

Zuhd in Islamic Mysticism

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1 Introduction

“Because it is a universal phenomenon, in evidence in ancient as well as modern societies, and because it is often a dramatic, even controversial, part of religions and cultures, asceticism has long been the subject of popular and intellectual interest.” This is how Wimbush and Valantasis open their monumental collection of papers titled simply *Asceticism* (Wimbush and Valantasis, xix). In this huge volume—the proceedings of an international conference at Union Theological Seminary in New York in April 1993—nearly fifty contributions and responses were collated, among them a response focusing on “the place of sensuality in Sufism” (Wimbush and Valantasis, 369–71). In view of the wealth of narrative material furnished therein and the thought-provoking variety of opinions displayed by eminent authorities, two things become apparent immediately: firstly, that the interest in the subject matter extends beyond the scope of a sheer historical and textual presentation—it demands an awareness of the place asceticism has taken in our present-day cultural and academic discourse; and, secondly, that there are many vantage points from which to view and evaluate such a broad and complex phenomenon—within any tradition in itself and, in the framework of the volume at hand, within Islamic mysticism.

With these sobering considerations, it is perhaps useful to go back to the roots and start this chapter by pondering the Arabic term for “asceticism” and its semantics. *Zuhd* (also, in some early works, *zahāda*)—and the derivative “ascetic” (sing. *zāhid*, pl. *zuhhād*, *zāhidūn*)—are the consensual equivalents for “asceticism.” However, the full Arabic term for asceticism is not merely *al-zuhd* but *al-zuhd fī l-dunyā*, which, in fact, implies “setting small store by this world,” devaluing or belittling it. This understanding stems from the only Qur’ānic verse in which the verbal root *z-h-d* appears. Describing the paltry sum with which Joseph’s brothers had sold him to the Ishmaelites, Q 12:20 reads: “Then they sold him for a paltry price, a handful of counted dirhams; for they set small store by him” (tr. Arberry, 227) (*wa-sharawhu bi-thamanⁱⁿ bakhsⁱⁿ darāhim^a ma’dūdātⁱⁿ wa-kānū fīhi min al-zāhidīn*). This proof-text suggests that *zāhid* originally means “one who thinks little of” and it suggests that

al-zuhd fī l-dunyā means “to think little of this world” and, by the same token, to think highly of “the other world,” *al-ākhirā*, the world-to-come.

Many proof-texts in this vein can be culled from the early *zuhdī* literature and its parallels in the *ḥadīth* literature; here is one such tradition: “A group of horsemen riding with the Prophet passed by a dead lamb. The Prophet said: ‘Do you see this? It had such little value for its owners that they threw it away ... The world has even less value for God than this one for its owners (*fa-l-dunyā aḥwan* ‘*alā llāhī min hādhihi ‘alā aḥlihā*)’” (Ibn al-Mubārak, 177 §508). Another example may be cited from *Kitāb al-zuhd al-kabīr*, a large compilation of traditions on *zuhd* compiled by Abū Bakr al-Bayhaqī, a fifth/eleventh-century scholar from Nishapur. Most of the traditions compiled in this book are attributed to figures identified as Sufis. Here, for example, is a tradition attributed to al-Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyād (d. 188/803): “All that is evil was placed in one house, whose key is the love for this world (*wa-ju‘ila miftāḥuhu ḥubb al-dunyā*); and all that is good was placed in a house, whose key is the rejection of the world (*wa-ju‘ila miftāḥuhu l-zuhd fī l-dunyā*)” (al-Bayhaqī, 133, 245).

Customarily, *al-zuhd fī l-dunyā* may be translated as “abstention from the world” or “renouncing the world” and those who “denigrate it” may be referred to as “ascetics” or “renunciants” (Melchert, 407). However, in an attempt to determine the semantics of asceticism in Islamic mysticism by means of the Arabic terminology, the aspect of “denigration,” “giving little value to the world,” should not be overlooked. This aspect, rather than promoting an *extra-neous* behavior that can be characterized as “world denying,” implies an *inner* attitude towards the world.

From such semantic discernment stems the following general observation: Islamic asceticism, especially within the Sufi lore, focuses on “attitudes” and “states of mind” rather than on “activity” and external behavior. This insistence on inner attitude is suggested by the notion of *qīṣar al-amal*, the curtailing of hopes for the future (see below). To this one may add such notions as *ḥusn al-ẓann*, thinking well (in particular of God’s decree), and hence cultivating an attitude of acceptance (*riḍā*), reliance (*tawakkul*), gratitude (*shukr*), perseverance (*ṣabr*), and submission (*islām, istislām*). In Sufi parlance this amounts to the preeminence of “the duties of the hearts” (*a‘māl al-qulūb*) over “the duties of the bodily organs” (*a‘māl al-jawāriḥ*)—namely, of mental and psychological positions—eventually termed *maqāmāt wa-aḥwāl*—designed to become established in one’s self by means of following certain training regimes (*riyāḍa*) (e.g. al-Sarrāj, 43–4: *wa-ammā al-a‘māl al-bāṭina fa-ka-a‘māl al-qulūb wa-ḥiya al-maqāmāt wa-l-aḥwāl*). These programs, if fruitful, may lead to the transformation of the self and to a radical shift in the value system of the practitioner.

In this shift, what one is truly after vis-à-vis what one must give up in order to attain it becomes clarified and illumined (see Shaqīq's *nūr al-zuhd* below). The demands set up by these regimes might be excruciating, but they revolve around one's inner fight with one's own self rather than extroverted ascetical feats. In these programs, worthy modes of behavior are by no means overlooked. They are achieved through the imitation of chosen role models; first and foremost, of course, the Prophet. Worthy of imitation are also the "friends of God" (*awliyā' Allāh*), the spiritual teachers, who, by enforcing a set of rules (*ādāb*), inculcate within their disciples the propensity for correct actions in all of life's circumstances. As we shall see, in all these programs, the main effort is directed to the transformation of the self, the *nafs*. Hence, the training of the self, *riyāḍat al-nafs*, becomes the main effort (*mujāhada*) of Muslim mystics, early and late, in their particular line of "asceticism."

Finally, a general comment on the typology of *zuhd* in early Islam is in order. Unlike the conventional account of a gradual, linear development from "asceticism" to "mysticism," it is my understanding that three different types of *zuhd* were *simultaneously* at play: extreme ascetic behavior, which, among other practices, included wearing rough woolen garments (hence: *ṣūfī*, to begin with, denoted a radical ascetic) (Sviri, Terms, 22–4), and "mild" asceticism, which advocated an inward rejection of worldly things out of religious piety (see Hurvitz; Kinberg, 39–44) and, lastly, *zuhd* as a station (*maqām*, *manzila*) in a process of inner transformation leading towards an intimate, luminous, mystical nearness to God and a behavioral "synergy" with Him. This latter type of *zuhd* preoccupied Muslim mystics from the outset.

