

Keynote | Sufism's Contribution to Mysticism: Moving Beyond the View of Mysticism as an Individualised, Anti-Textual and Non-Regulated Divine Experience

Dear All,

It is a pleasure to be here with you today, having had the privilege to be in this fascinating conference, thank you Brett and Szilvia for organising this, and thank you all for bearing with us until the last session of the day.

Introduction

This paper asks a simple question, what makes Sufism distinctively Sufi? I argue that what makes Sufism Sufi is its defining features, characteristics that emerged in two stages. The doctrinal core was largely established between the ninth to twelfth centuries. Its social and institutional forms developed later, and became fully visible between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Sufism as we know it today is the combined product of these two dimensions.

The second part of the paper will elaborate on some of the central aspects determining the fate of this tradition in the modern period. I will explain that Sufism's most distinctive feature, the claim that knowledge of God is transmitted through an authorised chain of masters and disciples, was an issue that became subject to harsh scrutiny with the advent of modernity from the 18th century onwards. These forms of scrutiny were enunciated both from the West but also from within certain Islamic (actually Sufi in many cases) critics. I will also explain how these debates about the legitimacy of the practice of mediation in Sufism ended up unveiling a counterintuitive claim, an inversion. That is, that a tradition that, in its claim to be mystical, thus proposing the establishment of a "direct", unmediated knowledge or experience of the union with God, appears to end up being deeply committed to *mediation*. By contrast, those modernists that had criticised the Sufism from within the Islamic camp, would do so on the basis of oftentimes allegedly championing a direct, scripture-based access to God. The paradox comes, when to a certain extent, this form of "accessing the divine" seems to fit more closely the definitions of non-meditatedness that were quintessentially been elaborated in Western academia on the nature of mysticism (e.g. Otto, James) and would supposedly more typically fit the mystical archetype.

The argument unfolds in three parts. The first traces the doctrinal formation of Sufism between the ninth and twelfth centuries, and for doing that I have selected two concepts that seem to me to explain and be the most representative of the tradition, 1) the taxonomy of stations and states and 2) *ma'rifa*, the experiential knowledge of God. The second part turns to the institutional structures developed during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the shaykh, the disciple, the *silsila*, and the order, and shows how these developments made Sufism a fundamentally mediated form of mysticism, with some very few though notable exceptions. The third examines the resulting paradox around the question of mediation and the anti-Sufi critique, I have introduced earlier. For doing so I will focus on the ideas of the Egyptian thinker 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Wakīl, as major exponent of that critique. I will as a fundamental part of this paper explore what of the features that have defined Sufism over the centuries have endured and survived into our days and how if so how do they look like in today's Sufi landscapes, with modern-day examples of Sufi groups and orders.

Part I. The Doctrinal Formation of Sufism (9th–12th Centuries)

Early Sufism and the Taxonomic Study of the Self

The Sufi tradition did not emerge *ex nihilo*, but from existing renunciatory modes of piety (*zuhd*) taking shape since the late eighth century. Only from the mid-ninth century, in Baghdad, do its distinguishable doctrinal features begin to appear; the social features became fully evident only by the fourteenth century.

Doctrinally, one of the most consequential features of these early texts is the study of the self, of human emotions and actions, through a systematic classificatory method. This reflected the wider taxonomic tendency typical of the ninth-century wider Islamic scholarly world, which used taxonomies to order legal categories in jurisprudence (*fiqh*), to classify hadith transmitters, and to organise among other things, philosophical concepts and complex theological ideas. The same drive that aimed at reducing complex realities to discrete, hierarchically ordered categories was introduced in Sufism. In this case what we find is that the early Sufis studied the human psyche by ordering emotions into the inner states transversed by those seeking God.

