

CHAPTER 1

TRACING SUFISM'S RELATION TO ISLAM

Sufism's place in Islam is one of the most contested topics in contemporary Islamic discourse. The controversial nature of Sufism can usually be demonstrated by simply raising the issue in Muslim company. I recall discussing an essay of mine on Sufism with two Egyptian professors at Middlebury's summer Arabic school in 2009. One of the professors quickly cautioned that Sufism deviated from authentic Islam. The other professor proudly shared that his uncle was a Sufi *shaykh* in Cairo, and that in fact Sufism was something quite profound and spiritual. The debate continued over lunch with an eventual agreement to disagree on the nature of Sufism.

Their contrasting views illustrate much wider trends in contemporary Islam. For many Muslims today, Sufism is emblematic of everything that went wrong with Islamic civilization. Whether in casual conversation or in polemical literature, Sufism is frequently associated with medieval superstition, resignation, and corruption, factors leading to the weakening of Islamic civilization and its eventual conquest by European powers. In mosques throughout the world, at Islamic conferences, and in pamphlets distributed by anti-Sufi preachers, it is an oft-heard refrain that Sufism is un-Islamic or at least the vehicle through which beliefs and practices foreign to Islam made their way into the religion. Sufis are sometimes associated with *bida'a*, corrupt innovations in religion, and even *shirk*, associating partners with God. These generally anti-Sufi attitudes are one aspect of the profound purging of traditional culture from Islamic societies that has occurred in recent centuries, whether by colonial powers, modernizing Muslim states, or revivalist movements.

Alternatively, for many other Muslims Sufism is conceptually inseparable from Islam. What we call Sufism is in many places seamlessly integrated into a broader Islamic spiritual culture, a culture developed over centuries and embedded in local contexts. For many Muslims, whether in Morocco, Syria, Pakistan, or Bosnia, Sufism is an organic part of the Islam they grew up with, integrated into annual festivals for Sufi saints, specific prayers or practices connected with a Sufi order, or through family connections to a local *shaykh* or shrine. These different perspectives on Sufism have long histories that must be understood before we can make sense of current debates. Such histories further contextualize the ways in which contemporary Sufi teachers in North America negotiate the relationship of their tradition to Islamic belief and practice, which will be explored in the second section of this work.

As a comprehensive history of Sufism is beyond the scope of this work, in this chapter I will provide an outline of the history of Sufism's relation to Islamic orthodoxy, highlighting key figures and events that have defined the diverse ways in which Sufism has functioned in relation to religious authority in Islam. The focus will be primarily on the period of contestation in recent centuries, as this period has most immediately shaped current discourse on Sufism. The chapter then concludes with a consideration of how Sufis and Sufi-influenced Muslims have responded to anti-Sufi movements, particularly in the post-9/11 context in North America.

A NOTE ON ORTHODOXY

What counts as "orthodox" or not within a particular religion is of course highly contested. Figures who represent unassailable orthodoxy for some Muslims are archetypal heretics for others. Most major Islamic sects and schools of thought have produced institutions of authority, the representatives of which simultaneously claim orthodoxy for themselves and designate other sects as heretical. As scholars such as Talal Asad have suggested, orthodoxy is always a reflection of who has the power to establish their understanding of Islamic discourse and practice as "normative," "official," and "orthodox."¹ As power shifts, so too does orthodoxy, and hence orthodoxy is not as stable as it is often imagined to be. Keeping this in mind, the sorts of Sufism that are considered in this work developed predominantly within a Sunni context (*abl al-sunna wal-jama'a*), and hence a broad conception of what has traditionally been considered to be normative Sunnism is what I have in mind in using the term "orthodoxy." Hence, by "orthodoxy" I mean the sort of Islam represented by the four Sunni schools of

law (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali) and two theological schools of thought (Ash'ari and Maturidi) that came to be seen as legitimate by the majority of Sunnis. Acknowledging this is not to affirm Maliki or Ash'ari claims to Islamic authenticity, for example, but merely to, in a historical sense, acknowledge that Sunnism crystallized around these legal and theological approaches. The representatives of Sunni law and theology, known as the *'ulama* (religious scholars) or *fuqaha* (jurists), have historically drawn the boundaries of orthodoxy, and hence it is this group as a class that has tended to represent "orthodoxy" in Islamic history. As Richard Martin and Abbas Barzegar describe, "In Islam authority in judicial and theological matters was determined by consensus among scholars who were partisans of those schools that eventually prevailed over a plurality of others."² In tracing Sufism and orthodoxy, then, I am in some sense tracing the history of the relationship between Sufis and Sunni jurists.

SUFISM AND ORTHODOXY: 700–1500 CE

As Vincent Cornell notes, the "eternal conflict" between jurists and Sufis in Islam is one of Islamic Studies' longstanding stereotypes.³ It is a stereotype insofar as this image of continual conflict is contrasted by the historical reality of *fuqaha* who were *fuqara*, jurists who were Sufis. Throughout Islamic history it was not uncommon to find Islam's esoteric and exoteric elements married in practice, so much so that an ethic emerged among Muslims in various parts of the world that Sufism could not be justly practiced without adherence to the law, and that the law could not be adequately fulfilled without practicing Sufism⁴—spirituality and legality required one another. Overall, relations between Sufis and jurists spanned the spectrum of possibility from opposition through competition and cooperation, including significant periods of overlap.

Good relations between representatives of Sufism and the law were not universal, however, and the stereotype of conflict between scholars and Sufis, though exaggerated, is based on reality. Opponents to Sufism have been active since Islam's early formative era.⁵ Although Sufism as a concept did not exist before the ninth century CE, proto-Sufi tendencies such as *zuhd* (asceticism) and *mahabba* (love) drew controversy and opposition.⁶ From the beginning, Sufism has had representatives who challenged legalist sensibilities.