It should be noted, however, that, when consulting literary sources that focus on the lives of individuals, an overlap of terms and descriptions might cause confusion. Such overlap is particularly prominent in the hagiographies of early mystics and pietists, as well as in Sufi compilations, where the lines between the different types of *zuhd* tend to be blurred, perhaps intentionally.

2 Late Antique *Zeitgeist*: Alienation from This World

ʿAbdallāh b. ʿUmar (d. 73/693), the son of the second caliph and one of the Prophet's close Companions, tells how the Prophet, touching him, proclaimed: "O ʿAbdallāh, be in this world as if you were a stranger (*gharīb*) or a passing wayfarer (*ʿābir sabīl*), and reckon yourself among the denizens of graves (*wa-ʿudda naḥsaka min ahl al-qubūr*)" (Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, 25; Ibn Ḥanbal, 41; Ibn al-Mubārak, 5 §13). To "be in the world like a stranger" implies that the believer should adopt an attitude of alienation towards worldly matters; "reckon yourself among the

denizens of graves" implies that he should be aware of death's imminence and life's transient nature and, therefore, should not be attached to anything. Such a call to "alienation" from the world echoes the ascetic, other-worldly disposition prevalent in Late Antiquity among monks, renunciants, and certain philosophical schools. Thus, for example, the fifth-century St. John Climacus (579–606 CE), in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, describes the merit of "exile" (in Greek *xaniteia*, which means both exile and being a stranger) and writes: "Exile means that we leave forever everything in our own country that prevents us from reaching the goal of the religious life ... For exile is separation from everything in order to keep from every attachment to ... people and to strangers" (Climacus, sections 3, 6, 8, 21, 29; Bondi; Brown, 88, 126; Caner, 25, 36, et passim; Sizgorich). Gnostic sources, too, reflect the ideal of "alienation" or "exile" from "the world" as the wish of the soul to return to its original state and abode (Pagels, 138–41; Pearson; Wright, 200, 209, 280, et passim). Such ideas occur also in dualistic Iranian religions such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Mazdakism.¹ Philosophers, especially those associated with Stoicism, practiced *apatheia*, namely, to regard the world and the suffering of the earthly life with equanimity, without emotional attachment, and to contemplate death. Marcus Aurelius, for example, writes:

Human life: duration: momentary; nature: changeable; perception: dim; condition of body: decaying; soul: spinning around; fortune: unpredictable; lasting fame: uncertain. Sum up: The body and its parts are a river, the soul a dream and mist, life is warfare and a journey far from home, lasting reputation is oblivion.

MARCUS AURELIUS, book II, 17

The above-quoted *ḥadīth* reflects, no doubt, a similar disregard for this-worldly life; a call to live in it "as a stranger." This bend of mind, widely familiar in Late Antiquity, seems to have been taken up by individuals or groups in early Islam. It was later integrated, with modifications, into the Sufi ethos, on which this chapter focuses.

From among the various currents that could have infused this worldview into early Islam, Christian monasticism seems the most likely candidate. The theme of Christian monks roaming the desert or living in mountain caves remote from inhabited centers occurs profusely in early Islamic sources as

¹ For Manichean ascetic practices, see, e.g., Vööbus, 1:115–24; for abundant material on the Iranian religious landscape in early Islam, see Crone.

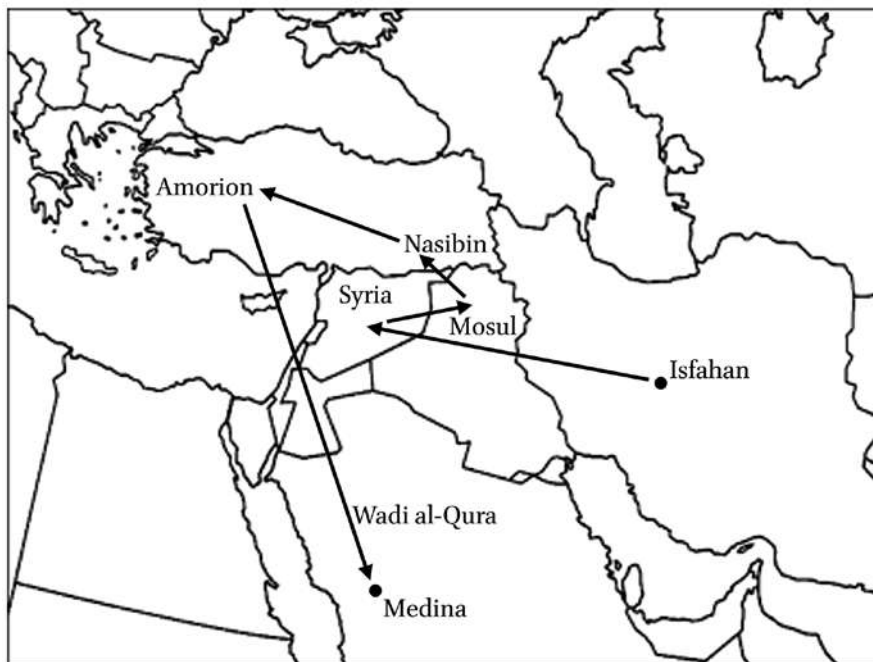


FIGURE 8.1 Salmān's journey for the truth

well as in Christian ones. The research material is vast and its details and conclusions are beyond the boundaries of this chapter (e.g. Andræ, *passim*;² Caner, *passim*; Griffith, *Arabic Christianity*, *passim*; Szilagyi). The well-known story of the monk Bahīrā is a case in point: looking down from his solitary cell over a caravan of traders from the Hījāz, he recognized the “sign of prophecy” between the shoulders of the young Muḥammad. He could thus ascertain that this young man was the long-awaited “messenger” named Aḥmad, whose appearance was prophesized by Jesus (according to Q 61:6) (Griffith, *Prophet Muhammad*; Roggema, 58ff.; Szilagyi). But there are also other stories that emphasize the role played by monks in proclaiming the validity of the Prophet and in inspiring an ascetical mode of living in nascent Islam. Notably, the story about Salmān al-Fārisī, who, after the idea of a Creator God had stirred in his heart, left his Zoroastrian (?) kinsmen and home in Jayy, in the province of Iṣfahān, and set out in search of the true religion which upholds

² In Andræ, note the rich material pertaining to instructions given by Christian monks to Islamic “seekers” after truth, often referred to as *ḥunafāʾ* (sing. *ḥanīf*); see also al-Shaybānī, 1:186.

this idea. On his long journey, which took him from Jayy to Mosul, then to the Jazīra, al-‘Ammūriyya (in Asia Minor), and finally to Medina, Christian monks directed him from one to another and from place to place till finally he reached his goal in Medina. With each monk he stayed for several years practicing ascetic devotions, such as fasting during the day and praying during the night. But only after meeting Muḥammad in Medina he became convinced that his goal had been reached: he found the true prophet and the true religion and embraced the new faith of Islam on the spot (see fig. 8.1) (al-Iṣfahānī, 1:250–2).