The Maqāmāt: al-Kharrāz and the Mapping of the Spiritual Path

This classificatory drive found its first major application in the first example of “mapping” of the spiritual path. One of the earliest surviving taxonomies of this kind appears in the *Kitāb al-ṣidq* of Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899), a leading figure of the Baghdad circles in the mid-ninth century. The text of Kharrāz, written in Arabic, enumerates thirteen inward stations that the seeker must traverse in strict sequence to reach God (see the slide). At the final point in this graded progression, he writes, the seeker’s heart gains a quick understanding, light lodges within it, and the soul is joyfully busied with secret converse with God.

Qushayrī: Stations and States

The trend of taxonomisation continues to grow and a generation and a half later, we see a more systematic account being introduced in which the station becomes a category distinct from the mystical state. It is offered by Abū ʿl-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) in his *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, written also in Arabic in Nishapur in the mid-eleventh century.

Qushayrī defines the station thus: “*The station is the good manners which the servant of God realises after he has entered it. He can arrive at it by means of his own actions, by fulfilling its requirements through concerted effort and self-imposed strictures in worshipping God.*” If you look carefully at both examples comparatively (see slide), the station is in this case an acquired condition, reached by effort and sustained discipline, and (very important) inhabited as a stable moral-spiritual posture.

A crucial point to keep in mind is that the vague progression articulated in Kharrāz’ taxonomy becomes in here clearer and firmer. Qushayrī, makes sequential ordering a strict precondition in the evolution in the path; no advance is possible without fully consolidating the preceding stage. One cannot reach true trust in God without first mastering contentment, nor true submission without trust, etc. (see slide).

Qushayrī then draws a foundational distinction between the station and the state, terms earlier writers had been using interchangeably. States here are seen involuntary divine gifts that may be withdrawn at any moment, whereas stations are considered stable conditions earned through effort and being securely held.

This feature then is incorporated into Sufism more broadly which then pervasively maintains it for centuries. Now one may ask, as a result of the great Sufi crisis of the early 20th century and I would

say its timid revival where have the stations and states gone? Today, only an extremely oversimplified version of this originally complex graded architecture has survived in living Sufi practice. Most contemporary orders no longer move the *faqīr* through a verifiable, master-assessed succession of *maqāmāt*. In the Budshishiyya in Morocco, a mass order I have worked with, what binds the initiate to the order and to the master, is the oath of allegiance (*bayʿa*) and the enunciation of a shared litany (*wird*) rather than any station-by-station assessment. Besides, one may be initiated by a secondary authority, the shaykh need not know the disciple personally, and one's actual teacher is normally a local *muqaddam* rather than the master of the order.

In other Sufi orders, there is a closer sense of a graded progression, in the Naqshbandī-Haqqani practice of *murāqaba* and the staged activation of the subtle centres (*laṭāʾif*), but the progression is ritual rather than intellectual. It is enacted through prescribed devotion, not as a learned curriculum, here the question of whether rational training of an scripturalist kind is necessary or not seemed to be important in the past but has lost fuel in the present, I will go back to this later.

One further shift is important to mention. Where the classical path often required the disciple to leave the world and follow the master, what would fit into the world-rejecting type in Roy Wallis's well-known typology of new religious movements (Wallis 1984), nearly all orders today are "world-accommodating", that is, the path is pursued alongside ordinary work and family life rather than in place of it. Thus, there is no sense of real renunciation in any meaningful sense of the word as it was common in premodern forms of Sufism. This is the case for most modern orders, with counted exceptions. The perhaps most notable of those is that among some (only some) initiates of the Chishtiyya order in India, there is a leaving the world behind in order to join the order, though examples like this are very marginal.

Maʿrifa and the Sufi Theory of Knowledge

Maʿrifa is one of the most important concepts in Sufism, the element that most clearly separates the Sufi understanding of Islam from other approaches. It has been variously defined as experiential knowledge, mystical knowledge, or gnosis. In Sufism, unlike in *kalām* or *fiqh*, God can only be truly known through a form of immediate, experiential cognition unavailable to the unaided rational faculty. Reason alone is insufficient.