In the ninth century, two distinct styles of Sufism began to emerge in Iraq and Khorasan.⁷ The Sufis of Khorasan, notably Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 875), tended toward an ecstatic approach to the spiritual life that at

times rent the conventions of Islamic theology. Al-Bistami was noted for his ecstatic sayings (*shathiyat*), such as “Glory be to Me!”⁸ Such sayings challenged conventional orthodoxy by centering the self as the site of divinity. As they lived on the periphery of Muslim religious and political authority, Sufis in Khorasan were more easily able to transgress theological norms. The Sufis of Iraq, however, were centered in Baghdad, the seat of the Caliphate and hence of Muslim political and religious authority. They tended to ensure that their discourse was more in line with authoritative theological norms, in part due to the charged religio-political climate.

Ninth-century Baghdad was a hotbed of theological contestation, so it is no surprise that the first recorded persecution of Sufis was Ghulam Khalil’s (d. 888) initiation of legal action against a group of Sufis in Baghdad in 885.⁹ Although we do not know with certainty the nature of the allegations brought against Abu’l Husayn al-Nuri (d. 907) and his circle, it is believed to have something to do with their claim of a relationship of *‘ishq*, ardent love, between themselves and God.¹⁰ This language of unbridled emotion was thought by moralists like Khalil to be theologically suspect and to further lead to behavioral excesses.¹¹

Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), founder of the Hanbali school of law, was also known for criticizing early Sufis for some of their practices and for their use of amorous and even erotic imagery. Christopher Melchert observes that Ibn Hanbal “was certainly hostile to al-Muhasibi and Sari al-Saqati,” two of Baghdad’s most important early Sufis.¹² More generally, Hanbalis criticized Sufis for what they perceived to be theological deviations and religious innovations (*bida’*).¹³ That being the case for some Hanbalis, not all were opposed to Sufism and indeed some later Hanbalis were renowned Sufis themselves. Notable Hanbali Sufis include ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166) and ‘Abd Allah Ansari (d. 1089).¹⁴ Historians have discovered that Sufism and Hanbalism were in many cases complementary rather than conflicted, with a number of overlapping concerns and trends (e.g., piety, religious authenticity, and criticism of corrupt rulers).

If jurists criticized Sufis for their talk of love, Sufis responded by criticizing jurists for *not* talking about it. Hakim Sana’i (d. 1131), the famous court poet of the Ghaznavids and Sufi lyricist, wryly observes in his *Diwan* that “Abu Hanifa has not taught love, Shafi’i has no traditions about it.”¹⁵ Sana’i is not so much disputing the legal work of Abu Hanifa and Shafi’i as he is suggesting that the divine love Sufis seek is not found in their books. Later Sufis would frequently portray jurists as legalists blindly persecuting God’s friends while pursuing fame and gain. Perhaps Sunni Islam’s most famous intellectual figure, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), criticized jurists

as textualists seeking financial rewards over genuine spiritual felicity.¹⁶ One of Sufism's most influential authors, Muhyi ad-Din Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240), went so far as to refer to some jurists as the "pharaohs of the saints" and the "antichrists of the servants of God."¹⁷

These examples illustrate the larger fact that Sufis certainly distinguished their path from legalism, from the pursuit of the law for its own sake, and they were not reticent about criticizing those jurists with whom they disagreed, or whom they believed to be careerists missing their sacred function. And yet antinomianism was not widespread among Sufis. There were of course the *qalandariyya* present throughout much of the Muslim world: the wild, wandering dervishes who abandoned the conventions of everyday life and social respectability.¹⁸ In contrast to their approach, however, we find Junayd al-Baghdadi's (d. 910) teacher, Harith al-Muhasibi (d. 857), characteristic of much Sufi thought. Al-Muhasibi distinguished between three kinds of valid religious knowledge in his *Kitab al-'Ilm*: (1) legal knowledge of the lawful and unlawful, (2) knowledge of the inner world, or the unseen, and (3) knowledge of God and the real meaning of things.¹⁹ In al-Muhasibi's tripartite epistemology, legal knowledge is one of three forms of valid religious knowledge, one that Sufis by no means reject. Rather, they specialize in the other two forms of knowledge, that of the unseen and divine realities, while acknowledging the necessity of the first.

The famous execution of Mansur al-Hallaj in 922, in part for openly expressing his experience of union with God, brought what tension there was between Sufis and less mystically inclined Muslims into stark relief.²⁰ The process of demonstrating Sufism's Islamic authenticity, though arguably begun by al-Muhasibi, continued in earnest during this time, evolving from Junayd's reticence to speak about aspects of Sufism that might engender controversy²¹ to active efforts to articulate Sufism's inherently orthodox nature as one of Islam's legitimate religious sciences alongside the study of scripture and the law. Works such as Abu Nasr al-Sarraj's (d. 988) *Kitab al-luma' fi'l-tasawwuf*, and Abu Talib al-Makki's (d. 966) *Qut al-Qulub*, are representative of the more systematic books outlining Sufi doctrine and practice that emerged at this time.²² Even more developed treatises on Sufism emerged in the generations following al-Sarraj and al-Makki, most importantly al-Qushayri's *Risala* (1046), which "describes Sufi teachings and practices from the viewpoint of a full-fledged Ash'arite theologian" and which became perhaps the most widely read treatise on Sufism.²³ Qushayri's colleague, al-Hujwiri, who died in Lahore in 1071, wrote a similarly influential work, *Kashf al-mahjub*, inaugurating the venerable genre of Persian Sufi literature.