Besides being an account of an initiatory passage into the religion of Islam, what seems relevant in the context of early Islamic asceticism is the tradition that Salmān’s initiation took place along late antique routes inhabited by Christian monks, who facilitated it. Needless to say: it is neither the historicity of this and similar accounts, nor its polemical undertones, that we are trying to trace; rather, it is the notion that a model of a devotional and ascetical life in early Islam was inspired by monasticism. It is also worth highlighting that Muslim sources, regardless of their polemical agendas, did not shy away from acknowledging the contribution of Christian monasticism to the build-up of ascetical features and values in early Islam.

3 The Build-Up of a “Moderate” Ascetical Model

The ascetical model, Christian as well as Manichean, which was witnessed by early devout Muslims, contained practices such as wandering in deserts or dwelling in remote mountainous cells (Caner, 23; 26, 32, et passim); wearing ragged clothes that denote poverty or no clothes at all; fasting extensively; praying incessantly in the night; and observing celibacy (Brock; Chitty, 123–42; Clark, 14–42; Vööbus, 1:115–24). That some early pious Muslims wished to adopt these practices and perhaps even to surpass them is evident, for example, from the early commentary of Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. ca. 150/767) on Q 5:87: “Do not ban the good things which God made permissible to you” (*lā tuḥarrimū ṭayyibātī mā aḥalla llāh lakum*). According to Muqātil, this verse came down (*nazalat*) in response to the actions of ten of the Prophet’s closest Companions who had convened in the house of ‘Uthmān b. Maẓ‘ūn, and together resolved to deny themselves food, clothes, and women. They even undertook to emasculate themselves, put on a garb of hair, erect solitary cells (*ṣawāmi’*), and withdraw to them to practice a monastic way of life (*fa-yataarahabū fihā*) (Muqātil, 1:317–18). Upon learning this from the angel Gabriel, the Prophet’s response was immediate and unequivocal: “He who does not adhere to my *sunna* and does not follow my fashion, does not belong

to me ... Our *sunna* is [wearing] clothes, [eating] food, and [wedding] women" (Muqātil, 1:318; Sviri, *Wa-raḥbāniyyatan*, 198).³

Other extreme practices were also criticized as being at odds with the more lenient direction that the nascent *sharīʿa* was taking and with the model set up by the Prophet Muḥammad. Many references to and commentaries on the well-known tradition "There is no monasticism in Islam" (*lā raḥbāniyyat^a fī l-islām*) (Karamustafa, 36; Sahnner, 161, 166, 169) suggest that the strict monastic model was seen as defying the religious prescriptions of early Islam. Extreme and continuous fasting is a case in point. When the Companion ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ wished to practice continuous fasting (*ṣawm al-dahr*), above and beyond the fasting required by the *sharīʿa*, the Prophet prohibited him from doing so. ʿAbdallāh pleaded and bargained with the Prophet, claiming that he could endure long periods of fasting. Finally, the Prophet conceded and allowed him a routine known as "the fasting of Dāwūd" (*ṣawm/ṣiyām Dāwūd*), namely, fasting on alternate days (*kāna yaṣūmu yawm^{an} wa-yuṣṭiru yawm^{an}*) (Ibn al-Jawzī, 144–5; al-Iṣfahānī, 1:354 [no. 43]; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *bāb al-nahy ʿan ṣawm al-dahr*). Apparently, this fasting routine became the limit of Muslim ascetical endeavor concerning abstention from food.

These accounts suggest that in early Islam there was no tolerance towards excesses in the fashion of monks and anchorites, such as continuous fasting, praying during the night, total or partial celibacy dictated by continuous night praying, wandering away from home, and the like. Such ascetical practices were often referred to by the terms *taqashshuf*, *nusk*, *taʿabbud*, *tarahhub*. Instead, a moderate version had developed as a prescription for pious believers, one that could be upheld not only by ascetical "virtuosi," but by the general community of believers at large. It is noteworthy that this call for moderation is illustrated in various anecdotes relating to Salmān al-Fārisī; anecdotes that suggest that, having found the "true religion," he relinquished the extreme ascetical practices which he had adopted during his sojourns with Christian monks. For example, when he saw a gloomy Umm al-Dardāʾ, upset that her husband was avoiding intercourse with her, he reproached Abū l-Dardāʾ saying: "You owe your wife her right—pray and sleep, fast and eat." When the Prophet heard of Salmān's call for moderation in piety, he exclaimed: "Salmān was given [right] knowledge!" (al-Iṣfahānī, 1:244–5 [nos. 603–4]). It may not be superfluous to

3 Cf. a milder version in al-Iṣfahānī, 1:151 (338), according to which Ibn Maṣʿūn's wife complained that her husband neglected his duties to her as "he prays during the night and fasts during the day (*ammā l-layl fa-qāʿim wa-ammā l-nahār fa-ṣāʿim*).” The Prophet scolded him, saying: "Do you not take me as your model (*a-mā laka bī uswa*)?" See also Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbis Iblīs*, *al-bāb al-ʿāshir, faṣl fī dhikr aḥādīth tubayyinu khaṭaʾahum fī afʿālihim*, 223.

reiterate that we are not dealing here with the historicity of the biographies of Salmān, Umm and Abū al-Dardā', and of other early personalities; rather, we are tracing the pious tendencies, projected into literary sources since the second/eighth century, that contributed to the construction of the ideal of ascetical behavior in moderation, also referred to as "mild asceticism."⁴ Such moderation enabled, no doubt, the construction of a pious ideal, which could be practically applied by the Islamic public at large and not only by "specialists" belonging to an ascetical elite (Kinberg; Sviri, Terms, 24). An important aspect of this ideal had to do with the attitude to the "world," to "this world" (*al-dunyā*), and, *ipso facto*, to the "world-to-come" (*al-ākhirā*).

