

CHAPTER ONE

THE BEGINNINGS

The Name

Most accounts of Sufism, including those written by Sufis themselves, open with a discussion of the etymology of this term. Here I will mention only the most common theories of its origins. The word “sufism” is a Latinized derivation from the Arabic root *ṣ-(w)-f*, the meaning of which was disputed already in early Sufi literature. Muslim mystics often trace it to the root *ṣafā* with the general meaning of “purity;” to the phrase *ahl al-ṣuffa* (“the People of the Bench”), that is, the pious and indigent companions of the Prophet who lived in his mosque; or to the *ahl al-ṣaffa*, i.e., those who occupy “[the First] Rank/Row” [in the mosque or in the eyes of God]). However, the most common, if less romantic, etymology points to the Arabic word for “wool” (*ṣūf*).¹ The Arabic verb *taṣawwaf*, which is derived from this noun, means “to put on or to wear a woolen garment.” Hence the verbal noun *taṣawwuf*, “the practice/habit of wearing woolen garments,” which is the native Arabic equivalent of the Latin *S(s)ufismus* and its analogues in various European languages, “Sufi(i)sm” (Eng.), “Sufitums” or “Sufik” (Ger.), “soufisme” (Fr.), “sufizm” (Rus.), etc. The Muslim mystic is usually called *ṣūfī* or *mutaṣawwif*, pl. *ṣūfiyya* or *mutaṣawwifa*. The normative literature of Sufism routinely describes the Prophet and some of his Companions, who were dissatisfied with the outward observance of the religious law and engaged in self-imposed strictures, as the first Sufis. However, the term does not seem to have gained wide currency until the first half of the third/ninth century, when it came to be applied to the Muslim ascetics and recluses in Iraq, Syria and, possibly, Egypt. Among the first ascetics in the Prophet’s immediate retinue, whom the Sufi tradition presents as Sufis *avant la lettre*, are Abū Dharr (d. 32/652), Abū ‘l-Dardā’ (d. 32/652), his wife Umm al-Dardā’, Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 35/655 or 37/657), Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yaman (d. 37/657) and ‘Imrān b. al-Ḥusayn

¹ See, e.g., A. J. Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, Cambridge, reprint, 1991, pp. 5–11.

al-Khuzāʿī (d. 53/672 or 54/673). To tie them firmly to the Sufi movement, its later exponents credited all of them with wearing wool,² an assertion that critics of later Sufism, e.g., Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), vigorously denied.³

In Islamic literature not directly affiliated with Sufism, these individuals as well the pious men and women of the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsīd era (ca. 51/670–ca. 185/800) were commonly referred to as *nussāk* (devout [men]), *zuhhād* (world renouncers or ascetics), *ʿubbād* (worshippers)—terms that roughly correspond to the Latin concept of *virī religiosi*. More than just fulfilling their religious duties, they paid close attention to the underlying motives of their actions and sought to impregnate them with a deeper spiritual meaning. This goal was achieved through a meticulous contemplation on the Qurʾānic revelation, a thorough imitation of the Prophet's piety, introspection as well as voluntary poverty and self-mortification. Strenuous efforts aimed at self-purification and self-improvement (*jihād*, *mujāhada*) were sometimes accompanied by voluntary military service in the Arab-Byzantine frontier region (*al-thugūr*), where many renowned early ascetics settled in search of a pure life and licit livelihood or, as the case may be, martyrdom “in the path of God.” The acts of penitence and self-renunciation, which their practitioners justified by references to certain Qurʾānic verses and the Prophet's utterances,⁴ may be seen as a reaction against Islam's newly acquired wealth that often led many faithful to abandon the frugal ways and heroic self-denial associated with the original Muslim community in Medina. The secular pastimes and lavish lifestyles of the Umayyad rulers and their officials were seen by many as contrary to the original Islamic ideals. While some religio-political factions, such as the Khārijīs and the militant wing of the Shīʿī movement, tried to topple the “impious” government through armed struggle, others opted for a passive resistance and a quietist attitude that they presented as a complete surrender to the will of God. Even though their exemplary piety and scrupulosity were sometimes interpreted as a challenge to the secular or military authorities,⁵ they were by and large tolerated as long

² See, e.g., Ibrāhīm Basyūnī, *Nashʾat al-taṣawwuf al-islāmī*, Cairo, 1969, pp. 11–12.

³ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs*, Cairo, n.d., pp. 161–165.

⁴ For a fine selection of such verses and prophetic logia see, e.g., Smith, *Early Mysticism*, pp. 125–152; cf. Arberry, *Sufism*, pp. 15–30.

⁵ E.g., ʿAmir b. ʿAbd Qays al-ʿAnbarī, whose defiant uprightness, frugality and unconventional vegetarian diet aroused the suspicions of his superiors, who reported

as they did not agitate against the state. They argued that the truly God-fearing person should try to save himself by withdrawing from the overbearing world and its sinful and unjust ways. As an outward sign of this pietistic withdrawal, some of them adopted a distinct dress code, which often featured a rough woolen robe. This robe set them apart from people wearing more expensive silk or cotton. Wittingly or not, the early Muslim *religiosi* thereby came to resemble Christian monks and ascetics, who also donned coarse woolen clothes as a symbol of penitence and contempt for worldly luxuries.⁶ In view of its strong Christian connotations, some early Muslim authorities sometimes frowned upon the wearing of wool. Others condemned it as an ostentatious display of poverty, which, they argued, implied that God was not adequately providing for the needs of his servants. In spite of their protests, the custom of wearing a woolen robe caught on with many piety-minded Muslims in Syria and Iraq. By metonymy, the name of the material was transferred onto those who made the habit of wearing it. Originally applied to itinerant outsiders (possibly in a derogatory sense), by the end of the eighth century C.E., in the central lands of Islam the nick-name *ṣūfiyya* ("wool-people" or "wool-wearers") became a self-designation of those given to ascetic life and mystical contemplation. This term did not, however, meet with a quick and universal acceptance. Thus, in Khurāsān and Transoxania, mystics of speculative slant were for a long time known as the "wise men" (*hukamā'*; sing. *hakīm*), "those who know [God]," or "gnostics" (*ʿarīfūn*; sing. *ʿarīf*). As for the more practice-oriented individuals, in the eastern lands of Islam, as in Iraq and Syria, they were called "the poor" (Arab. *faqīr*; Pers. *darwīsh*) or "the devotees" (*ṣuḥḥād*). In the East, ascetic discipline and world-renouncing piety were cultivated by some local sects, most notably, the Karrāmiyya of Khurāsān and Transoxania and the Malāmatiyya of Nishāpūr, which were suppressed by, or incorporated into, the Iraqi-based Sufi movement under the Saljuqs.⁷

him to the caliph Mu'āwiya, Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, Berlin and New York, vol. 2, 1992, pp. 87–88.

⁶ See Arthur Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic Documents Regarding Legislation Relevant to Syrian Asceticism*, Stockholm, 1960, pp. 20, 58, 59, 101, etc. cf. van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. 2, pp. 88, 94, 610, etc.

⁷ J. Chabbi, "Réflexions sur le soufisme iranien primitif," in: *Journal Asiatique*, vol. 266/1–2 (1978), pp. 37–55; B. Radtke, "Theologen und Mystiker in Hūrāsān und Transoxanien," in: *ZDMG*, vol. 136/1 (1986), pp. 536–569.

Assumptions and Goals

While most of early Muslim ascetics emphasized personal purity, moral uprightness, fear of God and strict compliance with the letter of the Divine Law, there were those who carried their search of God's pleasure a bit further. The latter group, who can be viewed as the forerunners of the Sufi movement, strove to achieve a psychological and experiential proximity with God through self-imposed deprivations (especially, abstinence from food and sex), self-effacing humility, supererogatory religious practices, long vigils, pious meditation on the meaning of the Qur'ānic text and a single-minded concentration on the divine object. In their ardent search for intimacy with God they sought inspiration in the following Qur'ānic verses: "If My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close: I listen to the prayer of every supplicant, when he calleth on me" (2:185/186); "We are nearer to him [man] than his jugular vein" (50:15/16), and "Withersoever ye turn, there is the Face of God" (2:144/145). Likewise, the first Muslim mystics pondered on those Islamic traditions (*ḥadīth*), which pointed to God's immanent presence in this world. Thus, in one tradition, God says: "I am present when My servant thinks of Me. . . . And whosoever seeks to approach me by a span, I approach him by a cubit; and he who seeks to approach me by one cubit, I will seek to approach him by two fathoms; and whoever walks towards me, I will run towards him."⁸ In another popular *ḥadīth*, the Prophet encourages believers to serve God as if they see Him, to count themselves among the dead, to know that the little quantity that suffices them is better for them than the abundance that distracts them [from the worship of their Lord] and to realize that a pious deed persists forever, while a transgression is never forgotten [by God].⁹ In meditating on these and similar scriptural passages and on the precepts attributed to the Prophet's pious followers, the representatives of the nascent Sufi movement developed a strict code of behavior which encouraged repentance, abstinence from worldly delights, frugality and voluntary poverty. The latter occasionally had an underlying political intent, as some early ascetics consciously abandoned gainful professions or

⁸ Smith, *Studies*, p. 145.