Al-Ghazali's famous text, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), more effectively articulated Sufism using the language of Islamic law than his predecessors had been able to do. Al-Ghazali is widely credited with revivifying Sunni Islam in the eleventh century by infusing the law with mystical elements,²⁴ in effect synthesizing Sufism and Islamic law in a way amenable to both Sufis and jurists.²⁵ The magnitude of his role in this regard remains contested, however. Nevertheless, whether by al-Ghazali's pen or in collusion with other factors, by the eleventh century Sufis began to receive official patronage from Muslim rulers. Under Seljuk rule in Khorasan, Sufis established *khanaqahs* (lodges) next to *madrasas* (schools of Islamic law), creating joint complexes for the teaching of Islam's inward and outward sciences.²⁶ Saladin (d. 1193) established the first Sufi lodge in Cairo in 1174.²⁷ By the thirteenth century, Sufism's status as a legitimate science within the sciences of Islam was relatively cemented. At this time "the very term Sufi could designate a legitimate professional occupation within the religious establishment."²⁸ No longer did Sufis have to only hint at the visions, states, and metaphysical perspectives they encountered. The metaphysical explicitness of Ibn al-'Arabi's works represent the comfort with which Sufis could express themselves in text, testifying to Sufism's establishment in Muslim societies.²⁹

By the fourteenth century Sufi orders were integral to the structure of Muslim societies. The orders would shape the practice of Islam in the late medieval era and were essential to the transmission of education, music, spirituality, and literature. Sufi shrines united various strata of Muslim societies as sites of shared piety.³⁰ Sufi shrines and the saints they contained in effect defined the spiritual and geographical landscapes of post-Mongol Islam, so much so that "the Shrine, not the mosque, became the symbol of Islam."³¹ Besides defining those societies that were already predominantly Muslim, Sufi teachers further played key roles in the conversion of non-Arab peoples to Islam.³²

During the medieval era Sufi orders were important symbols of Muslim political legitimacy. Sufis were not simply otherworldly mystics but people of real power in Muslim societies.³³ Sufi masters commanded immense respect from all social strata, including sultans and caliphs. Both political and religious authorities had to contend with Sufis, often working with them or utilizing their religious charisma for political legitimacy, but only rarely opposing them outright. After the Seljuks, Muslim rulers "established two parallel kinds of institutions to demonstrate their legitimacy: academies for training Muslim scholars, and residential hospices for Sufi devotees."³⁴ The importance of Sufi orders in legitimating state power only increased after the Mongol destruction of the caliphate in 1258. From that time until the

colonial period five centuries later, Sufism was essential to any regime that claimed an Islamic pedigree. Later dynasties, including the Mamluk, Ottoman, and Mughal, gave official patronage to Sufi teachers and orders, often with generous material support.

By the fourteenth century Sufism was not only recognized as a legitimate religious discipline but at times overshadowed theology and jurisprudence in power and popularity.³⁵ The dissemination of Sufi literature meant that Sufi doctrines infused multiple strata of Muslim societies, beyond the direct activity of Sufi leaders and their orders.³⁶ The widespread accessibility of Sufi texts raised the ire of conservative scholars, however, who feared the subversive influence of some of Sufism's more radical theological perspectives. Although the majority of the *'ulama* came to accept the practice of Sufism within the bounds of the *shari'a*, there remained some who could not stomach much of what Sufism had to offer.

That being a Sufi in the medieval period was respected as a legitimate religious vocation, one integrated into the structures of power and authority in Muslim societies, did not mean that Sufism was something entirely uncontroversial after the twelfth century. Though Sufis and jurists often functioned in complementary ways, there was an inherent tension between claims of religious knowledge based on the agreed-upon meaning of scripture and tradition, and claims of religious knowledge based on inner experience of religious truth, or "unveiling" (*kashf*). The famous ecstatic al-Bistami is reported to have said to a group of scholars, "You take your knowledge dead from the dead, but we take our knowledge from the Alive who does not die!"³⁷ For those whose claim to religious authority was based on interpreting scriptures, the claims of others to have gained knowledge from the very source of the scriptures themselves was potentially threatening. And, indeed, Sufis often proclaimed that they, not the jurists and theologians, had authoritative knowledge of what the Qur'an and Sunna meant based on an inner experience, a means of knowledge that trumped scholarly methods. Ibn al-'Arabi, in his *Futubat al-Makkiyya*, writes on this point:

One of the characteristics of the exoteric scholar in defending himself is that he is ignorant of him who says, "My Lord has given me to understand." He considers himself superior to the one who says this and to the true possessor of knowledge. But he who is of the Folk of Allah says, "God has cast into my inmost consciousness what He meant by this ruling in this verse." Or he says, "I saw the Messenger of God in an Incident, and he gave me news of the soundness of this report [*hadith*] which has been related from him and what it signifies for him."³⁸

As Ibn al-‘Arabi describes in this passage, there is a tension between scholarly and saintly modes of religiosity.³⁹ In the scholarly mode, knowledge is primarily cognitive and open to all who can apprehend the agreed-on or apparent meaning of religious texts, a kind of knowing generally referred to as *‘ilm*. In the saintly mode, however, knowledge is existential, inward, and available only to those God chooses to reveal it to. Sufis usually refer to this kind of knowing as *ma‘rifa* (experiential knowledge). The inner authority of the saint’s experience of course has the potential to disrupt or contest the “outward” authority of the scholar’s learning.

IBN TAYMIYYA’S CRITIQUE OF SUFISM

Those jurists and theologians who most feared the potential for claims of Sufi unveiling to contest and destabilize orthodox religious interpretations tended toward what may be termed textualism, or scriptural literalism. Exemplary here is Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), perhaps the most formidable opponent of elements of Sufi doctrine and practice, famously popularizing the veritable genre of writings against Ibn al-‘Arabi.⁴⁰ Illustrating the scholarly mode of religiosity well, Ibn Taymiyya writes: “whatever the Koran and *Sunna* adduce of law and learning is true and whatever in law and learning they contradict is wrong.”⁴¹ For Ibn Taymiyya, all authentic knowledge can be confirmed by referring to the clear meaning of religious texts, a principle that allows the scholar to disavow the interpretation of one who claims an inner knowledge of a text’s true meaning.