4 The Ascetical Model in Islamic Mysticism

The equivalent term for "asceticism"/"renunciation" used in Islamic literature is *al-zuhd fī l-dunyā*, literally: ascribing little value to the world. What is valued over and beyond "this world" is "the world-to-come" (*al-ākhirā*) and in it the abode of reward, *al-janna*, paradise, which every sincere believer hopes to attain. The opposite side of *al-janna* is *al-nār*, hellfire, where sinners and reprobates will be punished for their sins and misdeeds. The believers are thus thrown between "hope" (*rajā'*) for *al-janna* and "fear" (*khawf*) of *al-nār*. Among sincere believers, these polar religious emotions often resulted in committing themselves to practices that, in relation to the prescribed religious law, demanded extra effort, often referred to as "combat" (*mujaḥada*). Such practices are often referred to as "supererogatory acts of piety" (*nawāfil*). Thus, *al-zuhd fī l-dunyā* suggests an approach that, on the one hand, implies extra effort and, on the other, demands caution to not exceed the prescribed moderation, as seen above. This caution produced an approach that can be represented by a saying attributed to Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 162/778), one of the renowned pietists of the second/eighth century. Sufyān said: "Abstention from this world [rests on] the curtailing of one's hope [for the future]; [it does] not [rest on] eating rough food and wearing a [coarse woolen] cloak" (Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, 42 §32). It clearly portrays the insistence of some early *zuhhād* that to cultivate an attitude of inward renunciation toward the world is better than to practice excessive acts of denial of it. Such an attitude is often characterized by the notion of *qīṣar al-amal*, the curtailing of hopes, namely, a mindset devoid of anticipation for the future.

4 For the coinage of this term and a detailed presentation of its features, especially in the Ḥanbali school as regards food, see Hurvitz.

The sources that deal with themes and traditions relating to *al-zuhd fī l-dunyā* come, firstly, from the *zuhdī* literature, namely, from works specifically devoted to this topic to the point of choosing it for their titles. Works, bearing such titles as *Kitāb al-zuhd* or *Bāb fī l-zuhd*, mushroomed in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries—as stand-alone books, in special sections of *ḥadīth* collections, as well as in *adab* compilations.⁵ However, themes concerning *zuhd* concurrently appear also in a literary class that can be described as mystical. Thus, alongside the classical sources of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries (*ḥadīth*, *adab*, commentaries, biographies), from which we derive most of our material and notions concerning *zuhd*, there appeared also works by “mystics,” authors who subsequently became associated with Islamic mysticism, that is, Sufism (*taṣawwuf*). Since the development of *zuhdī* literature took place prior to the appearance of the first Sufi compilations in the late fourth/tenth century, I describe it as belonging to “the pre-compilatory phase” (Sviri, *Mysticism*, 244). Although *al-zuhd fī l-dunyā* occupied an important position in these mystical works, it took on a different direction to that presented in the non-mystical literature. As a consequence of this insistence—expressed by Sufyān and other early pietists—on one’s inner attitude rather than external practices, the mystical teachers went on to devise a psycho-physical regime, designed to assist disciples and seekers to cultivate a “personality” that, in dealing with “this world,” could resist the natural human inclination (in Arabic: *al-hawā*) towards it. What they devised could be named “a ladder of ascension,” a regime that marks out stages and stations (*manāzil*, *maqāmāt*) of the progress to God. Rather than extraneous self-denial and world-denying practices, such regimes, built upon the aspiration to reach God’s vicinity (*qurb*) in the present lifetime rather than in the life to come, combined ascetical practices (*riyāqāt*) with astute and relentless self-observation (*muḥāsaba*, *murāqaba*). Among the early authors who contributed to this tendency and whose works inspired subsequent mystical teachings, the following should be mentioned: Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 195/810), al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. ca. 313/910), Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899), and Abū l-Qāsim al-Junayd (d. 298/910). Although all became part and parcel of the later Sufi lore, at this early phase some of them were not identified as Sufis.

Let me now examine the direction that *al-zuhd fī l-dunyā* took in the works of three early mystics: Shaqīq al-Balkhī, al-Muḥāsibī, and al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī.

Shaqīq al-Balkhī is an early second/eighth-century author who hailed, according to his *nisba* and later hagiographies, from Balkh in Central Asia

5 Gobillot lists 37 titles “dating from the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries” containing the term *zuhd* (and *raqāʿiq*) dealing with various aspects of world-renunciation (*al-zuhd fī l-dunyā*).

(modern-day Afghanistan) (Nwyia, 213–31; al-Sulamī, 54–9). Bearing in mind his early lifetime, he is particularly important in charting the history of the mystical movement in Islam. His extant writing helps us in reassessing the co-existence of the ascetical and mystical movements in Islam, and thus in modifying the consensual—and by now obsolete—paradigm of “first there was asceticism, then came mysticism” (Sviri, Terms).

In a short treatise titled *Ādāb al-‘ibādāt* (*Rules of Conduct for Acts of Worship*), *zuhd* is the first of four “stages” (in his terminology: *manāzil*, sing. *manzila*), culminating in the lofty stage of the “love of God” (*al-maḥabba li-llāh*). The four stages that Shaqīq proposes are designed to transform the *nafs*, the lower self, from a self-absorbed, self-loving, earth-bound entity, manipulated by “desires” for this-worldly comforts, to an enlightened entity that can experience God’s nearness and intimacy during this life. These stages start with *zuhd*—the most appropriate translation here, contextually, is “abstention,” particularly abstention from excessive eating and drinking. This training of the lower self Shaqīq and other authors find necessary in order to curtail her⁶ desires (*adab al-nafs bi-qaṭ‘ al-shahawāt*). By avoiding eating in excess, the *nafs* becomes gradually accustomed to sustaining hunger (*jū‘*), to being aware of other superfluous desires, and to eliminating them altogether (*fa-yaṭla‘u fī tilka l-ḥāl ilā fuḍūl al-shahawāt*). Hence, this training develops a disregard for the world and its values (*fa-huwa yawma‘idhⁱⁿ fī l-dunyā lā yaṭlubuhā ma‘a l-ṭālībīn ... qad hānat ‘alayhi*). Superficially, such a process may appear as any ascetical regime, but it is primarily focused on transforming inner tendencies lying behind the external manifestation. The second stage in Shaqīq’s “ladder” is “fear” (*khawf*). Shaqīq describes fear as inherently connected with *zuhd*, “for there is no *zuhd* without the fear of God ... He who adheres to *zuhd* necessarily adheres to fear (*fa-lā yalzamu l-‘abd^u al-zuhd^a ... ḥattā yalzama l-khawf^a*).” Psychologically, self- and world-denial stem from the fear of God and from the dreadful prospect of the retribution in hellfire. However, these intertwined stages, according to Shaqīq, must not remain perpetual; rather, when they reach their zenith—Shaqīq advises a time frame of forty days—they are followed by a loftier and gentler stage, the third and penultimate one: longing for paradise (*al-shawq ilā l-janna*). Here is how Shaqīq describes the signs of the change that takes place at this stage:

6 I choose to maintain the grammatical gender of *nafs* in Arabic by referring to this entity in the feminine. Sufi understanding of the different types of “self” should not to be confused with the philosophical classification of the “anima,” a classification that derives from Plato and Aristotle—see more on this in Sviri, *The Self*.