⁹ Wakī' b. al-Jarrāh, *Kitāb al-zuhd*. Ed. by 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Faryawānī, 2d edition, Riyadh, 1994, vol. 1, p. 234.

even refused to inherit in protest against the perceived injustices and corruption of the Umayyad regime.¹⁰ Since this passive protest and withdrawal from active social life and economic activity did not normally lead to active resistance, the powers-that-be saw no reason in cracking down on the early world-renouncers, focusing instead on activist religious groupings, such as the Khārījīs and some radical Shīʿīs. The ascetics, on the other hand, were allowed to practice self-imposed strictures which they deemed as preparation for the imminent Final Reckoning. Although cognizant of their shortcomings in fulfilling the Divine Commands, the proto-Sufis placed their faith in God's limitless grace and mercy, which, they hoped, would assure salvation on the Day of Judgement to those who strove on the path of God. The emphasis on the more benign aspect of Divine Majesty gradually led some ascetics to speak of the love of God, citing the Qur'ānic verse 5:54/57: "He [God] loves them, and they love Him." Inspired by this and similar verses and traditions, the early mystics began to celebrate their longing for the Divine Beloved in poems and utterances of exceptional beauty and verve. It was this exalted love and longing which, in their eyes, justified the austerities to which they subjected themselves in order to demonstrate their faithfulness to the heavenly Beloved. In the teachings and statements of the early mystics, the feeling of intimacy with God was often mixed with an intense fear of divine retribution for the slightest slippage in thought or action exhibited by God's servant or even for his momentary neglectfulness of divine grace (*ghafla*). Also prominent in early mystical speculations was the idea of an eternal covenant between God and the human race prior to their creation as individual human beings endowed with sinful and restive bodies. Basing themselves on the Qur'ān (7:172), Sufi theorists described the emergence from "the reins of the sons of Adam" of the human souls in the form of specs of light. The specs bear testimony to the sovereignty of their Lord in pre-eternity and promise him their faithfulness and devotion. However, once the human souls have acquired their bodies and found themselves in the corrupt world of false idols and appearances, they forget their promise and succumb to temptations. The mystic's goal therefore consists in "recapturing the rapture" of the day of covenant in an effort to return to the state of

¹⁰ B. Reinert, *Die Lehre vom tawakkul in der klassischen Sufik*, Berlin, 1968, p. 188; van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. 1, pp. 228–229.

primordial purity and faithfulness that characterized the soul-specs before their actual creation.¹¹ In an attempt to achieve this goal the mystic had to contend not only with the corruptive trappings of the world, but also with his own base self (*nafs*), which Sufis see as the seat of egoistic evil lusts and passions impeding their progress towards God. It was therefore his task to look into himself and exercise self-restraint, with the aim of doing away with the self and all the impulses emanating from it. For as long as the self was enduring, true Islam, true surrender to God's will was not possible. In what follows I will demonstrate how these general tenets manifested themselves in the lives and intellectual legacy of those whom later Sufi literature portrayed, probably inaccurately, as the first Sufis.

The Archetypal Sufi: al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī

While later Sufi writers routinely attributed ascetic and mystical tendencies to the leading representatives of the early Muslim community and even to the Prophet himself, they nevertheless did not deny that "Sufi science" (*ʿilm al-taṣawwuf*) *per se* emerged among the second and third generations of Muslims. Of these, they usually cite the great ascetic and preacher from Baṣra named al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (21/642–110/728). He belonged to the generation of the "successors" (*tābiʿūn*), that is, those early Muslims who came after the Prophet's Companions (*ṣaḥāba*). His father, whose name was originally Pērōz, was taken prisoner during the Arab conquest of Iraq, and is said to have been brought to Medina, where he was manumitted by his owner, an Arab woman whose identity cannot be definitely established. While in Medina, Pērōz married a girl named Khayra who gave birth to al-Ḥasan in 642. He grew up in the Ḥijāz. In 42/662, after the famous Battle of Šiffin, in which the supporters of the fourth "Rightly-Guided" caliph ʿAlī clashed with the Syrian army of the Umayyad pretender Muʿāwiya, al-Ḥasan moved to Baṣra. There he joined an Arab expeditionary force and took part in the conquest of eastern Iran (43/663 and the following years). Upon his return from the military expeditions, he settled in Baṣra, where he lived

¹¹ G. Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam*, Berlin, 1980, pp. 145–165.

until his death in 110/728. Al-Ḥasan's fame rests on the sincerity and uprightness of his religious personality which made a deep impression on his contemporaries and won him many followers. He was, above all, famous for his fiery sermons in which he not only warned his fellow citizens against committing sins, but also commanded them to regulate their whole life in anticipation of the Last Judgement, as he did himself. These sermons, of which only fragments have been preserved, are among the best surviving specimens of early Arabic prose. Al-Ḥasan's vivid images of hell and his striking antitheses are masterpieces of religious rhetoric. Many later writers, especially al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 194/809) and al-Mubarrad, quote them together with the famous speeches of the political leaders of the Umayyad period as models of hortatory style; many of his sayings are included into the dictionaries of the greatest Arab quotations. Here are two famous examples: *ḥādithū ḥādhihi 'l-qulūba fa-innahā sarī'atu 'l-duthūr* ("Re-polish these hearts, for they are quick to grow rusty!"); *ij'al dunyāka 'l-qanṭara tajūzu 'alayhā walā ta'muruhā* ("Make this world a bridge over which you cross but upon which you do not build!").

Al-Ḥasan's judgements of the Umayyad state and its representatives are not, as is usually the case, confessions of allegiance to a political party. Rather they flow naturally from his religious principles. He criticized fearlessly the Umayyad caliphs of his time as well as the Umayyad governors of Iraq. After al-Ḥasan dared to attack the founding of Wāsiṭ by the caliph's trusted lieutenant, the fearsome Ḥajjāj, who sought to achieve complete control of the restive Muslim population of Kūfa and Baṣra, he was forced into hiding until Ḥajjāj's death in 96/714. At the same time, al-Ḥasan disapproved of those who sought to depose the evil governors through violence (*taghyīr al-munkar*). When the followers of the rebel Ibn al-Ash'ath (82/700) invited al-Ḥasan to join their struggle against the caliphal "oppressors," he excused himself by explaining that the violent actions of tyrants are a punishment inflicted by God upon his servants. They therefore should not be opposed by the sword but be endured with patience and fortitude. In his sermons al-Ḥasan constantly warned against worldly attitudes and attachment to earthly possessions: men are on the way to death and those who are already dead are only waiting for the others to follow. He was suspicious of those who amassed riches and even rejected a wealthy suitor for his daughter's hand. Nor did he accept the uncultivated land which was being distributed free by the authorities among the inhabitants of Baṣra: "If

I could have everything that lies between the two bridges for a basketful of earth, that would not please me.” Al-Ḥasan referred to the worldling, whose faith sat lightly on him and who sinned without concern, as “hypocrite” (*munāfiq*)—one who hovers midway between faith and unbelief. He judged sins strictly (*tashdīd al-mā‘āṣi*) and considered the sinner to be fully responsible for his actions. Hence he denied that one can exculpate himself by saying that God created all actions—a position that was interpreted by some as his support of the doctrine which emphasized human free will over against divine determination of events (*qadariyya*). However, his exact stance on this hotly debated issue remained elusive. In his famous letter to the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik, who supported the predestinarian view which implicitly justified the rule of his dynasty, al-Ḥasan shows a remarkable ability to skirt potentially divisive problems, without, however, overtly sacrificing his basic principles. Duly respectful of the caliphal authority, he reserved the right to criticize it for what he saw as violations of the divinely ordained order of things. He exhorted his listeners to practice humility and self-scrutiny. The latter was necessary in order to bring out the real motives of one’s words or actions and thus to make them more sincere. This psychological analysis was to become the cornerstone of Sufi self-discipline and introspection which were brought to fruition in the work of al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857).¹² Al-Ḥasan’s brotherly feeling towards his contemporaries (*ukhuwwa*) and his altruism (*īthār*) were also appropriated by later Sufis as an attitude conducive to the mystical goal. They became the foundation of the doctrine of chivalry (*futuwwa*)—a hallmark of many Sufi associations in the subsequent epochs. Another feature that made al-Ḥasan so attractive to later Sufis was his relative disregard for the exacting standards of *ḥadīth* transmission, which, in the eyes of pedantic *ḥadīth* experts, determined the overall worth of a Muslim scholar. His own sayings were sometimes circulated as *ḥadīths*, and he did not protest. Nor was he interested in reconstructing and documenting the chain of transmitters of any given statement attributed to the Prophet or his Companions—an attitude that caused some later *ḥadīth* scholars to treat him as a “weak” authority prone to “fibbing” (*tadlīs*). Since many later Sufis were themselves accused of carelessness in this matter, they argued that al-Ḥasan was, like themselves, interested in the “kernel” rather than the “husks” of religion. No