Although Ibn Taymiyya did not oppose Sufism outright and was himself a member of the Qadiriyya,⁴² his works targeted central aspects of Sufism, laying the intellectual groundwork for later, more sustained anti-Sufi movements. He criticized the Sufi veneration of saintly masters and the prayers made at their shrines. He rejected the Sufi use of music and belief in saintly miracles. Doctrinally, Ibn Taymiyya attacked Ibn al-‘Arabi’s exposition of the ‘oneness of being’ as a blameworthy innovation (*bida‘a*), one deviating from the beliefs of the early Muslim community. He further charged that Ibn al-‘Arabi’s works evince a heretical confusion of the Creator and His creation. Ibn Taymiyya wrote a number of works to this effect, distinguishing between authentic Sufism—the purification of the soul through scrupulous observance of God’s commands in the Qur’an and Sunna—and its inauthentic counterpart, philosophical Sufism (*tasawwuf al-falasifa*), which Ibn Taymiyya associated first and foremost with Ibn al-‘Arabi.⁴³ Ibn Taymiyya was so concerned with the deleterious effects of this sort of Sufism that he suggested its prevalence was a greater calamity for Muslims than the Mongol invasions.⁴⁴

REVIVALIST AND EUROPEAN CHALLENGES:
1500–1900 CE

SUFI REVIVALISM IN SOUTH ASIA AND AFRICA

Although Ibn Taymiyya had little impact on the wider Islamic intellectual tradition for some time following his death, his concerns about corruption and theological deviance among Sufis were shared by a growing number of Muslims in the sixteenth century, including many Sufis themselves. The official patronage afforded Sufis in Muslim dynasties eventually allowed for various forms of corruption to set in.⁴⁵ As a result, the reform of Sufism had been a longstanding concern. Many contemporary Muslims perceive Sufism to be a deviance from the dynamism of early Islam and a cause of the decline of Islamic civilization. And yet, in contrast to this widespread perception, Sufism was critical to religious reform and revival in Islam's later centuries.⁴⁶ Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sufi reformers emerged to purify their tradition of what they saw as passivity, superstition, overly metaphysical speculations, and misguided theology. These reformers have been described as "Neo-Sufis," a term first used by Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), in that their supposedly new form of Sufism left behind the inward-looking passivity and metaphysical speculations of older Sufism, embracing "the activist impulse of orthodox Islam."⁴⁷ However, scholars have since suggested that the distinction drawn between these newer orders and older ones is too stark.⁴⁸ Although there were a number of important Sufi reformers, I will briefly consider three here as illustrative of what may be termed Sufi revivalism.⁴⁹

In the Indian subcontinent, Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1625 CE) attempted to purge the Sufi tradition of universalistic metaphysics and create a more *shari'a*-oriented and politically active Naqshbandi order.⁵⁰ His success was such that he came to be referred to as the "reviver" or "renewer" of Islam in the second millennium (*mujaddid-i alf-i thani*) and the branch of the Naqshbandi order named after him was known as the Mujaddidiyya.⁵¹ Sirhindi was the most vocal and influential opponent of the religious syncretism and Shi'a sympathies of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (d. 1605). Believing that no one religion exhausted the truth, Akbar developed a universal religious order he referred to as the *Din-i-Ilahi*, or "Divine Faith."⁵² The *Din-i-Ilahi* drew on Islam, Hinduism, and other religions. Practically, Akbar's perspective manifested in a general leveling of Muslim-Hindu relations, as he saw himself as a protector and unifier of his subjects, regardless of religious affiliation.⁵³ In response to Akbar's policies, Sirhindi reaffirmed the importance of Muslim dominance in India, and, like Ibn Taymiyya, argued that the

nonbelievers were not to be granted concessions, but rather were to feel the humiliation of subjugation under Muslim rule.⁵⁴ He suggested that Muslims separate themselves from Hindus, that nonbelievers be “kept at arm’s length like dogs.”⁵⁵ Further, like Ibn Taymiyya, Sirhindi wrote against *bida’ā* or innovations in religion, generally rejecting the then normative Sunni stance on the possibility of *bida’ā hasana*, or venerable innovations in religion. He opposed the philosophical trend that had developed around Ibn al-‘Arabi’s thought, known as *wahdat al-wujud*, or the “oneness of being,” and instead advocated *wahdat al-shuhud*, or the “oneness of witnessing,” which more strongly emphasized the distinction between Creator and creation, between God and the world, and between Islam and other religions. Sirhindi revived a conservative, Sunni, law-affirming Sufism that would shape Islam in India for centuries to follow and have widespread influence throughout the Muslim world.⁵⁶

In the eighteenth century, the banner of Sufi reform in India was carried by Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762 CE). Wali Allah was exposed to the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya during study in Mecca and Medina and, like Ibn Taymiyya, opposed saint veneration, innovation in religion, and reliance on authorities besides the Qur’an and Sunna. He similarly opposed what he deemed excessive or misguided interpreters of Ibn al-‘Arabi, notably by the Naqshbandi poet ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492).⁵⁷ Wali Allah, like Sirhindi, maintained a generally positive view of Ibn al-‘Arabi himself but believed his thought had been taken in dangerous directions by his later followers. In his writings, Wali Allah stressed the importance of practicing both mysticism and the law, of being learned in both spirituality and jurisprudence, reaffirming the orthodox Sufi dictum that the correct practice of one required the other. He wrote, “Sufis without knowledge of the Qur’an and *Sunna*, and scholars who are not interested in mysticism are brigands and robbers of the *din* [religion].”⁵⁸ Wali Allah was renowned throughout the Muslim world for his Qur’an commentaries and his scholarship on *hadith* and jurisprudence.⁵⁹ He was a skilled intellectual synthesizer, working to reconcile orthodoxy, mysticism, and modern developments. He sought to revive Muslim authority in India, political and religious, and was concerned to prevent Hindu influences from contaminating Muslim practice. Wali Allah suggested that Muslims live far enough from Hindu towns that they could not see the light of the fires in Hindu homes.⁶⁰ Politically he believed the caliphate was necessary to unify Muslims, enforce the *shari’a*, and defend the Muslim community from its enemies.⁶¹ Wali Allah further advocated for religious reform and a renewal of *ijtihad*, or independent legal reasoning. He sought to harmonize the four Sunni schools of law as a way to unify the divided Muslim community in India.⁶² Overall, he wanted to

infuse Islamic law, spirituality, and politics with a renewed dynamism, seeing his tradition stifled by medieval accretions,⁶³ an orientation that would be shared by Salafi reformers in the nineteenth century.