He (i.e. the practitioner) then becomes one who yearns (*al-mushtāq*), who loves ardently (*al-shadīd al-ḥubb*), a knower and a stranger (*al-ʿālim al-gharīb*), constantly behaving kindly (*al-dāʾim al-iḥsān*), one who does not hasten to acquire possessions (*alladhī lā yarūḥu li-kasb al-māl*).... When you see him, he is always smiling, pleased with what he possesses.... He is the one continuously fasting, the one continuously praying (*al-ṣawwām al-qawwām*).

SHAQĪQ AL-BALKHĪ, 20

Obviously, these signs signify a transformation that occurs in this life, not what might or might not come about in the afterlife; it highlights a state of *being in the world*. Though Shaqīq's program contains "ascetical" elements, they are not its main characteristics. *Al-ṣawwām al-qawwām* may even be understood as an ironical reference to those who are immersed in fasting and praying at the expense of proceeding towards higher states. The fourth, last, and most elevated stage in Shaqīq's program is the love of God (*al-maḥabba li-llāh*). "Not everyone reaches this stage," he writes,

for it is the loftiest and most splendid of all stages ... When God makes him [the seeker] reach this stage, the light of love is in his heart. It overpowers him without eliminating the lights of the previous stages of *zuhd*, fear, and longing for paradise ... His heart is filled with love and longing for Him; these, due to God's kindness, mercy, light, and generosity to him, make him forget the former stages of fear and longing to paradise.

SHAQĪQ AL-BALKHĪ, 21

In other words, when immersed in the love of God—which is not simply a "concept" but a real state of being—the impact of the lower stages fades.

A pattern can thus be established: On the "ascending ladder," an advanced "stage" overshadows the lower stages. When one reaches the uppermost stage of the love of God, the lesser stages of abstention, fear, and longing for paradise dim out. To describe this phenomenon, which bears the marks of the psychological and mystical states of the illumined heart, Shaqīq uses the analogy of the sky lights:

The light of abstention and fear in the heart resembles the light of a glittering star ... When the moon rises, the light of the star dims out, though the star remains as it was. Similarly, the light of longing overshadows the light of fear and abstention without reducing their original light. As for the light of longing in relation to the light of love, it is like the rising moon

in relation to the sun. When the sun rises, it turns off the moon's light though the moon does not move from its place and its original light is not reduced at all. Thus, in worship, the light of the love of God is the strongest and loftiest.

SHAQĪQ AL-BALKHĪ, 21

In Shaqīq's quadruple program, abstention (*zuhd*) and fear (*khawf*), though indispensable, are the lowest and weakest stages in the transformative progress of the heart. Above them rank longing (*shawq*) and love (*maḥabba*). All stages relate to lights which reside in the heart; namely, to psychological capacities that grow in intensity along a transformative passage. This passage takes place not in the afterlife but in the interiority of the believer during his/her worldly existence. More than projecting the religious aspiration toward an afterlife with its rewards and retributions, the transformative progress takes place during the earthly life. Sufis, early and late, have reiterated this point both by stressing the value of "curtailing the hopes for the future" (*qīṣar al-amal*) as well as in the maxim: "the Sufi is the son of the 'moment' (*al-ṣūfī ibn waqtihi*)."

Whether directly related to Shaqīq or not, similar programs are replicated in the Sufi system at large, in which *zuhd* is counted as an elementary and necessary stage on the ascending transformative ladder of the mystical progress. Thus, in *Kitāb al-luma'* of Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), for example, *zuhd* is the third station (*maqām*) in a sevenfold ladder; al-Kalābādhī (d. 380/990) counts *zuhd* as the second *maqām* between "repentance" (*tawba*) and "perseverance" (*ṣabr*); al-Anṣārī al-Harawī (d. 481/1089), in *Manāzil al-sā'irīn*, prescribes a much more detailed program consisting of a hundred stations (*manāzil*), in which *zuhd* occupies the sixth position; al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), in *ʿAwārif al-ma'ārif*, discusses *zuhd* as a stage that follows "repentance" (*tawba*) and piety (*wara'*) and precedes perseverance (*ṣabr*) and poverty (*faqr*) (al-Suhrawardī, ch. 60, 283–9).

Regardless of the differences among these and other works, earlier and later, they are but a few examples, culled from a very rich library of Sufi works, that deal with the stages and states—often referred to as *maqāmāt wa-aḥwāl*—on the mystical ladder, and which count *zuhd* among the earlier and thus lesser stages on it (Massignon, 211; Nwyia, 171).

5 *Zuhd as Riyāḍat al-Nafs*

In Sufi literature, the main protagonist of the ascetical program is not the "world" (*al-dunyā*), but the self, the "lower self" (also the "carnal self")—*al-nafs*. The

Qurʾān speaks of three different “selves” (or “souls”): the tempting self (*al-naḥs al-ammāra bi-l-sūʾ*—Q 12:53); the blaming self (*al-naḥs al-lawwāma*—Q 75:2); and the contented, serene self (*al-naḥs al-muṭmaʾinna*—Q 89:27). These verses inspired Sufi authors to view the *naḥs* as an interior entity, which, because of her ties to the “inclination” (*al-hawāʾ*) and to the “Adversary” (*Iblīs, al-ʿaduww*), starts off laden with negative characteristics, but may transform to become enlightened and serene. Such transformation can only come about through effort and a special “training”—*adab, riyāḍa*. In fact, *riyāḍa* is the Arabic equivalent of the Greek *askesis*, from which the term “asceticism” derives. The training is perceived of as “combat” (*mujāhada, jihād*), a view which is supported by various traditions attributed to the Prophet, for example: “Your worst enemy is the *naḥs* that lies between your flanks (*aʿdā ʿaduwwika al-naḥs bayna janbayka*)” (al-Bayhaqī 157, 343; Sviri, *The Self*, 196–7).⁷

It is easy to see in “combat” a reference to severe ascetic activities, which emulate the monastic paradigm mentioned above. However, the line taken by the early mystical authors, and subsequently in the later Sufi system at large, is often mistrustful—and therefore even contentious—of external practices: rather than eliminate the *naḥs*, they argue, they strengthen her, for in her cunning manipulation, the *naḥs* turns the tables on the ascetical seeker. In directing the “combat” inwardly rather than outwardly, Sufis insist on a “psychological” paradigm that demands constant watchfulness over the *naḥs* and relentless reckoning with her. Such “watchful observation” is often referred to as *iʿtibār, taʾammul, tafakkur, naẓar*; the established term for “reckoning” with the *naḥs* is *muḥāsabat al-naḥs*.