Sufi writers have consistently juxtaposed *maʿrifa* with both received wisdom (*naql*) and reason (*ʿaql*); neither alone suffices to bring the seeker to a true realisation of God. By the time of al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910), the division between discursive knowledge (*ʿilm*) and experiential knowledge (*maʿrifa*) had already consolidated, both serve revelation, but only *maʿrifa* reaches its inner as well as its outer sense (the *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir* aspects of reality). In other words, the deeper, esoteric significance of ritual and doctrine was not accessible to ordinary reasoning. This is the reason why here the idea of initiation begins to make sense: only a select group can reach the hidden aspects of truth.

This epistemological claim is illustrated, once again, with a taxonomy. In the account of the heart given by Abū ʿl-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (d. 295/907), a Baghdad contemporary of Junayd who also wrote in Arabic, there are four concentric layers of the heart (see slide), the breast, the heart proper, the inner heart, and the heart's core, harbouring, respectively, Islam, faith, intimate knowledge, and finally union with God. *Maʿrifa* is thus necessarily preceded by the outer forms of observance and faith. Importantly, it is not an alternative to the *sharīʿa* but the fruit of its deepening internalisation.

The notion that such knowledge is reserved for an elect, reached only through initiation became normative from the fourteenth century onwards. Today, this concept remains doctrinally somehow alive but has been thoroughly democratised in practice.

Contemporary mass Sufi orders present the path less as guarded process culminating in gnosis than as a form of interior self-improvement open to all comers. The process has become individualised (a bit like what Gavin was explaining yesterday about the Bakhtis), but also democratised in the sense that there is no need of prerequisites or special qualities to actually join a Sufi order. Oftentimes, when aspirants (who commonly also read about premodern Sufi texts and ideas) ask about these democratising development in which all can be disciples of a master, I have found that different orders have developed different mechanisms to convince people that the process bears a decent degree of resemblance with past practices. Orders still want to convey the idea that the disciple is a chosen one, though it is clear this is not the case by looking realistically at recruitment processes.

For example, both the Budshishiyya in Morocco but also several West African orders say, “it is not you who choose the order but the order who chooses you”, or “the master is the one who chooses you, you are just realising his wish”. I argue here that this makes two things, one, attempting to bring current practices closer to the historical tradition, and two, reducing the agency of the aspirant to secure his/her affiliation, in case s/he doubts at some point whether to join the Sufi organisation. The convert-facing branches of the Naqshbandī-Haqqani and the Ba ‘Alawiyya networks of Ḥabīb ‘Umar in Yemen similarly cast *ma‘rifa* as a personal interior journey rather than the preserve of a hidden few that requires of a close supervision of a master. (Explain the case).

Rational Knowledge and Experiential Knowledge

How then do we read today the fact that Sufism has always privileged experiential above rational knowledge? For Qushayrī, stations are earned by effort, while states are transient visitations bestowed by God. *Ma‘rifa* sits closer to this second category, which means, as Nūrī insisted, that no human effort can *produce* knowledge of God. Asked how he had come to know God, Nūrī famously answered simply, “By God”; pressed on the role of reason, he replied that reason “cannot know God except by God.”

Yet effort is not irrelevant either; the outer layers of the heart must be activated before the deeper ones become accessible, so that discipline does not produce *ma‘rifa* but prepares the ground for it. *Ma‘rifa* is thus neither purely earned nor arbitrary, a divine gift that tends to arrive at the end of a long road of interior work, itself involving an important component of rational study.

This early hostility toward *kalām* and *uṣūl al-fiqh* would soften over time. The claim that *ma‘rifa* surpasses reason endured; what shifted was how much rational knowledge Sufism deemed necessary.

Al-Ghazālī and the Integration of Sufism into Sunni Learning

A pivotal shift came with Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), who, unlike the formative Baghdad Sufis antagonistic toward the theoretical disciplines, spoke as a master of *kalām* and jurisprudence. His *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* is the first systematic attempt to assign *kalām* and *fiqh* a more legitimate role within a Sufi epistemological framework, but still clearly subordinated to *ma‘rifa*. For him, the rational disciplines illuminate the exterior of revelation while leaving its interior accessible only to the gnostics.