In contrast to Shah Wali Allah, Ahmad Ibn Idris (d. 1837) was not an intellectual reformer, but he played a critical role in the rise of a new type of Sufi order that would come to dominate Muslim religiosity and politics in much of North Africa in the nineteenth century. Born in Morocco, Ibn Idris was trained at the famous Qarawiyyin University in Fez, where he received an education in both Islamic law and Sufism, as was frequently the case for scholars in the eighteenth century *Maghreb*.⁶⁴ After traveling to Mecca to perform the *Hajj* in 1799, Ibn Idris remained in Mecca, where he taught. Three of his students would found orders that shaped the practice of Sufism in the nineteenth century: Muhammad bin Ali al-Sanusi (d. 1859) of the Sanusiyya in Libya, Muhammad Uthman al-Mirghani (d. 1853) of the Khatmiyya in Sudan, and Ibrahim al-Rashid (d. 1874) of the Rashidiyya in Sudan and Somalia.⁶⁵ Ibn Idris was a proponent of the *tariqa Muhammadiyya*, or the Path of Muhammad, a “reformed and reinvigorated form of Islam.”⁶⁶ He believed that a reformed Islam required an emphasis on the inner life as well as outer acts.⁶⁷ Like Ibn Taymiyya, he contended that Muslims must return to the Qur’an and Sunna, and he rejected blind adherence (*taqlid*) to a school of law or Sufi order. Ibn Idris clearly illustrates how reform-minded Sufis shared much with more concertedly anti-Sufi movements such as the Wahhabis and Salafis, all seeking to purify Islamic practice of innovation and corruption in a return to the sources of the faith. Notably, however, Ibn Idris rejected the violence through which the Wahhabis pursued their project of purification.

WAHHABI AND SALAFI OPPOSITION TO SUFISM

In the eighteenth century, Ibn Taymiyya’s anti-Sufi polemics were revived and amplified by Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1791). Hailing from the Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab was drawn to the works of Ibn Taymiyya while pursuing theological studies in Medina. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab was profoundly influenced by Ibn Taymiyya’s concern to purify Islam of all contaminants, whether extra-Islamic, Sufi, or Shi’a in nature. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab was further influenced by Ibn Taymiyya’s creedal literalism, which rejected the Ash’ari *ta’wil* (figurative interpretation) of Qur’anic descriptions of God’s “hands” and “face” in favor of describing these as real (*haqiqi*) attributes of God.

Despite these shared concerns, there are important differences between the two reformers. Ibn Taymiyya was “a far more rigorous and careful

thinker and an infinitely more prolific scholar.”⁶⁸ Unlike most founders of religious movements in Islamic history, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab produced very little in the way of scholarly work, writing a number of quite short volumes, many consisting almost exclusively of *hadith* arranged topically. Hamid Algar suggests that the most significant difference between Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Taymiyya is to be found in their respective views on Sufism. Ibn Taymiyya certainly opposed elements of Sufism but himself remained an advocate of its ethics within the bounds of *shari‘a*. Ibn Taymiyya was, after all, a member of the Qadiri Sufi order, referring to ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani as “our master” in his commentary on al-Jilani’s famous work, *Futuh al-Ghayb* (“Revelations of the Unseen”).⁶⁹ Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, however, rejected Sufism, “root and branch.”⁷⁰ He accused his Muslim contemporaries of not simply indulging in heretical innovations but committing idolatry outright (*shirk*), hence falling into unbelief. For Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, the unbelievers were not just the Jews and Christians but also the surrounding Muslims and their Ottoman rulers.

Also unlike Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s perspectives were eventually married to political power. He began enforcing his purified vision of Islam in his hometown, al-‘Uyayna, under the protection of its ruler, ‘Uthman bin Mu‘ammar. He started by destroying a tomb built for one of the Prophet Muhammad’s companions and by personally lashing an adulteress.⁷¹ Such acts drew notoriety and then concerted opposition. Bin Mu‘ammar withdrew his protection and expelled Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. The emerging reformer then relocated to al-Dir‘iyya, where he formed a historically critical alliance with that city’s ruler, Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud (d. 1765). In 1746, with the military support of Ibn Sa‘ud, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab declared a *jihad* against the Muslims from the surrounding areas who refused to acknowledge his understanding of *tawhid*. Those who rejected his stark theology were considered idolaters (*mushrikin*), against whom fighting was permissible. Before his death in 1791, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab successfully established his vision of Islam in the Najd region of the Arabian peninsula, capturing Riyadh in 1773 and making it the capital of the new state.⁷² Following his death, Wahhabi forces began attacking the Hijaz, eventually taking over Mecca and Medina between 1805 and 1812. Muslims watched in horror as the Wahhabi forces “proceeded to destroy all the sacred tombs, including the tomb of Muhammad, to massacre the Muslims of the holy cities, and to impose their own standards on future pilgrims.”⁷³ Esther Peskes notes that, under Wahhabi rule in Arabia, the Sufi institution of *rabita* based on an intimate tie with a shaykh possessing *baraka*, the general Sufi claim of a special relationship with the Prophet through a *silisila*, and the veneration of the tombs of Sufi saints and other pious persons, which is

one of the most visible public manifestations of Sufis practices, were all condemned as sheer *kufr* [unbelief].⁷⁴

At the Ottoman sultan's request, the Egyptian governor Ali Pasha destroyed the Wahhabi-Saudi state between 1812 and 1818. However, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's ideas had already begun to disseminate through networks of scholars and preachers to prominent Muslim cities. Historians noted the spread of Wahhabi ideas as far as Cairo and Baghdad shortly after the Wahhabi establishment in the Najd.⁷⁵ Following the withdrawal of Ali Pasha's troops, the Wahhabi-Saudi movement began to expand again, this time based in Riyadh. Their opposition to the Ottomans made them attractive allies for the British, who sought to remove the Ottoman obstacle from their path to dominance in the region. British aid to the Saudis began in 1865 and increased until the First World War, after which the British supported the Saudi conquest of the Arabian Peninsula, securing Wahhabism's place in the Muslim world.⁷⁶

Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's campaign to purify Islam of Sufi innovations would later intersect with an ideological aversion to Sufism as being backward and superstitious, an aspect of Islamic civilization that needed to be purged if Muslims were to regain political power in the modern world. This more ideological aversion to Sufism, though itself not devoid of theological disagreement, was initiated by the nineteenth-century Salafiyya. The Salafi movement began soon after Muslims were faced with the growing power differential between their own societies and those of Europe. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, the three largest Muslim states, the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, were increasingly challenged by Europe's growing influence in global affairs. Although these empires, to varying degrees, attempted administrative reform along European lines, they could not sustain themselves in light of Europe's rapid technological, military, and economic advance. European colonial powers such as Britain, Holland, Russia, and France made extensive political and economic inroads into much of the Muslim world in the eighteenth century. Notably, the British East India Company became the *de facto* ruler of Bengal by 1764, and Napoleon successfully invaded Egypt in 1798. As the economies of Muslim empires became increasingly tied to Europe's rapidly expanding system of capital, Western influences began to penetrate Muslim societies in the form of manufactured goods, rationalized European military technology, mass media, more efficient forms of administration, and bourgeois social norms. Such influences became paramount as more and more Muslim states fell under the direct rule of European colonial powers.

While the eighteenth century was a period of decline for Muslim powers, the nineteenth century saw the complete disintegration of global

Muslim political power.⁷⁷ France occupied Tunis in 1881, and England occupied Egypt the following year.⁷⁸ Such a state of affairs inspired reformist thinkers, most notably Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), to call for a renewed pan-Islamism, as well as the embrace of European science and technology. For al-Afghani, Islam was a rational religion that needed only a reformation to purify it of medieval superstition, of which elements of Sufism were clearly a part. Al-Afghani criticized the Sufis of his day for betraying Islam's rationality and succumbing to fatalism, passivity, and blind obedience.⁷⁹ He blamed the success of the Crusades on "esotericism's" weakening of the Muslim community. For al-Afghani, "esotericism" re-interpreted Islam as something other than what it was: an eminently rational religion based on the transcendence of God.⁸⁰ We should note that he was not thereby an opponent of Sufism as such. Al-Afghani's most prominent student, Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), describes studying the work of Jami, a famous Naqshbandi poet and interpreter of Ibn al-'Arabi, under al-Afghani's tutelage.

Muhammad 'Abduh and, later, Rashid Rida (d. 1935) would take up Afghani's cause, disseminating his ideas in Egypt and throughout the Middle East. 'Abduh, who became the Mufti of Egypt in 1899, favored a return to the Islam of the *salaf* (the pious early generations of Islam) and criticized what he deemed to be Sufi excesses, including saint veneration and the ontological unity characteristic of Ibn al-'Arabi's thought.⁸¹ Although 'Abduh was an enthusiastic student of what he deemed to be true Sufism, he became increasingly concerned throughout his life and public career over Sufi innovations and deviations from the *shari'a*.⁸² With his role as Egypt's highest religious authority, 'Abduh's perspectives on Sufism were influential. Rida in particular had a negative experience attending a Mevlevi *sema'* (whirling ceremony), and was later drawn to the works of Ibn Taymiyya, which he would popularize through his journal *al-Manar*. Through this journal anti-Sufi perspectives were disseminated widely. Rida became a concerted opponent of Sufism, though, like 'Abduh, he accepted a limited form of mysticism, one concerned with sincerity in religion. Rida believed much of what he saw in Sufism to be a corruption of Islam that weakened Muslim civilization. Rida was also an enthusiastic supporter of the Wahhabi takeover of the *hijaz*, and defended the Wahhabi movement against accusations (often by Sufis) of heresy.⁸³ Though committed to reformist ideals, Rida took the trajectory of 'Abduh's thought in a more conservative direction. He emphasized the importance of returning to the sources of Islam: the Qur'an, Sunna, and the practice of Islam's first generations, the *salaf*. He opposed Shi'ism and Sufi saint veneration and called for a broad-based struggle to restore a united Islamic polity headed by a Caliph.

In this sense, Rida can be understood as laying the intellectual foundation for the Islamic revivalism of thinkers such as Abul Ala Maududi (d. 1979) and Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966).

THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN COLONIALISM ON SUFISM

Elizabeth Sirriyeh suggests that the effect of Wahhabi and Salafi opposition to Sufism “pales almost into insignificance” when compared with the profound impact European colonization had on Sufi orders and their place in Muslim societies.⁸⁴ In the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth, European colonial powers, including the British, French, Dutch, Russians, and Italians, sought not only to control but to remake much of the Muslim world in their own image. European rule of Muslim societies saw the gradual dissolution of traditional Muslim institutions such as the sultanate, the *madrasa* system, and the network of endowments (*awqaf*) and patronage that funded Muslim religious institutions.⁸⁵ The basic structures of premodern Muslim societies were for the most part dismantled and replaced with either European or European-derived systems of government, law, and education, representing a profound historic, cultural, and existential break with the past. As Sufi orders were integral to most precolonial Muslim societies, the European dismantling of the old order displaced them as well. Sufi responses to European encroachment ranged from collaboration and quietism to open declarations of *jihad* against the nonbelieving invaders. Though their role in resisting colonialism is often overlooked, Sufi orders were instrumental in organizing some of the most effective military resistance to European invasions, from South East Asia to the Caucasus and North Africa.

Sirriyeh suggests that Algeria is a particularly illuminative case study, as it endured one of the earliest and longest-running colonial occupations of any Muslim country.⁸⁶ Prior to the French invasion, Algeria was ruled by a contingent of Ottoman janissaries in collaboration with local tribal leaders and Sufis. When the French invaded in 1830, the son of a Qadiri *shaykh*, Amir ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri (d. 1883), assumed leadership of the resistance, declaring himself “Commander of the Faithful.” He began enforcing *shari‘a*, emphasizing Islamic norms, and waging *jihad* against the French.⁸⁷ Beginning in the early 1840s, the French ramped up their campaign in Algeria, burning crops, destroying villages, and slaughtering inhabitants, all to prepare the country for colonization.⁸⁸ ‘Abd al-Qadir continued his struggle throughout this difficult and violent period, alternating between periods of fighting and peace with French occupying forces, until his capture and imprisonment in 1847. He was not only an astute military commander

but also a philosopher who studied and wrote commentaries on the works of Ibn al-‘Arabi.⁸⁹ ‘Abd al-Qadir shows clearly that an orientation toward what Ibn Taymiyya called “philosophical Sufism” was not anathema to an activist and even militant concern to defend Muslim lands from invaders.