¹² On him see below.

wonder that his name appears in the spiritual genealogies (*silsilas*) of many Sufi orders, and he is cited innumerable times in moral works of exhortation. The influence of his ascetic piety persisted in Baṣra and beyond. Abū Ṭalib al-Makkī (d. 382/993 or 386/996), a classic of later Sufi literature, stated in his “Nourishment of the Hearts” (*Qūt al-qulūb*) that al-Ḥasan was “our leader (*imām*) in this doctrine . . . and we walk in his footsteps and we follow his ways and from his lamp we have our light.”¹³ The Sufi apologetics aside, his real relation with the nascent ascetic and mystical movement in Islam is difficult to ascertain. Some contemporary evidence indicates his reluctance to commit himself fully to any one religious or intellectual trend in Islam, including proto-Sufism.¹⁴ His awesome stature as the leading exponent of Islamic tradition has made him a convenient figurehead for various later religious schools and movements.

The Accumulation of Ascetic and Mystical Lore in the second/eighth and early third/ninth Centuries

Whether or not al-Ḥasan was indeed the founding father of the Sufi movement and the Sufi *avant la lettre*, his passionate preaching of high moral and ethical standards won him numerous followers such as Yazīd b. Abān al-Raqāshī (d. between 101/729 and 121/738), Muḥammad b. Wāsi‘ (d. 127/744), Mālik b. Dīnār (d. 128/745), Farqad al-Sabakhī (d. 132/749), ‘Abd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd (d. ca. 133/750), Dāwūd al-Ṭā’ī (d. 165/781), and many others. Coming from a wide variety of backgrounds, these men are described in the sources as professional Qur’ān-reciters (*qurrā’*), pious fighters for religion and frontier warriors (*nussāk mujāhidūn*), small-time traders, weavers, scribes and Qur’ān copyists. All of them shared a strong repugnance to worldly delights, social injustices, oppressive powers-that-be, luxury, and hypocrisy. Their actions and utterances exhibit a common fear of divine retribution for the slightest moral lapse and an exaggerated sense of sin that they sought to alleviate through constant penance, mortification of the flesh, contrition and mourning.¹⁵ This self-effacing, God-fearing attitude often found an outward

¹³ Abū Ṭalib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, Cairo, 1310 A.H., vol. 1, p. 149.

¹⁴ Ibrāhīm Basyūnī, *Nash‘at al-taṣawwuf*, pp. 12–13.

¹⁵ For the authoritative statements that encourage the practice of weeping and self-recrimination see Wakī‘ b. al-Jarrāḥ, *Kitāb al-zuhd*, vol. 1, pp. 248–263.

expression in constant weeping which earned some of the early ascetics the name “weepers” (*bakkāʿūn*).¹⁶ Already at that stage, some of them show the awareness that their exemplary piety, moral uprightness, and spiritual fervor place them above the herd of ordinary believers who were unable to overcome their simplest passions of the moment, not to mention the temptations and complex moral dilemmas which God deliberately placed before his elect friends to test the strength of their resolve. Hence the idea of friendship with, or proximity to, God (*walāya*), which the early ascetics and mystics traced back to several Qurʾānic phrases suggesting the existence of a category of God’s servants whose exemplary piety and high moral integrity have secured them God’s special favor in this and future life (e.g., 10:62; 18:65).¹⁷ It is in this narrow circle of the early Muslim ascetics that we witness the emergence of an elitist, charismatic piety, which was gradually translated into moral authority and, eventually, into a significant social force. In that early epoch, however, the social ramifications of this ascetic and moralizing tendency were rather limited. By and large, this accentuated God-fearing attitude was confined to a small group of religious *virtuosi*, whose search for personal salvation through constant meditation on their sins and extraordinary ascetic feats was too individualistic to win them a broad popular following. Nevertheless, the arduous sermonizing and exemplary uprightness of al-Ḥasan’s disciples secured them a relatively wide acceptance among the population of Baṣra and beyond. Firmly rooted in the Qurʾān and the tradition, their pious preaching and admonitions encountered no significant opposition from either Muslim scholars or secular rulers. Their moralizing and penitential discourses often exhibit the influence of the Torah and the Gospels—an influence most of them did not care to conceal. It is especially prominent in the sayings ascribed to Mālīk b. Dīnār,¹⁸ a renowned preacher and moralist of Baṣra, who called upon his listeners to “fight against [your] desires just as [you] fight against [your] enemies.” In a similar vein, his contemporary, the pious weaver Farqad al-Sabakhī, frequently quoted Jesus (ʿĪsā) and the Torah in his pious exhortations. He was, incidentally, an Armenian Christian, who embraced Islam later in life and had a profound knowledge of the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures.¹⁹

¹⁶ See F. Meier, “Bakkāʿ,” EI, vol. 1, 959–61.

¹⁷ See, e.g., van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. 2, p. 90.

¹⁸ R. Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder des Sufismus*, Wiesbaden, 1995, vol. 1, p. 60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–53.

Interestingly, Farqad's woolen robe was denounced by a visitor from Kūfa as a sign of his "residual" Christianity (*naṣrānīyya*),²⁰ in an episode indicating that, in his age, the wearing of wool was still perceived as something foreign to Islam. This impression is confirmed by Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110/728), a celebrated scholar contemporary with al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, who criticized the wearing of wool as a deliberate imitation of the Christian monastic custom. For him, this habit was incompatible with Muḥammad's preference for cotton²¹ and, moreover, showed a lack of gratitude for God's bounty. Later on, similar misgivings were voiced by Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778), a prominent early expert on the Islamic Law, tradition (*ḥadīth*) and Qur'ān interpretation, who viewed the ostentatious wearing of wool as an "innovation" in religion (*bid'ā*).²² On the other hand, Mālik b. Dīnār declared that he was not fit to wear wool (*ṣūf*) because he had not yet achieved the level of personal purity (*ṣafā'*) which characterizes the perfect servant of God.²³ These and similar statements indicate that, contrary to what later Sufi authors try to make us believe, neither the Sufi devotional style, as we know it from later works, nor its outward symbol, the woolen garment, met with universal approval. In fact, the early ascetics who adopted this dress code seem to have been in the minority, especially since the above criticisms came from the men, whom the later Sufi tradition invariably presented as "Sufis." The woolen habit was relatively common in Baṣra and, to a lesser extent, in Kūfa, which seems to have been home to the first ascetics known as *sufis*: Abū Hāshim (d. 160/776) and 'Abdak (fl. in the second half of the second/eighth century). Its link to Christian monasticism, especially to its Nestorian version,²⁴ was obvious to the Muslims of Iraq. Yet, this did not prevent the first Sufis from making the woolen tunic a hallmark of their devotional style. On the contrary, they appear to have been deliberately imitating Christian monks: early ascetics, such as 'Āmir b. 'Abd (al-) Qays, fl. ca. 650, Abū Bakr b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 94/713) and

²⁰ Abū Nu'aym al-Isfahānī, *Hilyat al-awliyā' wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyā'*, Cairo, 1932–1938, vol. 4, 221–222; cf. Ch. Pellat, *Le milieu basrien et la formation de Ḡāhiz*, Paris, 1953, p. 101.

²¹ Arberry, *Sufism*, p. 35.

²² Abū Nu'aym, *Hilya*, vol. 7, p. 33 and van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. 1, p. 224.

²³ Margaret Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad*, London, 1935, p. 69.

²⁴ Vööbus, *Syrian and Arabic Documents*, pp. 20, 58, 101, etc.; Ogén, "Did the Term *ṣūfī* . . .", pp. 40–45.

ʿĪsā b. Ṣabīḥ al-Mudrār (d. 227/841), were often reverently referred to as “the monks of this community.” From Kūfa and Baṣra the practice of wearing wool and the style of piety, which it had come to symbolize, spread to Syria and Baghdad. Eventually it gave name to the ascetic and mystical movement that gained momentum in the early third/ninth century.

In the eastern lands of the Caliphate, the spread of Baghdad-style Sufism was delayed by almost one century by the resistance of local ascetic groups, notably the Karrāmiyya of Khurāsān and Transoxania, whose leaders discouraged their followers from adopting the “foreign” custom and name. Little is known about the style of piety peculiar to these groups, which were later suppressed by, or incorporated into, the Sufi movement.