In the Islamic mystical tradition, therefore, *al-zuhd fī l-dunyā* refers, above and beyond any other aspect of it, to a psychological effort to cut off any attachment to worldly matters—such as possessions, self-regard, social status—that please the *naḥs*. Sufis refer to such an act as *qaṭʿ al-ʿalāʾiq*. Thus, for example, al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1074) cites a fourth/tenth-century Sufi of the Baghdadi school: “The worshipper does not find pleasure in his conduct with God as long as the pleasure of the *naḥs* remains. For the people of truths (*ahl al-ḥaqāʾiq*) have cut off the attachments (*qaṭaʿū l-ʿalāʾiq*) that separate them from the Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*) before the attachments cut them off [from Him]” (al-Qushayrī, 79). And al-Sarrāj, in a chapter devoted to the station of *zuhd*, cites the following definitions by al-Junayd (d. 298/910) and by his teacher and maternal uncle Sarī al-Saqāṭī (d. ca. 253/867). Al-Junayd said: “*Zuhd* means that the hands are empty of possessions (*amlāk*) and the hearts are empty of greed

7 See also al-Bayhaqī, 163: “The combatant is he who fights his self (*al-mujāhid man jāhada naḥsahu*).”

(*ṭamaʿ*); and Sarī said: “*Zuhd* means that the heart is empty of that which the hands have become empty of” (al-Sarrāj, 72).

One of the earliest authors in the line of “interiorizing” the combat with the *nafs*—in fact, the one who laid down the literary foundation for the inward-looking principle—and who emphasized the need to constantly watch over the *nafs*, is fittingly nicknamed al-Muḥāsibī, that is, “the one who holds oneself accountable.” He was “an early mystic of Baghdad” (d. 243/857), to allude to one of the earliest studies on him by Margaret Smith, who inspired several lengthy studies.⁸ Here is a telling citation from his epistle *Sharḥ al-maʿrifa wa-badhīl al-naṣiḥa* (*Explaining Knowledge and Extending Advice*): “It is incumbent upon you, my brother, to reckon with your self (*muḥāsaba*), to know her (*maʿrifa*), and to oppose (*mukhālafa*) whatever she entices you to; for, more than by anything else, the self is characterized by what is despicable (*radhāʾil*)” (al-Muḥāsibī, *Sharḥ al-maʿrifa*, 37–8).

Knowing and observing the self, for al-Muḥāsibī, entail paying special attention to her cunning propensity to deceive and delude the ascetics despite—or rather due to—their external acts of self- and world-denial. He writes: “Do not be deluded by your lengthy night vigils or by your prolonged fasting or by other external supererogatory acts of devotion (*nawāfil*) without knowing your self, your power (*bi-qudratika*—or should one read *bi-qudratihā*, ‘by her power?’), and your Lord” (al-Muḥāsibī, *Sharḥ al-maʿrifa*, 30).⁹

Al-Muḥāsibī even notes, disparagingly, that the ulterior motive for most ascetics, sometimes he names them *qurrāʾ* and *ahl al-taqashshuf*, is to feign poverty and exhibit piety in order to gain public praise and favor. In his *al-Masāʾil fī aʿmāl al-qulūb wa-l-jawāriḥ*, he writes: “there are many a renunciant (*muqill*) whose asceticism (*zuhd*) is apparent on the exterior of their body, while their hearts are possessed by desire.” Then he cites a certain sage who finds the following in the “wisdom of Jesus”:¹⁰ “We have seen that some of the renunciants are full of love for this world, whereas others, wealthy ones, are devoid of love for this world; for example, the chosen ones Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon. Then, when God willed it, they abstained even from a grain of sand” (al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Masāʾil*, 10).

In this line he also writes:

8 For a detailed list of studies concerning al-Muḥāsibī, see Picken, 2–13; for a detailed list of his works, see Picken, 67–122.

9 Cf. the ironical tone in Shaqīq’s allusion to *al-ṣawwām al-qawwām*—see above.

10 The reference is probably to one of the Gospels; on Christian references in al-Muḥāsibī, see Picken, 2, 5; Sviri, *Countless Faces*, 65; van Ess, 27–8.

I fear that most of the worshippers among our contemporaries are deceived and deluded (*makhdūʿin mughtarrīn*); how many self-denying ones are there, wearing [ragged] clothes (*mutaqashshif fī libāsihi*), belittling themselves (*mutadhallil fī nafsihi*), eating trifle food from the rubble of the world; how many praying and fasting ones are there; warriors, pilgrims, weepers, preachers, and those who feign abstention from the world (*wa-muḡhir lil-zahāda fī l-dunyā*)—with no sincerity of conscience (*ʿalā ghayr ṣidq min al-ḍamīr*) to the Lord of the worlds.

AL-MUḤĀSIBĪ, *Kitāb al-rīʾāya*, 41

In the same vein, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, a third/ninth-century prolific author from Tirmidh in Transoxiana—another early mystic who was given retrospectively a prestigious place in the Sufi tradition—draws a comparison between false and genuine Christian monasticism, on the one hand, and false and genuine asceticism of his time, on the other. He writes:

The so-called ascetics of our time (*mutazahhidat zamāninā*), like [the pretentious monks] behave in this manner: they take up wearing wool and shabby clothes, eating leftovers and stale bread. Their wish is to exhibit asceticism (*iḡhār al-zuhd*) while their hearts are full of worldly desires, making their religion a means for their worldly drives.

AL-TIRMIDHĪ, *Nawādir*, ch. 5, 40; SVIRI, *Wa-rahbānīyyatan*

6 Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's Physiology and Cosmology of the *Nafs*

Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's views of the "lower self" (*nafs*) and the need to beware of her manipulations stem from his overall understanding of her physiological characteristics and cosmological origin. His analysis of the dynamics of the *nafs* and her association with pleasure, desire, and the base inclination is consistent, though hardly systematic or formal. Here is a condensed extract from a detailed, lengthy, and somewhat long-winded description:

When the clay became alive, the *nafs* emerged, established herself within the interior of the body, and exhaled.... The *nafs* resides in the lungs and from here she breathes (*tatanaffasu*) due to the life force inherent in her.... Between the heart and the lung God placed a subtle vessel from where a whizzing wind flows through the blood vessels. The origin of this wind is the fire [of hell], it is created from this fire.... In this fire, joy and loveliness are located. He called [this wind] desire (*shahwa*).... When,

due to an incidental memory, this wind stirs up in its vessel, the *naḥs* senses it and her [own] fire is kindled.... The *naḥs* is a turbid wind whose origin is earthy; she spreads within the blood vessels and fills them up in less than an eye-blink.... The origin of the base inclination (*hawā*) is the breath (*naḥs*) of fire. When this breath emerges from the fire [of hell], it carries with it desires with which hellfire is surrounded,¹¹ joy (*farah*) and attractive loveliness (*zīna*), and these it delivers to the *naḥs*. Joy and loveliness arouse the *naḥs*, due to the hot wind [i.e. desire] that is placed by her side in that subtle vessel; in less than an eye-blink, she spreads within the blood vessels that pervade the whole body, from head to foot. From her movement within the body the *naḥs* derives pleasure (*ladhdha*) and is cheered up. Hence her desire and pleasure.