During the early nineteenth century the Russians fought Naqshbandi and Qadiri-organized resistance in the Caucasus (Chechnya and Dagestan) for twenty-five years, only subduing Sufi resistance to Russian rule in 1859. Most famously, the Naqshbandi *shaykh* Shamil Dagestani (d. 1871), known popularly as Imam Shamil, effectively ruled much of Dagestan, Chechnya, and parts of Ingushetia between 1834 and 1859, while waging a defensive war against the Russians. Like the Wahhabis, he enforced a strict version of the *shari‘a* in areas under his rule, flogging drinkers and banning tobacco, music, and dancing.⁹⁰ Naqshbandi and Qadiri Sufis contributed both to the Islamization of the Caucasus region and resistance to Russian invaders, again illustrating that Sufism was not incompatible with strict religiosity and activism.

Amir ‘Abd al-Qadir and Imam Shamil are two of many examples of Sufi resistance to European expansion in the nineteenth century. The Tijani leader Al-Hajj Umar Tal (d. 1864) fought the French in the Senegal River valley, while across the world, in Java, the Qadiri order was instrumental in the uprising against the Dutch in 1888.⁹¹ The British faced off against the Mahdi, Muhammad Ahmad (d. 1885), and his followers in the Sudan, engaging in large, bloody battles there. Late in the nineteenth century, the Sufi leader Muhammad Abdallah Hasan (d. 1920) organized resistance to British, Italian, and Ethiopian incursions into Somalia. When the Italians attempted to conquer Libya in the early twentieth century, they had to contend with the Sanusiyya, a widespread Sufi order that functioned to coordinate the efforts of numerous North African tribes. Following the Second World War, when the Allied powers set up an independent Libyan state, the head of the Sanusi order was crowned Idris I, the first king of independent Libya.

For nineteenth-century Europeans, then, Sufi orders became associated not only with the bizarre and exotic, but also with militancy and fanaticism. They appeared as the stalwart representatives of Islam’s old order in the face of the political collapse of Muslim states, the displacement of Islamic law, and dissolution of the traditional Islamic madrasa system. Furthermore, as Sirriyeh notes, although Sufis frequently resisted European colonial incursions, they ultimately failed to defeat colonialism. In many cases their eventual collaboration with colonial powers shook Muslim confidence in Sufism.⁹² The British, for example, co-opted the hereditary caretakers of Sufi shrines in the Punjab into a system of landlords through which they could exercise

their influence.⁹³ Imam Shamil, when realizing that resistance to Russian dominance in the region was futile, advocated that Muslims accept Russian rule, while 'Abd al-Qadir accepted state honors from France following his arrest and exile. Sufis came to be associated with collaboration and quietism. With the loss of confidence in Sufism, Muslims were willing to consider other claimants to Muslim representation and revival, including nationalists and Salafis. The failure of Sufis to resist French colonization is exemplary in this regard, as the early twentieth century saw the rise of nationalist and Salafi opposition to French rule gain support among many Algerians.

Emerging Wahhabi and Salafi narratives attempted something of an erasure of Sufism from Islamic history, downplaying its role in medieval Islam, with some suggesting that Sufism was an extra-Islamic phenomenon, perhaps of Hindu origin, infiltrating and compromising the rationalism and activism of Islam. Carl Ernst notes that Orientalist literature on Sufism was widely translated into Arabic and Persian and avidly read by Muslim elites.⁹⁴ In particular, the Orientalist separation of Sufism from Islam, in claiming a Greek, Persian, or Hindu origin, bolstered the argument that Sufism was in many ways a contaminant from outside of the Islamic tradition.

ORIENTALISM AND THE SEPARATION OF SUFISM AND ISLAM

Sufism's normativity within the Islamic tradition was challenged not only by Muslims concerned with revival and reform but also by European scholars whose understanding of Sufism was in part shaped by the remarkable discovery of linguistic families. In 1786 William Jones (d. 1794), a philologist and colonial official for the East India Company in Calcutta, gave the third presidential address to the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Jones's address would profoundly shift European understandings of self and other. Having learned to read Sanskrit and Persian, Jones was struck by a remarkable correspondence among Sanskrit, Persian, and the classical languages of Europe: Greek and Latin. In his address, Jones noted,

The *Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet beating to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists.⁹⁵

As Tomoko Masuzawa observes, Jones's lecture lit afire the imaginations of eighteenth-century European elites, igniting a craze for the classical literature of India.⁹⁶ The lecture also fostered widespread speculation on the nature of the "common source" Jones alluded to. This common source came to be referred to as the Indo-European language, an ancient language from which Indian, Persian, and European languages were thought to derive. This idea of a single linguistic source emerged as the most probable answer to the question, incisively posed by Wendy Doniger: "How are we to explain the fact (and it is a fact) that people speak one form or another of Indo-European languages from India to Ireland?"⁹⁷ Though this common source is not observable (there are no ancient documents written in Indo-European), Doniger shares the widely held view among linguists that it is an "inescapable hypothesis"⁹⁸—the correspondences, both surface and structural, among Indian, Persian, and European languages, can only be explained by positing a common origin.