ʿAbd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd

Among al-Ḥasan’s numerous followers ʿAbd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd (d. ca. 133/750) gained special prominence through his public sermons that emphasized humility and scrupulosity in food and conduct. A professional preacher (*qāṣṣ*) famous for his eloquence, he painted vivid pictures of the Judgement Day, calling upon his listeners to prepare themselves for a face-to-face encounter with God. Each person’s righteousness and record of good works, he argued, will determine the clarity of this beatific vision. Some of his statements imply that the righteous may actually experience the delights of paradise in this life as a reward for their sincere and disinterested worship of God.²⁵ According to ʿAbd al-Wāḥid, God imparts to his righteous friends (*awliyāʾ*, sing. *walī*) the “internal,” secret knowledge (*ʿilm al-bāṭin*) of himself and of the world, which he conceals from the rest of his creatures, including the angels. This sacred trust elevates God’s friends above other mortals, placing them just beneath the prophets.²⁶ Later Sufi theorists juxtaposed this “internal” knowledge with the so-called “external” one (*ʿilm al-zāhir*), that is, traditional Islamic sciences, such as the Qurʾān and its commentary, the authoritative tradition (*ḥadīth*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The “external” knowledge was viewed by

²⁵ Abū Nuʿaym, *Ḥilya*, vol. 6, pp. 157–158.

²⁶ B. Radtke (ed.), *Adab al-mulūk: Ein Handbuch zur islamischen Mystik aus dem 4./10. Jahrhundert*, Beirut, 1991, pp. 34–35 (Arabic text).

the Sufis as inferior to *ʿilm al-bāṭin*—an assumption that aroused the ire of many Muslim traditionalists who revered the letter of the Divine Law. ʿAbd al-Wāḥid belonged to the category of ascetics whom the sources describe as “weepers.” These were the people who wept profusely over their sins or out of fear of God (*khashayt Allāh*) and uncertainty about the divine verdict to be passed on them on the Judgement Day.²⁷ On the more personal level, weeping could be caused by one’s feeling of weakness and humility before God as well as compassion for those who strayed from the right path or for the dead who are no longer able to better their fate in the afterlife. Through constant mourning, these “beggars of the spirit” hoped to obtain the good will of God in remitting, at least partly, their future punishments. Their weeping finds a striking parallel in the early Christian concept of *gratia lacrimarum*, which characterized many Coptic and Syrian monks, such as Shenute (Shenoudi), Ephraem the Syrian, John of Ephesus and Isaac of Nineveh.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, ʿAbd al-Wāḥid’s pietistic exhortations occasionally mention Christian monks whose deep disdain for this world and its sinful inhabitants he found praiseworthy and encouraged his followers to emulate.²⁹ Like the Christian monks, they should keep themselves entirely apart from the world by forming a closely-knit community that was united by the common desire to pursue the path of God in very truth.³⁰

It was with this goal in mind that ʿAbd al-Wāḥid founded the first Sufi “cloister” (*duwayra*) on the island of ʿAbbādān at the mouth of the Shaṭṭ al-ʿArab.³¹ Whether ʿAbd al-Wāḥid was indeed its founder or simply occasional resident, ʿAbbādān indeed became a chief training ground for Iraqi ascetics. Originally a military outpost against sea raiders, it was manned mostly by pious volunteers for the religion (*ghuzāt*; sing. *ghāzī*), who combined military service with acts of worship and supererogatory piety. ʿAbbādān’s commandant, Rabīʿ b. Ṣabīḥ, was a famed fighter for religion who perished on a military

²⁷ L. Massignon, *Recueil de textes inédits concernant l'histoire de la mystique en pays d'Islam*, Paris, 1929, p. 5.

²⁸ F. Meier, “Bakkā”, EI, vol. 1, p. 960; Margaret Smith, *Studies*, p. 25, and 126–127.

²⁹ *Hilya*, vol. 6, p. 155.

³⁰ Smith, *Studies*, p. 185.

³¹ The existence of the first Sufi “monastery” (*khānaqā*) at Ramla (Palestine), which was allegedly constructed by Abū Hāshim al-Ṣūfī in the first decades of the second/eighth century, is impossible to ascertain, see F. Meier, *Abū Saʿīd-i Abū l-Ḥayr (357–440/967–1049): Wirklichkeit und Legende*, Leiden and Tehran, 1976, pp. 302–304.

expedition against “infidel” Indians in 161/777, during the reign of the caliph al-Mahdī. A pious man, who, like ‘Abd al-Wāḥid, studied under al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Rabīʿ is said to have imposed upon his garrison a number of supererogatory fasts and vigils. Additionally, the inhabitants of ‘Abbādān engaged in the constant recitation of God’s name (*dhikr*) which later become a keynote of Sufi ritual practice. Whoever was the real founder of the Sufi cloister at ‘Abbādān, he certainly made it a major attraction for *jihād*-minded Muslim ascetics who flocked there from far and wide. When ‘Abbādān lost its strategic significance, it became a refuge for Iraqi world-renouncers. It was visited by such great heroes of the later Sufi literature as Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 215/830), Bishr al-Hāfi (d. 227/841), Sarī al-Saqāṭī (d. 251/867), Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896) as well as the great Qur’ān commentator Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767 or 159/775),³² whose exegetical work played an important role in “the birth of the mystical language of Islam.” ‘Abd al-Wāḥid left many disciples: some of them distinguished themselves as accomplished ascetics. Among them was Aḥmad al-Hujaymī (d. in the late second/eighth century), who is credited with the establishment of the first ascetic lodge in Baṣra.³³ Funded through a charitable donation, it housed many of al-Ḥasan’s and ‘Abd al-Wāḥid’s disciples in Baṣra, assuring the continuity of their teaching.

*Variety of Devotional Styles: Ibrāhīm Ibn Adham, Ibn al-Mubārak and
Fuḍayl Ibn ‘Iyād*

About the same time, we witness the emergence and spread of ascetic groups in the garrison towns and fortresses along the Byzantine-Muslim frontier in Syria and upper Mesopotamia. This area, known as al-Thughūr (“Marches”), was home to two great representatives of the next generation of Muslim ascetics: Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 161/778) and Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797). Coming from the eastern lands of the Caliphate, they settled in the Marches in search of “a pure and licit livelihood” (*ḥalāl maḥd*). Their presence in the area, which was a scene of fierce struggle between the Muslims and the Christians, further illustrates an intimate link between the nascent

³² Van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. 2, pp. 102–106.

³³ Meier, *Abū Saʿīd*, pp. 304–305.

ascetic movement and what the sources describe as the *ribāṭ* and *jihād*, that is, residence and voluntary military service on the borders of Islam. In addition to martyrdom, life in the Thughūr offered a welcome escape from the increasingly overbearing caliphal state for the “knights of the prayer niche” (*fursān al-miḥrāb*) who were anxious to dissociate themselves completely from the “tyranny” of its “impious” rulers. The fervid atmosphere of self-denial and martyrdom that characterized life in the frontier territory produced a class of warrior-monks who combined warfare against the Byzantine enemy with spectacular acts of “harsh worship,” charity and self-imposed poverty.³⁴ It was there that the piety of the fighters for faith reached its peak: their incessant search for purity, especially in dietary matters, caused them to reject even those things which are usually permitted under the Divine Law.

Ibrāhīm Ibn Adham

A typical representative of this extreme world-renouncing piety is Ibrāhīm Ibn Adham.³⁵ A native of Balkh (presently in Afghanistan), whom later legends portray as heir apparent to the local ruler,³⁶ he had experienced a sudden conversion during a hunting trip. Shaken by the heavenly voice that commanded him to abandon his “sinful ways,” Ibn Adham is said to have abandoned kingship for the life of a vagabond and set out on a journey to the west. During his life-long peregrinations, he was “eating [what he earned from] the labor of his own hand,” that is, reaping, gleanings or grinding corn, or tending orchards. When he was unable to procure a licit livelihood, he fasted.³⁷ In addition to ascetic precepts, his teaching emphasized a constant meditation (*murāqaba*), contrition, sadness (*kamad*), Divine friendship (*khulla*), and gnosis (*maʿrifa*).³⁸ They were to become standard in the later Sufi tradition. Having settled in Syria, on the border with Byzantium, Ibn Adham took part in several naval and land expeditions, on the last of which he died “[of a decease] of the

³⁴ M. Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War*, New Haven, CT, 1996, pp. 107–134.

³⁵ For his biography and teaching see Gramlich, *Alle Vorbilder*, vol. 1, pp. 135–282.

³⁶ According to his earliest biographers he came from “a pure Arab stock,” Radtke, “Theologen,” p. 539.

³⁷ Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence*, p. 126, cf. al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 13.

