of Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya because the “point” of her depiction in medieval hagiography is more often about knowledge than gender. Whatever else the “real” Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya may have been, she was seen as a woman whose knowledge and opinions were worth heeding. In Sufi writings, the trope of “Rabi‘a the Knower of God” (*Rabi‘a al-‘arifa bi-llah*) is closely related to the trope of Rabi‘a the Lover. The reason for this is simple: (male) Sufi authors would ask, “Who would know the (male) divine Beloved better than His most ardent (female) lover?” The theme of knowledge—whether it be rational knowledge or intimate knowledge—is a common thread that links early representations of the trope of Rabi‘a the Teacher in Muhasibi, Jahiz, Burjulani, Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur, and Ibn al-Junayd to later representations of the trope of Rabi‘a the Lover in Makki, Sulami, Ghazali, and ‘Attar. The conceptual relationship between Love and knowledge has a pedigree that goes back long before the coming of Islam. As we saw in the previous chapter, no matter what other literary influences might have existed, the trope of “a woman wise in the ways of love” would have been enough by itself to allow the figure of Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya to be compared with the figure of the priestess Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*.

When medieval male writers of Islamic hagiography used gender-based stereotypes in their depictions of Rabi‘a, she is often portrayed as emotional or even hysterical. For example, Ibn al-Jawzi depicts her as crying, weeping and fainting.¹⁰⁷ Such images reinforce the long-held Muslim stereotype of women as deficient in intellect and emotional stability.¹⁰⁸ Such portrayals undermine the image of Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya as a wise sage and cause the reader to treat her aphorisms skeptically, “with a grain of salt,” so to speak. However, modern male writers in the West are just as likely to use gender-based stereotypes

106 Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, p. 197.

107 See, for example, Ibn al-Jawzi’s chapter on Rabi‘a from *Sifat al-safwa*, reproduced in Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 276–83.

108 On the Muslim trope of women’s innate deficiencies, see Rkia E. Cornell, “Soul of A Woman Was Created Below: Woman as the Lower Soul (*Nafs*) in Islam,” in *Probing the Depths of Evil and Good: Multireligious Views and Case Studies*, ed. Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen and Hendrik M. Vroom (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2007), pp. 257–80.

as their medieval Muslim counterparts. In particular, contemporary New Age depictions of Rabi'a are replete with gendered stereotypes. The only difference is in the details. For example, in contrast to Ibn al-Jawzi, who depicts Rabi'a as a hysterical eccentric, the New Age writer Charles Upton portrays Rabi'a as a dreamy romantic, a Sufi version of the Hippie-era flower child. In his book *Doorkeeper of the Heart*, he turns the medieval "Poem of the Intimate Gift" into a more modern adaptation:

I set up house for you in my heart
As a friend that I could talk with.

Gave my body to someone else,
Who wanted to embrace it.

The body, all in all, is good enough for embracing.
But the Friend who lives in my house
Is the Lover of my Heart.¹⁰⁹

In this poem, Upton evokes the 1960's Hippie-era ethic of free love. In the first verse, the reader is presented with an image of youthful domesticity, in which Rabi'a, the "girlfriend," sets up house with her divine "boyfriend." It is not hard to imagine the two of them sharing intimate converse over a cup of herbal tea. The second verse informs the reader in a rather offhanded way that Rabi'a has given her body to another and that furthermore, she may do so again. In this and the following verse, the romantic Hippie ethic of free love trumps the moral issues of betrayal and sexual promiscuity that are raised by this scenario. Rabi'a's gift of her body to another is ultimately of no major concern because her body is less authentically "hers" than her heart. Like the disposable husk of a seed, her body is "good enough for embracing." What is most important in the naive romanticism of this poem is the bond of true friendship that Rabi'a maintains with "the Lover of my Heart," for her heart is the core of her being. In Upton's poem, Rabi'a cohabits spiritually with her divine lover in a sort of "open marriage."