What began as a linguistic category, however, soon evolved into an anthropological category. In the mid-nineteenth century European Orientalists began to refer to Sanskrit, Persian, and Greek as belonging to the Indo-European or, more concisely, "Aryan" family of languages. The word "Aryan" was derived from the ancient Persian and Sanskrit *arya*, meaning "noble," a term Persian and Sanskrit speakers used to refer to themselves.⁹⁹ Though Jones's discovery could just as easily have led to a sense of humanity's shared history and perhaps underlying unity, it morphed into what would eventually become categories of differentiation based on race. Notably, Wilhelm von Humboldt (d. 1835), a Prussian minister, education reformer, and linguist, hypothesized that a given language was intimately connected with the "race" or "nation" from which it originated. According to Humboldt, a given people formed and were in turn formed by their language: a race's mental power was determined by its language, which itself expressed the race's mental possibilities and limitations.¹⁰⁰ Humboldt further suggested that the Indo-European languages presented the best climate for advanced mental formation and, apparently, historical destiny.

The superiority of the Indo-European language family was thought to lie in its grammar. Humboldt proposed that the grammar of Sanskrit (and related languages like Greek) is flexible, spawning new linguistic forms and thereby generating cultural creativity and philosophical progress. The creativity of Indo-European grammatical structures stood in contrast with the rigidity of the Semitic language family. Rather than see the relatively static quality of grammatical structures in Hebrew and Arabic as something positive, representing perhaps an ancient purity preserved over time, Humboldt, following the Sanskritist Friedrich Schlegel (d. 1829), evaluated this

quality of Semitic languages negatively. Semitic grammar was limited by its inherent rigidity, a limitation reflected in the purported lack of originality in Semitic thought, a thought characterized rather by inflexibility and barrenness. Whereas Indo-Europeans could assimilate new ideas and then creatively develop them in previously unforeseen directions, Semites could assimilate ideas only partially, usually becoming fixated on them in an exclusivist and inflexible manner—hence the philosophical and spiritual infertility of Semitic peoples. This perspective was solidified in the works of French Orientalist Ernest Renan (d. 1892), for whom “Indo-European is taken as the living, *organic* norm, and Semitic Oriental languages are seen comparatively to be *inorganic*.”¹⁰¹

If the grammatical structure of Semitic languages was marked by inflexibility, and the character of Semitic peoples was derivative of this rigidity, then Semitic religions could not but be intolerant, philosophically barren, prone to fanaticism and legalism—none more so than Islam. If Islam, a quintessentially Semitic religion, was by definition rigid, legalistic, and devoid of philosophical sophistication and spiritual profundity, then the remarkable poetry and sophisticated philosophy of the Sufis could in no wise be Islamic, and must be derived from an Aryan source, whether Indian, Greek, or Persian. This belief, at root, is what fostered the separation of Sufism from Islam in the minds of European scholars of the Orient. William Jones was also one of the first Orientalists to write on Sufism, describing it as a “metaphysical theology, which has been professed immemorially by a numerous sect of *Persians* and *Hindus*, was carried in part into *Greece*, and prevails even now among the learned *Muselmans*, who sometimes avow it without reserve.”¹⁰² The underlying presumption in Jones’s statement is that Sufism, like all genuinely creative mysticism and philosophy, is in essence Aryan and hence non-Islamic. This perspective carried the day for some time among Anglo-Orientalists. E. H. Palmer, in his work *Oriental Mysticism* (1867), argued that Sufism is the “primeval religion of the Aryan race.”¹⁰³

SUFISM AND ISLAM: 1900 TO THE PRESENT

REEVALUATING ORIENTALIST DEPICTIONS OF SUFISM

This framing of Islam as Semitic and nonspiritual was assisted by the fact that many Orientalists like Jones accessed Sufism tangentially.¹⁰⁴ Jones had access to texts on the margins of Sufism, and it would be some time before European scholars encountered sufficient Sufi material to reevaluate its relationship to Islam. In separating Sufism from its religio-cultural context,

Orientalists in effect created a theoretical Sufism that bore little correspondence to the tradition itself, as later scholars would discover.¹⁰⁵ Reynold A. Nicholson set about putting to rest the thesis of Sufism's Aryan origin, first in his essay "A Historical Enquiry concerning the Origin and Development of Sufism" (1906)¹⁰⁶ and later in his work, *The Mystics of Islam* (1914), the title of which indicates Nicholson's comfort with understanding Sufism as something indigenously Islamic. In the work's introduction, Nicholson acknowledges extraneous religious influences on Sufism, but he asserts, "Even if Islam had been miraculously shut off from contact with foreign religions and philosophies, some form of mysticism would have arisen from it, for the seeds were already there."¹⁰⁷ For Nicholson, the seeds of Sufism were already present in the ascetic tendencies of early Islam. Louis Massignon, in his influential *Essai sur les origines de la lexique technique de la mystique musulmane* (1922),¹⁰⁸ similarly argued that Sufism developed out of Islam's ascetic tradition¹⁰⁹ and convincingly demonstrated the role of the Qur'an in shaping Sufi terminology. He criticized some of his contemporaries as "pro-Aryans" and "anti-Semites" for suggesting that "Semitic peoples absolutely lack the aptitude for the arts and sciences, concluding that there is an 'Aryan' origin of mysticism in the so-called Semitic religions."¹¹⁰ Echoing Massignon, and in direct contrast to the Orientalist hypotheses on the non-Arab character of Sufism, René Guénon wrote, in 1947:

The completely gratuitous supposition of a foreign origin—Greek, Persian, or Indian—is in any case formally contradicted by the fact that the means of expression of Islamic esoterism are intimately linked with the very constitution of the Arabic language. . . . The truth is that "Sufism" is as Arab as the Koran itself, in which it has its direct principles.¹¹¹

Guénon accurately notes Sufism's connection with the Arabic language in regard to terminology and semantics, and, more esoterically, with the *abjad* system of numerology based on Arabic letters. He also points out that Sufism's principles are drawn from the Qur'an, evidenced, for example, in the Sufi categorizations of the self, drawn directly from Qur'anic reference, and in the long history of Sufi hermeneutics of the Qur'an.

Nicholson, Massignon, and Guénon's shared understanding of Sufism's inherently Islamic nature has become something close to normative within current scholarship on the subject. A. J. Arberry, in his *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (1950), defines Sufism as "Islamic mysticism" and includes chapters on the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad, acknowledging their role as sources of Sufism.¹¹² J. Spencer Trimingham, in