AL-TIRMIDHĪ, *Riyāḍa*, 29–39¹²

To recap al-Tirmidhī's views, here is a short summary: The *naḥs* is the life force that, on the day of creation, enlivened the clay (*tīna*) from which Adam was created. In the primordial act of creation, the *naḥs* attached herself to the hollow interior (*jawf*) of Adam's body, and ever since she resides within the bodies of all human beings. Though Adam came to life by the breath of God, his body became vital and energized by means of the *naḥs* which brought with her the earthly life force inherent in the clay, or soil, itself. The *naḥs* is not an abstract concept; she is an entity located in the lungs. With the breath (*naḥs*) and via the blood vessels, she moves through the entire body. She spreads in the body with immense speed and interacts with other organic energies akin to herself. One such energy is "desire" (*shahwa*), which is seen by al-Tirmidhī as an organic substance with a capacity for growth, movement, and fermentation. All these entities and energies have a cosmological origin: "desire" comes from the fire of hell;¹³ it retains a kinship with joy (*farah*), attractive loveliness (*zīna*), and the base inclination (*hawā*). All three take residence in the body and have an impact on the human being's psychological drives which manifest in his physical conduct. Desire is located in the vicinity of the *naḥs*, within a subtle organ near the lungs. Both *naḥs* and desire are characterized as hot, fiery winds that, when mobilized, awaken and kindle one another. The fast movement of the *naḥs* in the bloodstream produces pleasure (*ladhdha*), another animated energy on which the *naḥs* feeds. Pleasure interacts with the

11 According to the *ḥadīth*: *ḥuffat al-nār bi-l-shahawāt*. See Muslim, *Bāb al-janna*, 1; for more references, see *Kitāb al-riyāḍa*, 37.

12 For a detailed discussion concerning the process of self-transformation, see Sviri, *The Self*.

13 See the *ḥadīth* "*inna al-nār ḥuffat bi-l-shahawāt*" mentioned above.

inclination (*hawā*), and this cluster of impulses, filled with vital, organic, and cosmic energy, reaches the bodily organs by means of the fast movement of the *nafs* through the bloodstream. One example of such a meeting of energies is the gushing forth of the seminal fluid (*mā' al-ṣulb*) in the pleasurable act of copulation (al-Tirmidhī, *Ri'yāḍa*, 32).

This complex structure stands at the root of al-Tirmidhī's suspicion not only of the *nafs*, but also of the ascetic behavior. According to him, all behavior and every ambition, be it for a good or a bad cause, stems from the *nafs*. The deep entanglement of the person with the *nafs* is reflected, linguistically, in the reflexive pronoun *bi-nafsī*, "by myself." Personhood, by definition, is associated with the *nafs*; the *nafs* is the person, the "ego." In his *Sīrat al-awliyā'*, al-Tirmidhī offers a detailed description, at times painful in its honest self-analysis, of the path a seeker must take in order to purify his heart in his wish (*irāda*) to reach God's vicinity. On his path, he oscillates between periods of extreme ascetic effort (*jahd*, *mujāhada*, *ri'yāḍa*), on the one hand, and, on the other, of desolate, sober realization of the futility of this effort. In *Sīrat al-awliyā'* he offers a detailed description of the seeker's ascetic struggle at the beginning of his quest (*irāda*): it consists of abstaining from food, drink, clothes; forcing abstention on all parts of his body: his hearing, seeing, talking, handling, and walking; seclusion (*'uzla*)—in fact, any of the ascetic practices that can be culled from the familiar monastic inventory (al-Tirmidhī, *Sīrat al-awliyā'*, 5 §10). But to no avail. The *nafs* takes control and ascribes to herself all his achievements. She is, writes al-Tirmidhī, like a tree whose branches keep shooting up anew even when the seeker exerts all his effort to uproot it altogether. The awareness of this hopeless situation comes about by means of "self-observation." Al-Tirmidhī uses the verb *naẓara* (to observe, investigate) rather than *ḥāsaba* (from which *muḥāsaba* derives). By means of self-observation (*naẓar*), the seeker finds that his attempts at harnessing his bodily limbs (*jawāriḥ*) to steer away from desirable objects may result, indeed, in physical abstention, yet his *nafs* remains full of desire. "He says: it is all but one desire" (al-Tirmidhī, *Sīrat al-awliyā'*, §6). In other words: he finds that external abstention does not eliminate the inner, psychological, desire. If one sincerely wishes to achieve purification on the path to God, one should withdraw inwardly from any desire. This calls for an even more unwavering observation, for how can one get rid of the fundamental, original desire to attain God's nearness and to receive the spiritual gifts that are associated with it? Paradoxically, this, too, is an expression of desire. When the seeker finds that even behind this lofty desire the *nafs* is at work, and that no willful act on his part is devoid of the *nafs*'s machination, he becomes powerless and perplexed (*muḍtarr ḥayrān*). At the point of helplessness and despair the seeker relinquishes all his aspirations and delusions of self-power

and places himself entirely in God's hands. "Then divine mercy reaches him, and he is granted mercy" (*fā-adrakathu l-raḥma fā-ruḥima*) (al-Tirmidhī, *Sīrat al-awlīyā*, 15 §29). To this al-Tirmidhī finds an appropriate reference in Q 27:62: "He who answers the constrained when he calls unto Him, and removes the evil and appoints you to be successors in the earth. Is there a god with God?" (tr. Arberry, 388).

Accordingly, the ultimate ascetical act is to renounce all desires and ambitions, including the desire for abstention. This is sometimes called *tark al-zuhd*.

7 Relinquishing Abstention (*Tark al-Zuhd, al-Zuhd fī l-Zuhd*)

In one of the earliest Sufi compilations, in the chapter on *zuhd* in *Kitāb al-ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf* by al-Kalābādihī (d. 380/990), the following saying by al-Shiblī (d. 334/945)—a Baghdadi Sufi associated with al-Junayd—is cited:

In reality, *zuhd* does not exist: one either abstains from what does not belong to him—this does not count as abstention; or one abstains from what belongs to him—what kind of abstention is this, if the object [of abstention] is with him? There is nothing but harnessing the *naḥs*, generosity, and comforting the other.