'Attar, whose representation of Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya lies behind the romanticized image of Rabi'a used by New Age writers like Upton, sought to avoid morally ambiguous scenarios by reminding his readers that she was not like ordinary women: "When a woman is on the path of God Most High, she is a

109 Upton, *Doorkeeper of the Heart*, p. 4.

man and cannot be called a woman.”¹¹⁰ Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami had a similar idea in mind when he portrayed Rabi’ā as the quintessential Sufi woman. Although he does not call Rabi’ā an honorary man as ‘Attar does, he makes a point of stressing that some of the most respected male scholars of her day sought out her knowledge and advice.¹¹¹ Sulami reverses the gender stereotypes of his era by portraying Rabi’ā’s spiritual knowledge as fully equal to that of a male Sufi master. In one account, he portrays Rabi’ā as coming upon a crucified criminal. Rather than cringing or turning away at the grisly sight (as an ordinary woman might do), she looks directly at the crucified man and says, “Upon my father! With that tongue you used to say, ‘There is no god but God!’”¹¹² This story illustrates what Amy Hollywood has called the “ethics of detachment,” which is often found in hagiographic literature. In this trope, the saint refuses to make a personal moral judgment but rather affirms God’s justice by allowing it to proceed in its own way.¹¹³ Feminist theory, says Hollywood, has tended to regard such tropes as gendered expressions of the “male bias toward rationality, disembodiment, and justice.”¹¹⁴ However, she argues against this critique by stating that there is no necessary correlation between gender identity and either rationality or justice, nor is there a gendered correlation “between disinterestedness and rationality, or between the ideal of justice and a rule-based ethical system.”¹¹⁵

Like the feminist historian Leila Ahmed, the scholar of Sufism Marcia Hermansen characterizes Sufi women as “culture-critiquing female heroes.”¹¹⁶ Although this is an appealing image, it is unfortunately an exaggeration. Most Sufi women are depicted in hagiographical accounts as supporting the status quo, including gender distinctions, rather than opposing them. Amy Hollywood’s research into medieval Christian hagiography has made it clear that most often it was male writers, not the women they wrote about, who

110 ‘Attar, *Tadhkirat al-awliya*, p. 61 and Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 155; the most recent major work on Rabi’ā—Jean Annetay, *Une Femme Soufie en Islam: Rabi’ā al-Adawiyya* (Paris: Éditions Entrelacs, 2009)—provides a good example of how modern romantic narratives continue to depend on ‘Attar. Although Annetay acknowledges in several places that ‘Attar’s accounts are historically anachronistic, he nevertheless reproduces them as if they were true.

111 Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 74–5.

112 Ibid., pp. 80–1.

113 Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife*, pp. 193–6.

114 Ibid., p. 197.

115 Ibid., p. 198.

116 Marcia Hermansen, “The Female Hero in the Islamic Religious Tradition,” in *The Annual Review of Women in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma and Katherine K. Young (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), vol. 2, p. 130.

were the real culture critics. In this respect Muslim hagiography is no different. However, certain female figures are sometimes regarded as transcending gender stereotypes, even if the men who wrote about them could not always maintain this image consistently. Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya is a figure of this type. The ethics of detachment that she exhibits in Sulami's story of her encounter with the crucified man reflects the ostensibly "male" virtues of *muruwwa* (an ethic of mature behavior) and *hilm* (forbearance and practical wisdom). As we saw in Chapter 1, these characteristics are key elements of the trope of Rabi'a the Teacher. The cultural importance of these virtues during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods was that they signified the presence of intellect and reason, properties that in patriarchal Islamic society were attributed to men more than to women. For the Persian Sufis Sulami and 'Attar, Rabi'a was a unique woman who displayed the maturity, knowledge and judgment of a man. This is why 'Attar placed her outside the gender category of women. As Toshihiko Izutsu reminds us, *muruwwa* and *hilm* were culturally associated with men in early Islam because they are not passive virtues. Rather, they refer to "a [person] who governs and dominates others, and not of those who are governed and dominated."¹¹⁷ In exemplifying these characteristics, Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya was thus more "male" than "female" because she exercised moral authority over men.