³⁸ Smith, *An Early Mystic*, p. 73.

belly.” When he could not find a food that he considered “clean,” he walked hungry or ingested clay and sand. In an effort to avoid popular acclaim and the enthusiastic crowds that flocked to him in search of his blessing, Ibrāhīm went out to live in the desert. While there, “he fell in with Christian anchorites,” who instructed him in their “inner wisdom,” or “gnosis” (*maʿrifa*), which gives its possessor power over his fellow believers.³⁹ As M. Bonner pointed out, Ibrāhīm’s fasting and eating of earth springs from the ascetic fear of the world as the source of pollution. Abstinence from food and social intercourse (Ibrāhīm is said to have sought an employment that would allow him to stay away from people, such as, for instance, guarding one’s orchard during the night) was deemed to reduce the intake of this pollution to a minimum. In his own words, “whoever wishes to repent must abandon his oppressive ways, and cease mixing with the people.” Paradoxically, Ibrāhīm’s radical aversion to the world and its inhabitants, his voluntary poverty and the divine wisdom that he achieved through spectacular deprivations gained him the popularity that he had been so anxious to avoid. In spite of his fear of publicity, he acquired a wide and enthusiastic following who aspired to emulate his stringent ways. These “devotees of harsh worship” formed a recognizable group whose obsession with purity, to the extent of identifying the supererogatory as the norm, set them apart not only from the Muslim community at large but from the other ascetics of the frontier as well.⁴⁰ Ibrāhīm’s asceticism was described by R. A. Nicholson as one of “quietist and practical type,” which “had not crossed the borderline that divides asceticism from mysticism.” Whether this statement can be sustained in the absence of a crisp distinction between ascetic and mystical piety and of the original works by the early ascetics,⁴¹ Ibrāhīm b. Adham was re-imagined by later Sufi authors as a paragon of, and a chief spokesman for, the nascent mystical movement.

³⁹ Arberry, *Sufism*, pp. 36–37 and Bonner, *op. cit.*, pp. 128–129.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 130 and pp. 159–184.

⁴¹ For, in my view, an unsuccessful attempt to establish a crisp chronological and conceptual borderline between the two see C. Melchert, “The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.,” *SIU*, vol. 83/1 (1996), pp. 51–70.

Ibn al-Mubārak

A more accommodating, inner-worldly oriented type of piety is exemplified by the Khurāsānī devotee ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak,⁴² who is credited with great feats of arms in the holy war against the Byzantine Christians. Although his later biographers invariably stressed his exemplary piety and abstinence from worldly delights, he was primarily famous for his active “striving on the path of God” (*jihād*) and superior physical strength. These qualities made him a formidable warrior and a popular military leader. A role model and a source of inspiration for his numerous friends and comrades-in-arms, who insisted that his virtues “were never united in any man of learning” of the epoch,⁴⁴ Ibn al-Mubārak represents an activist, inner-worldly oriented asceticism that was quite distinct from that pursued by Ibn Adham and his followers. Not only did he disapprove the idle and slothful ascetics he encountered in Baghdad, he also actively encouraged his followers to engage in a gainful employment, especially in trade and the crafts. He himself was a successful merchant, who generously lavished his wealth on the Muslim volunteer fighters of the frontier and provided for indigent Muslim pilgrims to Mecca.⁴⁴ A prolific writer and *ḥadīth* collector (*muḥaddith*), Ibn al-Mubārak is famous for his “Book of Renunciation [Asceticism]” (*Kitāb al-zuhd*), one of the earliest, and probably the most comprehensive, works of this genre. *Kitāb al-zuhd* is a collection of the *ḥadīth* and pious dicta, which are carefully selected to emphasize the world-renouncing attitude of the Prophet, of his family, of the Companions and the Successors as well as of those Muslim devotees who came in their wake. Similar to the *zuhd* collections by Zā’ida b. Qudāma, Wakī‘ b. al-Jarrāḥ (d. 197/812) and Asad b. Mūsā (d. 212/827), this work contains hundreds of pious aphorisms, moral and ethical precepts which became the building blocks of the later Sufi tradition. As the other works of this genre, Ibn al-Mubārak’s *Kitāb al-zuhd* praises humility, patience, penitence, trust in God, hospitality, vigils, silence, poverty and weeping, while strongly condemning avarice, envy, anger, selfishness, and other vices. Yet Ibn al-Mubārak was careful to steer

⁴² Some sources described him as a native of Marv (Central Asia), see Reinert, *Die Lehre*, p. 309; Arberry, *Sufism*, p. 40.

⁴³ Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence*, p. 120.

⁴⁴ Van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. 2, p. 552.

clear of the extremes of *tawakkul* (trust in God) which were practiced by some of his overzealous contemporaries.⁴⁵ In Arberry's words, Ibn al-Mubārak's collection on *zuhd* "shews the ascetic at work assembling evidence in the Prophet's life and preaching to justify his own." Although most of the professional *ḥadīth* experts viewed Ibn al-Mubārak as a reliable transmitter, they were generally suspicious of the ascetically minded collectors of pious dicta on account of their propensity to disseminate the narrative material that the *muḥaddithūn* considered either undocumented or outright fabricated. Among such ostracized individuals we find compilers of the other *zuhd* collections, especially Asad b. Mūsā and, to a lesser extent, Wakī' b. al-Jarrāḥ, whom established *ḥadīth* experts usually dismissed as "weak" or "unreliable."⁴⁶ From the third/ninth century onwards, standard biographies of *ḥadīth* transmitters demoted them to the rank of *quṣṣās* (story-tellers or sermonizers)—a name that came to carry strong derogatory connotations due to the rapid proliferation of the unscrupulous and ignorant itinerant preachers who plied their narrative wares in the streets and bazaars. Anxious to edify their audiences by putting ready-made answers to various moral and ethical dilemmas into the mouths of the early Muslim heroes, the collectors of the pious manuals often forewent the careful scrutiny of the narrative and exegetical material from the Prophetic epoch. Their lack of rigor aroused the suspicions of the professional *muḥaddithūn* who had doubts about the authenticity of the ascetic and moralizing lore disseminated by the free-booting ascetics, especially since the latter were rarely associated with any established legal or *ḥadīth* school. Such suspicions led to acute tensions between the two groups of Muslim *religiosi*. In response to accusations of unreliability and outright forgery of their pious narratives, the ascetics denounced their learned detractors for making religious science their profession and source of livelihood, which they saw as a gross offence against religion.⁴⁷ It fell to the great Sufi apologists of the tenth and eleventh centuries C.E. to try to allay this mutual mistrust.

⁴⁵ Reinert, *Die Lehre*, p. 220.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Raif G. Khoury (ed.), *Asad b. Mūsā, Kitāb al-zuhd*, Wiesbaden, 1976.

⁴⁷ Abū Nu'aym, *Hilya*, vol. 10, p. 117.

Fuḍayl Ibn 'Iyād

In Fuḍayl Ibn 'Iyād (d. 187/803), whom a later Sufi legend portrayed as a converted highway robber from Transoxania (Samarqand),⁴⁸ we find a Muslim equivalent of “the Knight of the Mournful Countenance.” According to a later Sufi writer, upon Fuḍayl’s death, sadness disappeared from this world. His permanent grief and mourning were signs of his repentance and compassion for his fellow believers. Only once in his lifetime did he allow himself to smile: on the day his son died. He interpreted this horrible affliction as a token of divine grace by which God meant to lighten his lot in the hereafter. Hence his joy, which even his companions saw as incongruous and *outré*. Day and night he prayed for his salvation, and yet, when asked about the condition of humanity, his reply was: “Forgiven, had it not been for my [sinful] presence in their midst.” His fear of God is thrown into sharp relief in his statement that he would rather live and die as a dog than wait to be resurrected as a man on the Day of Judgement.⁴⁹ Although he spoke constantly about death, it was not death that scared him, but rather his failure to secure God’s satisfaction (*riḍā*) with his worship. This constant fear to fall below the standards of righteousness set by the Divine Dispensation and the resultant humility in God’s presence, is combined in Fuḍayl with a total lack of respect for temporal rulers, including the fearsome caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, whom the sources portray as humbly seeking Fuḍayl’s admonition.⁵⁰ Stripped of the thick layers of legend, his biography presents itself as an epitome of the world-renouncing attitude that was shared by many Sunnī authorities of the epoch.⁵¹ Having started their careers as *ḥadīth* collectors and legal experts (*fuqahā*), these men grew disillusioned with their profession and their colleagues, who were ever eager to curry favor with the rulers and powerful courtiers. By allowing themselves to be seduced by the trappings of the royal court or of a provincial governor’s residence such as sycophantic scholars, in view of their more scrupulous colleagues,

⁴⁸ This legend was apparently unknown to Fuḍayl’s earliest biographers, see J. Chabbi, “Fuḍayl b. 'Iyād, un précurseur du ḥanbalisme (187/803),” in: *BEO*, vol. 30 (1978), pp. 331–345.

⁴⁹ Abū Nu‘aym, *Hilya*, vol. 8, p. 84.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 105–107.