AL-KALĀBĀDHI, 94

The compiler, al-Kalābādihī, adds an explanation: "He, al-Shiblī, seems to define *zuhd* as the relinquishing of something (*tark al-shay'*) that [in the first place] does not belong to him; for what does not belong to him cannot be relinquished, as it is already relinquished (*li-annahū matrūk*); and what belongs to him, he [also] cannot relinquish." The notion of *zuhd* here seems to revolve round holding on to, or letting go of, possessions. However, it suggests that "abstention," just like "possession," is in and of itself a delusion: as long as one associates anything with oneself, it belongs to oneself, even if one is intent on relinquishing it. Since nothing really belongs to a person—whence abstention? Paradoxically, the low esteem with which the world and its possessions—material or otherwise—are regarded, leads to a devaluation of abstention itself. A variation on al-Shiblī's saying, cited in al-Suhrawardī's *Awārif al-ma'ārif*, is more succinct and more explicit: "*Zuhd* is heedlessness (*ghafla*), for this world is nothing, and *zuhd* in nothing is heedlessness (*al-zuhd fī lā shay' ghafla*)" (al-Suhrawardī, 283).

Al-Shiblī's radical assertions do not reveal an unusual approach in Sufi teaching. On the contrary, Sufi compilations contain many sayings and anecdotes in

a similar vein. One of the best-known illustrations of the suspicion with which Sufis regard *zuhd* is found in al-Qushayrī's *Epistle*. When Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī (d. mid-third/ninth century) was asked what his experience of *zuhd* was at the beginning of his path, he answered: "*Zuhd* has no stage (*manzila*)" and then elaborated: "For three days I was [in the stage of] *zuhd* and on the fourth day I came out of it. On the first day I abstained from the world and everything in it; on the second day I abstained from the hereafter; on the third day I abstained from everything but God. On the fourth day I remained with nothing but God" (al-Qushayrī, 38). And Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240), in a chapter on *zuhd* in his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, retells Abū Yazīd's story, but modifies its conclusion with a punch line that has become proverbial: After the third day, God asks Abū Yazīd: "What do you want, Abū Yazīd?" and the latter answers: "I want not to want (*urīdu an lā urīda*), for I am the wanted (*al-murād*) and you are the wanting (*al-murīd*)" (Ibn al-'Arabī, 3:319).

The above-mentioned anecdote about Abū Yazīd is not merely an extraordinary story. Thus, Shihāb al-Dīn Abū Ḥaṣṣ al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1235), in his authoritative compilation *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif*, likewise describes the relinquishing of the individual will and choice (*tark al-irāda wa-l-ikhtiyār*) as a hallmark of Sufism at large. He writes:

The people of al-Shām do not know the difference between Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) and poverty (*faqr*). They base themselves on Q 2:273 and on the Prophetic tradition according to which the poor will enter paradise before the wealthy.... The Sufi, however, does not relinquish things in expectation of a promised compensation [in the future], but in order to experience immediate mystical states (*aḥwāl mawjūda*), for he is "the son of the moment" (*fa-innahu bn^u waqtihi*). The Sufi finds blemish in [having] choice and will, for in every state he stands according to the will of God, not according to his own will. Hence, he does not see any merit in poverty per se nor in wealth per se. Wherever God places him, therein lies the merit, since he looks to the permission (*idhn*) which God has given him to stand where he stands.

AL-SUHRAWARDĪ, 38

In the last resort, al-Suhrawardī emphasizes the significance of the act of total "relinquishing" (*tark*) by introducing the paradox *al-zuhd fī l-zuhd*. He writes:

Abstention from abstention means to step out of making choices as regards abstention; for the one who abstains (*al-zāhid*) chooses abstention and wills it; ... however, when he is placed in the station of relinquishing his will (*maqām tark al-irāda*) and is stripped off of his choice

(*wa-nsalakha min ikhtiyārihi*), God reveals to him what his will [of him] is, and then he relinquishes this world by what God wills, not by what his *naḥs* wills; his abstention then becomes by God (*fa-yakūna zuhduhu bi-llāh ta'ālā ḥīna'idhⁱⁿ*).

AL-SUHRAWARDĪ, 283

8 Conclusion

Documentary evidence from as early as the eighth century CE reveals Muslim men and women who were stirred by a longing to seek, while still in their earthly lives, God's love (*ḥubb*), intimacy (*uns*), and nearness (*qurb*). Stemming from this longing, they also aspired to gain a direct "knowledge of God" (*al-ʿilm bi-llāh*, *maʿrifa*). The elements of nearness to God, love of God, and a direct knowledge of Him became the defining features of the mystical life in Islam since these early beginnings. Aspirants were seeking to become "men of sincerity" (*ahl al-ṣidq*), men of certitude (*ahl al-yaqīn*), and God's friends (*awliyāʾ Allāh*)—a spiritual elite (*al-khāṣṣa*) distinguished from ordinary worshippers (*al-ʿamma*) and even from pietists (*ahl al-taqwā*). They believed that as a prerequisite for attaining the longed-for mystical states, their interiorities, their "selves," must become purified of all attachments and appetites. Thus, they focused their effort on "cutting off their worldly attachments" (*qaṭʿ al-ʿalāʾiq*) and on "curtailing the selfish appetites" (*qaṭʿ al-shahawāt*). This preliminary stage of the transformative process they often named "abstention" or "renunciation" (*zuhd*). Rather than an extroverted social or religious phenomenon, *zuhd* (also *zahāda*), in the sense of abstention from worldly interests, denoted, therefore, a stage in the process of self-transformation. In this transformative process, the aspirants exerted themselves voluntarily to effortful acts and practices that extended beyond the prescriptions of the religious law. Such efforts they sometimes named "strenuous battling" (*mujāhada*) or "battling with the lower-self" (*jihād al-naḥs*) or "the training of the lower-self" (*riyāḍat al-naḥs*). According to Shaqīq al-Balkhī, one of the earliest authors whose work is extant, the objective of such efforts was to allow the dark forces governing human nature to transform into luminous energies; this luminosity heralded the desired mystical existence. Shaqīq names the light that emanates from such efforts "the light of abstention" (*nūr al-zuhd*); to him, as well as to most early mystics, this term signified an inner state rather than any outer manifestations. Intimate nearness to God, resulting from passionate search and voluntary efforts, was anchored in a divine saying (*ḥadīth qudsī*) known as *ḥadīth al-nawāfil* ("the tradition concerning supererogatory acts of worship"). This

divine saying points to no less than a “synergy” between man and God. In it God says:

My servant does not come near to Me by performing [anything but] My Commandments, but then he comes ever nearer to Me by performing voluntary acts of worship (*nawāfil*), so that I love him. And when I love him, I become his ear by which he hears, his sight by which he sees, his tongue by which he speaks, his hand by which he wards off, his foot by which he walks, and his heart by which he understands. By Me he performs these things.

AL-TIRMIDHĪ, *Nawādir*, ch. 260, 458

The human-divine synergy became the subtext and explanation of the marvelous, often referred to as “miraculous,” deeds attributed to the “friends of God” (*karāmāt al-awliyāʾ*). This, ultimately, is the path taken by those whose final ambition, paradoxically, is to relinquish not only their self-based will but also their choice of “abstention.” Thus, by becoming empty of both, they seek to reveal, and live by, God’s choice for them.

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