For Makki, Sulami, Khargushi and other Sufis who wrote about Rabi'a from the standpoint of institutionalized Sufism, she was seen as a figure of authority because her unique knowledge of God gave her the ability to make important insights into Sufi doctrines. However, for the trope of Rabi'a the Sufi, the knowledge that conveyed this ability went beyond what was expressed by mature reason and judgment. Sufi mystical theology acknowledges the importance of reason (*'aql*) and good judgment (*hilm*), which characterizes the trope of Rabi'a the Teacher, but it privileges knowledge that goes beyond such reasoning. Epistemologically, it is not enough to know about something (Ar. *ilm* or *khibra*, "expertise"). Rather, it is more significant to *know the ways of knowing*—to be conversant with the "ins and outs" of knowledge itself (Ar. *ma'rifa*). For Makki and the Sufi theologians who followed him, Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya was able to impart remarkable insights to her students because she possessed this deeper type of knowledge. As discussed in the previous chapter, the root of this knowledge was in her combination of essential asceticism and Love mysticism. For the Sufi hagiographers who wrote about her, it did not matter whether or not she was called a "Sufi" in

¹¹⁷ Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran*, p. 207.

her lifetime. Because the weight of evidence demonstrated that she possessed the type of knowledge that was seen as a hallmark of Sufism, she could only have been a “Sufi.” That is to say, from the standpoint of major Sufi writers such as Makki, Sulami, Ghazali, or ‘Attar, the distinction made in this chapter between “Rabi’ā the Sufi” and the other master narratives in which she appears is somewhat artificial. For them the tropes of Rabi’ā the Teacher, Rabi’ā the Ascetic, and Rabi’ā the Lover were all integral parts of the master narrative of Rabi’ā the Sufi.

Although he was not a Sufi himself, the Abbasid-era *littérateur* Abu ‘Uthman al-Jahiz was also thinking in much the same way when he described Rabi’ā as a “Woman of *Bayan*.” For Jahiz, the true intellectual was one who understood things “from their roots to their branches.” As a Sufi theorist, Abu Talib al-Makki similarly indicated that Rabi’ā possessed this kind of knowledge when he referred to her as a *muhiqqa*. By using this term he meant that she knew how everything “worked” or “fit together” in both the inner and outer dimensions of reality.¹¹⁸ Through the wisdom of her teachings she could strip away the veil of appearances and reveal the true nature of things. For both Jahiz and Makki, as well as for their successors, this type of wisdom was exemplified by Rabi’ā’s use of the aphorism as a pedagogical tool. In other words, she personified James Geary’s definition of the aphoristic way of knowledge: “Inside an aphorism it is minds that collide and the new matter that spins out at the speed of thought is that elusive thing we call wisdom.”¹¹⁹ Jahiz and Makki were well aware that creating a good aphorism takes more knowledge and skill than creating a good argument. This is because teaching by way of aphorisms requires a deeper and more thorough type of understanding than teaching by way of formal arguments. In order to convey a meaningful paradox to others one must possess a full understanding of paradoxical knowledge.¹²⁰ As Makki states about Rabi’ā al-‘Adawiyya in *Qut al-qulub*, in figurative terms, this type of knowledge resides in the heart rather than in the head.

The ability to teach with aphorisms was not the only type of advanced knowledge associated with the trope of Rabi’ā the Sufi. As a *muhiqqa*, Rabi’ā also had a deep understanding of moral conduct and the Shari’a. By understanding the proper balance between what pertains to God (*huquq Allah*) and what pertains to the human being (*huquq al-insan*), she was credited

¹¹⁸ Makki, *Qut al-qulub*, vol. 2, p. 95.

¹¹⁹ Geary, *The World in a Phrase*, p. 16.

¹²⁰ For a comparison of the Sufi aphorism and the Zen *koan*, see Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, p. 133f.

with the paranormal ability to act in an appropriate way at all times and in all contexts. In the ethical worldview of Umayyad and early Abbasid Islam, this sense of innate appropriateness was an important sign of *hilm*. In the hagiographical tradition, Rabi'a's ability to accord everything its proper right or due allowed her to cast a critical eye on human behavior. This concept is expressed by the Arabic verb *haqqa*, the root of the term *muhiqqa*, by which Makki characterizes Rabi'a the Lover as Rabi'a the Sufi. The statement of Rabi'a recorded by Jahiz, 'By God, I am ashamed to ask for the world from the One who owns the world, so how can I ask for the world from one who does not own it?' also expresses this type of judgment. Thus, it is in terms of prioritizing moral and ontological truths (Ar. *tahqiq*) rather than of modern feminist theory that one is most justified in calling Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya a "culture-critic."