⁵¹ J. Chabbi (see note 48 above) views him as a typical representative of the Sunni revival that culminated in Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855).

forfeited their right to guide the community to salvation. To dissociate themselves from this herd of learned renegades, Fuḍayl and his likes (e.g., Dāwūd al-Ṭāʾī)⁵² adopted a moderate ascetic lifestyle and withdrew from the ranks of professional men of religion (*ʿulamāʾ*). This nonconformist, anti-establishment position found an eloquent expression in his vigorous defense of the Prophetic precedent (Sunnā) against all manner of “innovations” (*bidʿa*) under which its proponents understood doctrines and practices either unknown to, or not explicitly endorsed by, the Prophet and his immediate followers. Although critical of the excessive luxury and ill-gotten wealth of the rulers and their officials, Fuḍayl insisted that man should support himself and his family⁵³ through the toil of his own hands rather than rely on charity or begging.⁵⁴ Nor was he opposed to gainful employment, including trade, as long as it did not distract the Muslim from the worship of God and from fulfilling his religious obligations. Although Fuḍayl consistently shunned the rulers and rejected their gifts, he had no compunctions about accepting money from the pious merchant Ibn al-Mubārak.⁵⁵

Conclusions

While later Sufi literature tends to represent all three devotees we have just discussed as the soul-mates and the founding fathers of the Sufi movement, one cannot but notice substantial differences in their religious attitudes and devotional styles. Ibrāhīm b. Adham and his followers adhered to an extreme, exclusivist type of piety. Its stringent requirements inevitably set them apart from the Islamic community as a whole. Ibn al-Mubārak, on the other hand, demonstrates a much more inner-worldly, community-centered religious attitude. Not only did he recognize the ascetic’s obligations towards his family and the society around him, but he also encouraged his adherents to be actively involved in the affairs of this world. This position found its expression in two distinct domains: his mercantile

⁵² Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, vol. 1, pp. 283–288.

⁵³ While Fuḍayl was married (perhaps to several women), Dāwūd al-Ṭāʾī remained celibate throughout his life, see Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, p. 285.

⁵⁴ Fuḍayl may have inherited this notion from his teacher Sufyān al-Thawrī, see Wakīʿ b. al-Jarrāh, *Kūṭab al-zuhd*, vol. 1, p. 220; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 372–373 and Chabbi, “Fuḍayl,” pp. 338–339.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 342–343.

activities and charity and in his role as a collector and classifier of the prophetic legacy, the *ḥadīth*. One can describe his devotional style as historicist in as much as it was based on a thorough contemplation of, and meditation on, the Muslim community's past.⁵⁶ To this end he engaged in the collection of hortatory *ḥadīth* which fulfilled a clear edifying function by providing his fellow believers with the exemplary ethos and practices ascribed to the early Muslim heroes. This aspect of his activities attracted to him numerous disciples who flocked to him from far and wide. This educational function is much less prominent in the activities of Ibn Adham who was primarily concerned with his personal salvation and tolerated his enthusiastic partisans as a necessary evil. Another important aspect of Ibn al-Mubārak's personality is his volunteering in the *ribāṭ* and *jihād*, a feature which he shares with Ibn Adham but which he exemplifies in his own distinct way, that is, as a combination of personal strength, unswerving loyalty to his comrades-in-arms and pious gloom.⁵⁷ A different facet of the inner-worldly devotional style is demonstrated by the career of Fuḍayl b. 'Iyāḍ. His evolution from a professional *muḥaddith* to a reclusive and grim ascetic reflects his desire to guide the consciousness of his fellow Muslims unfettered by affiliation with either temporary authorities or with the emerging theological and juridical schools. His activist social stance, propensity for public exhortations, energetic opposition to all manner of *bid'a*, including ostentatious display of piety,⁵⁸ as well as his emphasis on economic self-sufficiency and moderation make him a precursor of the populist Sunnism of Ibn Ḥanbal and of his religious-political school rather than an exponent of Sufism in the strict sense of the word.⁵⁹ His statements clearly show him to be a proponent of a moderate, inner-worldly asceticism and God-fearing attitude rather than a mystic.⁶⁰ It is his impeccable Sunni credentials and popularity that later Sufi authors, starting from Ja'far al-Khuldī (d. 348/959) onward, endeavored to appropriate by casting him as an exemplary Sufi master. The reason why these individuals of widely disparate temperaments and dissimilar religious outlooks ended up

⁵⁶ Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence*, p. 120.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 131.

⁵⁸ E.g., the wearing of wool, see Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya*, vol. 8, p. 98.

⁵⁹ Chabbi, "Fuḍayl," passim.

⁶⁰ See, e.g., Smith, *An Early Mystic*, p. 74.

in the same classificatory category should be sought in the underlying ideological agendas pursued by the creators of the Sufi tradition. Should we, for a moment, ignore those later agendas and presuppositions, we shall find that we are dealing with representatives of distinctive devotional styles who were rather arbitrarily crammed under the same conceptual umbrella.

The Love Mysticism of Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya

Another notable and influential trend in early Muslim asceticism is brought into a sharp focus in the semilegendary life of Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 185/801), a female ascetic of Baṣra. One cannot go so far as to doubt her historical existence, but accounts of her life and teachings feature many legends that cannot be neatly separated from authentic information. Rābi'a is said to have been born in 95/714 or 99/717–18 and to have breathed her last in 185/801 at Baṣra, where her tomb is still shown outside the city. In later Sufi hagiographies, she is described as one of the three famous female ascetics (*mutazahhidāt*) of Baṣra, the two others being Mu'adhha al-'Adawiyya, wife of the early ascetic 'Āmir b. 'Abd al-Qays al-'Anbarī (d. ca. 50/670), and Umm al-Dardā', wife of the Prophet's pious companion Abū 'l-Dardā' (d. 32/652).⁶¹ Born into a poor family, she was stolen as a child and sold into slavery. According to some later sources, she even "fell into minstrelsy" and earned her living as a singing girl (*qayna*).⁶² However, her sanctity secured her freedom, and she retired to a life of seclusion and celibacy, at first in the desert and then in Baṣra, where she gathered round her many disciples and associates, who came to seek her counsel or to listen to her teaching. Among these visitors were such noted ascetics as Sufyān al-Thawrī, 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd, Mālik b. Dīnār, the mystic Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 195/810) and the Baṣran recluse Riyāḥ b. 'Amr al-Qaysī (d. 195/810). Already the earliest accounts of Rābi'a's life report frequent verbal jousts between Rābi'a and her guests. Out of these jousts she always emerged triumphant, showing that her

⁶¹ Pellat, *Le milieu basrien*, p. 104; cf. van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. 3, p. 101.

⁶² J. Baldick interprets this legend as "a reminiscence of the celebrated converted prostitutes of early eastern Christianity," see *Mystical Islam*, p. 29.

male visitors were still held down by affectation and egoism.⁶³ When ‘Abd al-Wāḥid had proposed to her, he was greeted by a scornful rebuff, “O the sensual one, seek another sensual like thyself. Hast thou seen any sign of desire in me?” Another suitor, the governor of Baṣra, who tried to entice her into marriage by a dowry of a hundred thousand golden *dīnārs*, also got the brush-off. Other offers of marriage, including the improbable one from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī who had died more than seventy years before her death, were also rejected. In Rābi‘a’s words, she was completely unable to tolerate any suitor who would distract her from God for a single moment, not to mention commit herself to him for life. For it was God whom she considered to be her only genuine Bridegroom.⁶⁴

In another episode she shows her disregard for the professional *ḥadīth* collectors. For her, their profession was but a sign of vain-glory and a distraction from contemplating God, which, in her mind, was even worse than the accumulation of capital and the bringing up of children.⁶⁵ This attitude was shared by many of her ascetic contemporaries.

Rābi‘a’s whole life was marked by extreme asceticism and self-denial. Many of the statements attributed to her by later Sufi authors emphasize her self-sufficiency and unwillingness to depend on anyone save God. When her friends suggested that her kinsfolk purchase her a servant to look after her needs, she said, “Verily, I should be ashamed to ask for this world’s goods from Him to Whom they belong! How should I seek them from those to whom they do not belong?”⁶⁶ Interestingly, the great Arab writer al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 256/869), a native of Baṣra, who was possibly the first to record this anecdote,⁶⁷ makes no mention of the numerous miraculous deeds ascribed to Rābi‘a by later authors. His silence indicates that, in the third/ninth century, her legendary image was still in the making. On the other hand, al-Jāḥiẓ’s story is at odds with the evidence that she did have a servant, Maryam al-Baṣriyya, to whom she communicated her doctrine of pure love (*‘ilm al-maḥabba*). That Rābi‘a’s legend took at least two centuries to crystallize is evident from the fact that it was not known to the tenth-century Sufi biographers al-Sarrāj

⁶³ M. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, New York and Mahwah, 1996, p. 153.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–13.

⁶⁵ Abū Ṭalīb al-Makkī, *Qūt* vol. 1, pp. 156–157.

⁶⁶ Smith, *Rabi‘a*, pp. 20–21.

⁶⁷ Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Al-Bayān wa l-tabyīn*, 3d edition, Cairo, 1960, vol. 3, p. 127.

(d. 378/988), al-Kalābādhi (d. ca. 384/994), and al-Makkī (d. 386/996), who, however, were aware of her existence.⁶⁸

Rābi'a's unshakable trust in God's generosity and solicitude for his servants is attested by her following statement: "Will God forget the poor because of their poverty or remember the rich because of their riches? Since He knows my state, what have I to remind Him of?" Oblivious of mundane comforts she was often seen sleeping "on an old rush mat with a brick under her head to serve as a pillow." She drank and made her ablutions from a cracked jar.⁶⁹ Placing her trust in God's providence, Rābi'a gratefully accepted illness and suffering as signs of God's attention to her persona. In line with this belief she endured her afflictions and pain with fortitude, refusing treatment and medicine offered to her by her fellow ascetics.

Later Sufi writers, such as Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. ca. 627/1230),⁷⁰ credited her with numerous miracles. Food was miraculously served to her guests and she herself was provided for by mysterious visitors and donors: a camel (or a donkey), which died when she was on pilgrimage, was restored to life for her use; the lack of a lamp in her house was compensated by the light which emanated from her body during the night; God himself protected her house and fields from looting; she could fly in the air on her prayer-mat.⁷¹

However, by far the most striking feature of Rābi'a's piety is her single-minded focus on God whom she viewed as the only worthy object of desire, love and worship. Before God all other concerns and commitments were allowed to fade into insignificance. For Rābi'a, even love for one's children and the Prophet as well as fear of hell and Satan were but distractions that should not interfere with one's worship of God. This attitude is brought into a sharp focus in the famous story in which Rābi'a publicly announces her intent to put to the torch the gardens of paradise and douse the flames of hell-fire, so that no one would serve God out of desire for his reward and fear of his punishment.⁷² Questioned about her love for the

⁶⁸ *The Kitāb al-luma' fi 'l-taṣawwuf of Abū Naṣr . . . al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī* ed. by R. A. Nicholson, 2d edition, London, 1963, p. 322; A. Arberry (tr.), *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 83, 93, 159; al-Makkī, *Qūt*, vol. 1, pp. 156–157.

⁶⁹ Smith, *Rabī'a*, p. 25.

⁷⁰ A. Arberry, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya' ('Memorial of the Saints')* by Farid al-Din Attar, reprint, London, 1990, pp. 39–51.

⁷¹ Smith, *Rabī'a*, pp. 31–38.

⁷² Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, p. 151.

Prophet, her answer was, "My love for God has so possessed me that no place remains for loving any save Him!" The Divine Beloved thus becomes the very core and ultimate goal of her being, which leads to a life of utter intensity and self-abnegation.⁷³ This total, undivided commitment to God is dramatized in numerous hagiographic stories of Rābi'a's life reproduced by 'Aṭṭār. It was related that on her death-bed she bade her friends to depart and leave the way free for the messengers of God. As the visitors were departing, they heard her making confession of faith and a voice which responded, "O soul at peace, return unto thy Lord, well-pleased, well-pleasing! Enter thou among My servants! Enter thou My Paradise" (Qur'ān, 89: 27–30). After her death, Rābi'a was seen in a dream and asked how she had escaped from Munkar and Nakīr, the angels who interrogate the newly deceased in their graves. When they approached her and asked her, "Who is thy Lord?", she sent them back to their Master, "Return to your Lord and tell Him, 'Although Thou hast thousands and thousands of Thy creatures [to remember of], Thou hast not forgotten a weak old woman. I, who had only Thee in the entire world, how could have I forgotten Thee, that Thou shouldst ask me, Who is thy Lord?'"

Since Rābi'a left no written legacy, in reconstructing her religious views one has to rely on utterances such as just cited, which are usually presented in the form of responses to queries from her friends and visitors. Another source of our knowledge of her ideas is her prayers and homilies which are attributed to her by her biographers, such as 'Aṭṭār. According to the latter, she used to pray at night upon the roof of her house, saying, "O Lord, the stars are shining and the eyes of men are closed and kings have shut their doors and every lover is alone with his beloved; and here am I alone with Thee!" In another prayer she speaks to God in the following manner, "O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me therein, and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me thence, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty!"

Rābi'a's sayings, which have come down to us in later renditions, display traditional ascetic and mystical themes, namely, repentance, gratitude, and the vision of God in this life and in the hereafter.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 154

Thus, in discussing the process of man's conversion to a godly and righteous life, she emphasized that although the initiative may appear to be man's, his success or failure depends, in the long run, on God's good will, "How can anyone repent unless his Lord gives him repentance and accepts him? If He turns towards you, you will turn towards Him." In line with her overriding preoccupation with God to the exclusion of all else, she held that the true servant's gratitude towards God should focus on the Giver, not on the gift. One spring day, when her fellow ascetics urged her to come out and behold the works of God, she rejoined, "Come rather inside to behold their Maker. Contemplation of the Maker [in my soul] has turned me away from contemplating His creatures." In a similar vein, when asked about Paradise, Rābi'a replied with a famous maxim: "First the neighbor, then the house!" (*al-jār thumma 'l-dār*). According to the great Sunnī theologian al-Ghazālī (d. 555/1111), this saying implies that no one who does not know God in this world will see him in the next; one who has not met him here and now will not enjoy the vision of him in the afterlife; nor can anyone seek to approach God in the future life without securing his friendship in this one. In other words, none may reap who has not sown. The otherworldly orientation of Rābi'a's teaching is thrown into sharp relief in her vision of herself as a total stranger in this world; she eats its bread in sorrow, while preparing herself for the future life of bliss in the presence of her Maker. Asked how she had attained such an advanced stage of sanctity, Rābi'a replied, "By abandoning what does not concern me and seeking fellowship with Him Who never dies."

Statements and themes such as these are the stock-in-trade of the nascent ascetic and mystical movement in Iraq and Syria, and could have been said by any of her world-renouncing contemporaries. What sets Rābi'a apart from them is her ardent preaching of a disinterested and sincere love (*maḥabba*) of, and fellowship (*uns*) with, God. This concern becomes the sole aim and *raison d'être* of God's human lover that places him apart from the generality of the believers. This idea runs like a red thread across the countless utterances and poetic lines attributed to Rābi'a, including the following:

I have made Thee the Companion of my heart,
 But my body is present for those who seek its company,
 And my body is friendly towards its guests.
 But the Beloved of my heart is the guest of my soul.

The verse often ascribed to her⁷⁴ speaks of the two types of love: one that seeks its own ulterior ends, and one that is directed toward God alone. It is often quoted as evidence of the dual nature of her all-consuming passion for the Divine Lover:

I love Thee with two loves: a selfish one and one of which Thou
[alone] art worthy.
The selfish love makes me oblivious of all that is not Thou and causes
me to think only of Thee
As for the love of which Thou [alone] art worthy,
Thou raisest the veils for me so that I may see Thee.
In neither love have I any merit, for the praise for both loves is wholly
Thine.

Elaborating on these poetic lines, al-Ghazālī argues that by the selfish love Rābi'a meant one's love of God as the Bestower of grace and temporary happiness; by the love that is worthy of him, she implied the love of his Beauty "which He revealed to her." The latter, in al-Ghazālī's mind, is far superior to the first type of love. Anticipating the theosophical speculations of later Muslim mystics, Rābi'a described her arduous attempts to achieve union with the Divine (*waṣl*). According to one of her verses, "My hope is for union with Thee, for that is the goal of my desire!" Elsewhere, she says, "I have ceased to exist and annihilated my own self. I have thus become one with God and am now altogether His."

Thus, in later accounts of her life and teaching, Rābi'a presents herself as a true mystic inspired by an ardent love of, and conscious of having entered into unitive life with, God. Her emphasis on love of God distinguishes her from contemporary ascetics and quietists who were preoccupied with abstention from earthly delights, maintaining ritual purity, voluntary poverty, fear of God, and meticulous observance of religious duties. In the later Sufi tradition, Rābi'a is portrayed as the first exponent and the very embodiment of pure, disinterested love of God for His own sake alone. In a similar vein, she is depicted as the first to combine the preaching of divine love with the doctrine of unveiling (*tajallī*; *kashf*) of God before his lover, that is, of the beatific vision in this world.

⁷⁴ It has been shown by G. J. H. van Gelder to be part of a secular love poem; see his "Rābi'a's Poem on the Two Kinds of Love: A mystification?" in: *Verse and the Fair Sex, a collection of papers presented at the 15th Congress of the UEA* . . . 1990. Ed. F. de Jong, Utrecht 1993, pp. 66–76.