In Sufism, knowledge of the outward aspect of things (Ar. *zahir al-ashya'*) is indicated by the term *'ilm*, whereas knowledge of the inner nature of things (Ar. *batin al-ashya'*) is indicated by the term *ma'rifa*.¹²¹ The term *ma'rifa* does not appear in the Qur'an, nor does it figure prominently in Hadith. By contrast, the word *'ilm* appears about 750 times in the Qur'an and includes all forms of knowledge, with special emphasis given to understanding the revelations and signs of God. Although the term *ma'rifa* is not used in the Qur'an, words derived from the Arabic verb *'arafa* ("to know" or "to be familiar with") are used more than 70 times and revolve semantically around the concept of knowledge as recognition.¹²² Sometimes, the past participle *ma'ruf* ("known") is used to designate acts that are both lawful and morally transparent, such as in the phrase, "commanding the good (*al-ma'ruf*) and forbidding evil" (Qur'an 9:71).

The word *ma'rifa* as a term for inner knowledge first began to be used in Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya's lifetime, around the second half of the eighth century CE. Evidence for the use of *ma'rifa* as a technical term in this period can be found in the statement of Abu Hashim al-Sufi (d. 776 CE) that was discussed earlier in this chapter: "Those who truly know God (*ahl al-ma'rifa bi-llah*) are alienated from [the World] and are desirous of the Hereafter." In this

121 John Renard distinguishes these terms by defining *'ilm* as "discursive knowledge," "acquired knowledge," or "traditional knowledge," whereas *ma'rifa* is "experiential knowledge," "infused knowledge," "intimate knowledge," or "mystical knowledge." See idem, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), p. 7.

122 Ibid., pp. 13–14; note that knowledge-as-recognition is considered philosophically to be a "Platonic" concept.

statement, Abu Hashim uses a phrase that can also be translated as the “People of the *Ma'rifa* of God.” In this sense, the term *ma'rifa* denotes both knowledge and familiarity: those who know God in this way are also by implication the “friends” or “protégés” of God (*awliya' Allah*, Qur'an 10:63). This statement and others like it also imply that in Rabi'ā's time *ma'rifa* was used to describe the knowledge obtained through essential asceticism, thus providing a connection between Proto-Sufism and Islamic ascetic traditions.¹²³

A discussion of *ma'rifa* that comes close to how it was likely understood by the “real” Rabi'ā al-'Adawiyya can be found in 'Ali al-Hujwiri's Sufi treatise, *Kashf al-mahjub*.¹²⁴ This work has already been cited for its discussion of the concept of the heart. Hujwiri's treatment of Sufi knowledge (which he terms *ma'rifat Allah*) is also useful for this discussion because he retains the distinction between inward and outward forms of knowledge that characterized the Proto-Sufism of Rabi'ā's generation. For Hujwiri, *al-'ilm bi-llah*, outward knowledge of God, is essential for understanding the outward aspects of religion, such as Islamic law and dogmatic theology. In this sense, it is foundational for all religious knowledge in Islam. By contrast, *ma'rifa* or inward knowledge is a more advanced form of knowledge that comprises the in-depth knowledge of things and their attributes (*ma'rifa 'ilmiyya*), as well as the knowledge of states, contexts and conditions (*ma'rifa haliyya*). In summary, *ma'rifa* thus stands for both in-depth knowledge of the world and metaphysical states of being. It is superior to *'ilm* because it is the most comprehensive form of knowledge. For this reason, it leads the believer to the deepest understanding of God. Although the exoteric *al-'ilm bi-llah* is “the foundation of all blessings in this world and the next,” it is spiritually of lesser value than the esoteric *ma'rifat Allah* because “the worth of everyone is in proportion to *ma'rifat Allah*, and he who is without *ma'rifa* is worth nothing.”¹²⁵

123 John Renard places the first Sufi use of *ma'rifa* in the ninth century CE. He identifies al-Harith al-Muhasibi as the first to make “a systematic effort to establish the foundations of Sufi thought as a legitimate religious discipline” (Ibid., p. 22). However, accounts of Proto-Sufis in works such as Isfahani's *Hilyat al-awliya'* make it clear that an understanding of *ma'rifa* that was very close to the eventual Sufi concept had been developed by the second half of the eighth century CE.

124 See Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub*, pp. 266–77. In what follows, I depart from R.A. Nicholson's English translation of some of Hujwiri's concepts. For example, he translates *'ilm* as “cognition” and *hal* as “feeling.” I find these translations to be superficial, and thus they do not accurately convey the meaning expressed by Hujwiri in the original Arabic-inflected Persian.

125 Ibid., p. 267.

Hujwiri also states that *‘ilm* is a deficient form of knowledge epistemologically because it requires one to “turn away” or distance oneself from the object of knowledge in order to know it. For this reason, all that can be known theologically about God through *‘ilm* are the outward manifestations of divinity, such as His laws, dogmas and divine attributes. However, in *ma‘rifat Allah*, knowledge of God is not limited in this way. As with *‘ilm*, the knowledge denoted by *ma‘rifa* requires a “turning away;” however, in this case knowledge of God is gained not by turning away from the object of knowledge but by “turning away from everything that is *not* God [as the object of knowledge].” Thus, the one who possesses *ma‘rifat Allah* achieves a greater degree of objective distance by turning away from the perspective of the World and by turning toward the perspective of true reality (*al-haqiqa*). In this sense, the epistemological meaning of *ma‘rifa* as a form of in-depth knowledge shares much in common with the intimate knowledge gained by *mahabbat Allāh*, or the Love of God.¹²⁶

Hujwiri’s discussion of *ma‘rifat Allah* is also helpful for understanding the aphorisms of Rabi’ā al-‘Adawiyya that express her essential asceticism. For example, when Rabi’ā is asked in Khargushi’s *Tahdhib al-Asrar* how she has attained her high spiritual station, she replies: “By leaving aside all that does not concern me and by cleaving to the One who always is.”¹²⁷ According to Hujwiri’s theory of *ma‘rifa*, this act would be an excellent example of “turning away from everything that is *not* God.” According to Rabi’ā’s statement, the essential ascetic must reposition herself with respect to the World in order to achieve a more profound perspective on the World.

Hujwiri’s discussion of *ma‘rifa* also helps explain another of Rabi’ā’s aphorisms: “For everything there is a fruit and the fruit of *ma‘rifa* is orientation toward God.”¹²⁸ According to this statement, true knowledge is both a goal and a return. Although orientation toward God is the “fruit” or goal of *ma‘rifa*, it is also the beginning of *ma‘rifa* because one cannot know God until one has turned away from everything other than God. The Sufi notion of orientation toward God is expressed by the verbal noun *iqbal*, which means “turning toward something” or “orienting oneself toward something.” Semantically, this term is related to the Arabic noun *tawba* or “repentance,” which similarly comes from a root that means, “to turn.” For Sufis like Hujwiri as well as for Proto-Sufis like Rabi’ā al-‘Adawiyya, “turning to God in repentance” is the

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 269–71.

¹²⁷ Khargushi, *Tahdhib al-Asrar*, p. 81.

¹²⁸ Sulami, *Early Sufi Women*, pp. 76–7 and Khargushi, *Tahdhib al-Asrar*, p. 49.

first step on the path of essential asceticism. Turning away from the World only makes sense spiritually if one turns toward God in place of the World. In the circular logic of this aphorism, “turning” or spiritual orientation has neither a beginning nor an end. Although the act of turning toward God is supposed to come before knowledge of God, the increase in knowledge of God reinforces and makes permanent the essential ascetic’s “turn” toward the divine.