Rābi'a's semi-legendary figure has inspired a number of her romantic biographies and at least two Egyptian films. In the West, she became associated with the story of the torch and water with which, as mentioned, she sought to burn paradise and put down the fires of hell. This motif, which goes back to the Persian work *Manāqib al-ʿarīfīn* by the eighth/fourteenth century Anatolian writer Aflākī, resurfaces in an almost word-for-word rendition in the *Mémoires du sieur de Joinville* (Paris, 1854, p. 195). In that work the story is placed in a different geographical and chronological setting: a preaching friar named Yves the Breton, who was sent to Damascus by the King of France Louis IX (the future Saint Louis), meets en route an old woman carrying fire and water, and so on. It is not certain that the heroine of this story is our Rābi'a al-ʿAdawiyya, since the scene is set in Damascus. This city was home to yet another holy woman of the second/eighth century, who was also named Rābi'a bint Ismāʿīl al-ʿAdawiyya.⁷⁵ It is surprising that the oldest textual evidence of this story in the Islamic world goes back no further than the eighth/fourteenth century, while the French chronicle mentions it a century earlier. Somewhat later, the French bishop Jean-Pierre Camus (1582–1653) avails himself of the same motif to illustrate the notion of pure love in his book *La Carité ou le pourtrait de la vraye charité, histoire dévote tirée de la vie de Saint-Louis* (Paris, 1641).

The Formation of Mystical Language and Speculation: Shaqīq al-Balkhī

In the Kurāsānī devotee Shaqīq al-Balkhī we find another instance of the impassioned, *jihād*-oriented piety which we have already observed in Ibrāhīm b. Adham and Ibn al-Mubārak. The only difference is the geographical setting against which his career unfolded. While the latter two “strove on the path of God” by waging war against the Christians of Byzantium, Shaqīq resided in a fortified *ribāṭ* at Washgird (eastern Iran), which was manned by volunteers fighting against “the pagan Turks” of Central Asia. In 195/810, he was killed in action during a military expedition to Kulan in the Upper Oxus.⁷⁶ In theological and juridical matters, he was originally a follower of Abū Ḥanīfa and his disciple Abū Yūsuf. However, after his conversion

⁷⁵ Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, p. 25; cf. van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. 1, p. 144, note 42.

⁷⁶ Radtke, “Theologien,” p. 540.

to asceticism, he lost interest in juridical and theological discourses and dedicated himself single-mindedly to the service of God. On the personal level, Shaqīq presents himself as a curious hybrid of Ibrāhīm b. Adham and Ibn al-Mubārak. As the latter, he began his career as a merchant, who did business with the semi-Islamicized Turks of Transoxania. His mercantile career came to an abrupt end after a curious encounter with a Buddhist monk who challenged him to demonstrate his trust in God as the sole provider of men by abandoning his trade.⁷⁷ In the aftermath of this encounter, Shaqīq “repented,” distributed all his possessions in alms, and embarked on the career of a warrior-ascetic of the frontier.

In some respects, Shaqīq resembles Ibrāhīm b. Adham, with whom he associated for a while. As with Ibrāhīm, his scrupulousness (*warāʿ*) and reliance on God (*tawakkul*) often took extreme forms. On occasion, Shaqīq went even further than his master. For him, the rampant corruption of this world made it impossible for the true devotee to sustain himself through the work of his hands, except in dire need. To avoid the corruptive influence of the world, Shaqīq advocated “a rule of life involving a complete renunciation, a state of permanent acquiescence in the Will of God.” In his mind, both craftsmanship and trade were “suspect” (*shubha*) and, therefore, must be relinquished by anyone seeking perfection in worshipping God. Furthermore, in Shaqīq’s mind, attempts to secure one’s livelihood amounted to casting doubt on God’s beneficence and ability to provide for his creatures. No wonder that Shaqīq is often described as the earliest exponent, if not the founder, of *tawakkul*—a doctrine that promoted a complete trust in God and a total abandonment, or reduction to a minimum, of gainful employment.⁷⁸ Shaqīq seems to have adhered to the stringent version of *tawakkul*, which was later rejected by most of the Sufis in favor of a more moderate one. This watered down interpretation of *tawakkul* made it acceptable to the majority of Sufis and not just to a handful of spiritual athletes similar to Ibrāhīm b. Adham. Shaqīq’s Khurāsānian disciple, Ḥātim al-Aṣamm (d. 237/851)—whom the sources of the time describe as an “ascetic,” a “scholar,” and a “sage” (*ḥakīm*)—became the chief transmitter and exponent of Shaqīq’s logia relating to ascetic ethics and practices.⁷⁹ Ḥātim’s disciple, Abū Turāb al-Nakhshabī (d. 245/859),

⁷⁷ Abū Nuʿaym, *Hilya*, vol. 8, p. 59; cf. Arberry, *Sufism*, pp. 38–39.

⁷⁸ Reinert, *Die Lehre*, pp. 172–175.

⁷⁹ Radtke, “Theologen,” p. 542; Arberry, *Sufism*, pp. 39–40.

was an itinerant ascetic who is said to have a following of 120 students (*murīdūn*). Of these, according to later Sufi authors, only two were able to withstand the rigors of ascetic training and to become established Sufi masters.⁸⁰ The high “drop-out” rate may indicate that, despite the popularity of individual ascetics, their stringent standards of asceticism remained the domain of a few “spiritual athletes” who were capable of maintaining their vows throughout their lifetimes. The figure of Abū Turāb is important in yet another regard. His itinerant lifestyle, which replicates that of many early devotees (notably, Ibrāhīm b. Adham and Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyād), permitted him to bring the teachings of Shaqīq and Ḥātim to Iraq and Syria, where he successfully disseminated their ideas of *tawakkul* among local ascetics and mystics. As his predecessors, he thus served as a vital intellectual bridge between the Eastern and Western traditions of ascetic spirituality.⁸¹ One may argue that the activities of Abū Turāb and his likes facilitated the convergence of the two strands of Islamic ascetic piety during the following century, when the Sufism of the Baghdad school became predominant. Perhaps even more significant was Shaqīq’s contribution to what came to be known as “the science of the mystical path” (*‘ilm al-ṭarīq*)—the all-important symbol of the Sufi lifestyle and worldview. While earlier ascetics did sometimes refer to various levels of spiritual attainment they had experienced in the service of God, no one, it seems, had tried to classify them or present them in a hierarchical order. In his treatise “The Rule of Worship” (*Adab al-‘ibādāt*), for the first time Shaqīq attempted to do just that: to describe the various stages or “dwelling stations” (*manāzil*) of worship and the levels of experience associated with them. If authentic,⁸² this short work can be viewed as an important borderline between asceticism and nascent mysticism.⁸³ In any event, Shaqīq’s teaching stands in sharp contrast to, say, Fuḍayl’s, who had considered renunciation (*zuhd*) and complete resignation to the will of God (*riḍā*) to be the highest stages of spiritual progress, beyond

⁸⁰ Al-Sarrāj, *Lumaʿ*, p. 209; al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 136; Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, vol. 1, p. 327.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 325–332.

⁸² For proofs of its authenticity see P. Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique*, Beirut, 1970, pp. 213–216.

⁸³ I personally doubt that any crisp line can be drawn chronologically or conceptually without skewing the process of the organic, gradual growth of mystical ideas from the simple piety of Islam’s first devotees.

which there was “no higher stage.” Significantly, in Shaqīq’s system both the world-renouncing piety and the fear of God, which characterize a typical Muslim ascetic (*zāhid*), are relegated to the lower stages of spiritual perfection. Although Shaqīq did not try to question the intrinsic merits of these ascetic virtues,⁸⁴ he was quite forthright in placing them well below mystical experiences, such as the all-consuming desire of paradisiacal bliss in the proximity of God and the ardent love of God. Implicitly, Shaqīq’s system gave preference to mystics over ascetics. In Shaqīq’s view, the former occupy two upper stages of the mystic path, while the ascetics remain at its beginning.⁸⁵

Table 1. Chapter I. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and His Circle

Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728)



Yazīd b. Abān al-Raqaṣhī (d. between 101/729 and 121/738)
 Muḥammad b. Wasīʿ (d. 127/738), Mālik b. Dīnār (d. 128/745)
 Farqad ak-Sabakhī (d. 132/749)
 ʿAbd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd (d. ca. 133/750)
 Dāwūd al-Ṭāʿī (d. 165/781)
 Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. 185/801)
 Riyāḥ b. ʿAmr al-Qaysī (d. 195/810)
 Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 215/830)

⁸⁴ E.g., he argued that “patience” (*ṣabr*) and “resignation,” or “satisfaction” [with the Divine Will] (*ridā*), should be “the beginning and the end of each pious act,” see al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, p. 66.

⁸⁵ Nwyia, *Exégèse*, pp. 213–231; idem (ed.), *Trois oeuvres inédites de mystiques musulmans*, Beirut, 1973, pp. 17–21.

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By

Alexander Knysh



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