Sufi doctrinal and hagiographical works that convey traditions about early ascetics and Proto-Sufis indicate that along with the concept of *ma'rifa*, the practice of the invocation of God (*dhikr Allah*) also began to gain importance in the second half of the eighth century CE. Various forms of the verb *dhakara* (“to mention,” “to recall”) occur 290 times in the Qur'an. In addition, several Qur'anic verses in which the noun *dhikr* (“invocation” or “remembrance”) is used, employ this term in ways that resemble Sufi concepts. Two such verses will suffice as examples here: “We did not send down before you aught but a man; so ask the Folk of Remembrance (*ahl al-dhikr*) if you do not know” (Qur'an 16:43); “It is only in the remembrance of God that the heart is at peace” (*ala bi-dhikri Allahi tatma'innu al-qulub*, Qur'an 13:28). The first of these verses refers to a group of people known as the “Folk of Remembrance.” Sufis have long taken this appellation as referring to themselves. As for the second Qur'anic verse, Sufis see it as divine authorization for their practice of *dhikr* as invocation, which is a key characteristic of Sufi devotionism.

Although most references to *dhikr* as a formal practice in Sufi sources were written after the mid-ninth century CE (nearly fifty years after Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya's death), several early ascetics, including Rabi'a herself, have been credited with establishing the practice of *dhikr* as a spiritual discipline. For example, in the chapter on Remembrance and Invocation in *Tahdhib al-asrar*, 'Abd al-Malik al-Khargushi quotes Rabi'a as making the following supplication: “My God, I ask you to make my aspiration in the World my remembrance (*dhikr*) of you in the World; and [to make my aspiration of you] in the Hereafter the vision (*ru'ya*) of you.”¹²⁹ Khargushi also quotes Abu Sulayman al-Darani as saying, “One who knows his Lord (*man 'arafa rabbahu*) finds that his heart is panicked because of the recollection (*dhikr*) of Him. It is preoccupied in service to Him, and it weeps at its mistakes.”¹³⁰ Ibrahim ibn Adham is quoted as saying: “One who does not find three habits (*mawatin*) in his heart finds the door to God locked before him. [These are]:

¹²⁹ Khargushi, *Tahdhib al-asrar*, p. 318.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

recitation of the Qur'an; remembrance (*dhikr*) of God the Great and Glorious; and prayer (*salat*)."¹³¹

These traditions are important both for what they say and for what they do not say. First, Darani's use of the verb *'arafa* indicates that the concept of *ma'rifa* in the sense of "knowing God deeply" may already have been established as a spiritual goal by the time of Rabi'a's death. The same can be said of the correspondence between the knowledge of God (*ma'rifat Allah*) and the remembrance of God (*dhikr Allah*). The fact that Khargushi cites Darani as speaking of *dhikr* is significant, because the early Sufi who is most often quoted on the practice of *dhikr* is Dhu al-Nun al-Misri (d. 859 CE). As we have seen, some early writers allege that Dhu al-Nun was Darani's student. However, it is also important to note that the early mystics of Rabi'a's time do not yet seem to have settled on a common understanding of the meaning of *dhikr* or on how the concept of *dhikr* relates to the concept of *ma'rifa*. Rabi'a's understanding of *dhikr* in the above quotation has to do primarily with the recollection of God's actions in the World. Here *dhikr* connotes remembrance through observation and reflection; as such, it is related to the concept of *tafakkur* ("consideration," "reflection," or "meditation"), which also appears in the discourses of Proto-Sufis around this time. Darani, on the other hand, thinks of *dhikr* as an act of momentary recollection—as if God suddenly comes to mind and startles the worshipper into the awareness of His presence. This is more like a flash of insight. By contrast, for Ibrahim ibn Adham *dhikr* is clearly a form of invocation, for he speaks of *dhikr* as a practice to which the heart becomes accustomed. Nonetheless, despite such differences, all of these statements agree on the implication that *dhikr* occurs in the heart, which is the seat of the spiritual intellect. This provides important circumstantial evidence that the concepts of heart, knowledge, and remembrance were already defining elements of Proto-Sufism at the end of the eighth century CE.

131 Ibid.

RABI‘A FROM NARRATIVE TO MYTH

THE MANY FACES OF ISLAM’S
MOST FAMOUS WOMAN SAINT,
RABI‘A AL-‘ADAWIYYA

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