In *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān*, Ghazālī likens this esoteric knowledge (*ma‘rifa*) to the “red sulphur,” the mythical agent that transmutes base metal into gold. In a similar manner he argues, that base metal becomes gold, the simple seeker becomes united with God, *ma‘rifa* is the true alchemy of the soul. Ghazālī did not invent the hierarchy in which *ilm* is necessary but insufficient and *ma‘rifa* alone reaches the interior of revelation, but he was the first to defend it from within the “scholarly establishment” rather than from a position of critical distance, lending it an institutional authority it had previously lacked.

Ibn ‘Arabī and the Metaphysical Expansion of Ma‘rifa

This trajectory reached its ultimate instance in Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), for whom the entire apparatus of Islamic theology was reframed as a series of levels of divine self-disclosure, accessible in their fullness only to the realised mystic.

Kalām sought to resolve, through rational argument, fundamental questions about God’s nature and His relationship to creation. For Ibn ‘Arabī these questions matter, but reason repeatedly hits impasses, because God’s reality lies beyond rational inquiry. He argues that only the mystic who has realised the unity of all being in God can perceive how the divine attributes, creation, and existence fit together.

As a result, he argues that *ma‘rifa* is not merely a higher stage of knowledge but the very foundation of *all* knowledge. Rational knowledge is possible only because reality possesses the underlying unity that mystical insight reveals. Which means that without it, reason would lack a “secure basis”.

Fittingly, Ibn ‘Arabī’s followers named him *al-Kibrīt al-Aḥmar*, the Red Sulphur in following with the preceding tradition, after the rare agent is seen as having proved to turn seekers into masters; in his own writings the term denotes the rarest degree of spiritual mastery, the Perfect Human (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*) who acts as a direct catalyst for divine illumination on earth.

If we are to look at the modern picture, on this question modern Sufi orders are more diverse.

A few groups privilege the experiential aspect to the near-exclusion of formal scholarly training, the South Asian Chishtiyya being the order most associated historically with prising experiential knowledge, divine love (*‘ishq*) and audition over juristic learning, though even there, its major shaykhs were themselves trained in the Islamic sciences.

In most cases, however, a degree of more standard rational training, mainly Qur’ānic recitation, reading of Sufi scholarship and in some cases the study of Islamic law (less so in orders in the West) and more rarely philosophy, is incorporated either as optional or as part of the order’s weekly activities.

Antinomian Responses: The Qalandars and Ḥaydaris

This is part of a long-lasting tradition. Many Sufis since medieval times accepted the growing role of scholarly learning as a necessary foundation for higher spiritual knowledge. Yet this process of routinisation, of turning unorthodox communities into fully established stable groups and/or communities of learning was neither an uncontested nor a linear process. As Sufism became integrated into “learned Islam”, movements we broadly call “antinomian” gained strength, offering a radically different response to the same religious culture.

From the turn of the thirteenth century, wandering dervish groups, most notably the Qalandariyya and Ḥaydariyya, emerged across Syria, Egypt, Iran, and Anatolia. They renounced property, work, and settled life through deliberately transgressive practices. They were known for shaving the head and eyebrows, wandering half-clothed, begging, and sometimes associating with social outcasts. The case of these groups represents a public rejection of the entire apparatus of normative religion, above all the *sharī‘a*, but also the outward forms of a “rational curriculum” introduced into a plethora of increasingly respectable, institutionalised forms of Sufism.

Ibn Taymiyya and the Scriptural Critique of Mystical Metaphysics

That metaphysical turn also provoked a powerful reaction. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), allegedly himself affiliated with the Qādirī order and a defender of early Sufism, subjected the Ghazālī–Ibn ‘Arabī tradition to sustained criticism, arguing that the incorporation of Neoplatonic philosophy had transformed a path originally rooted in the Qur’ān and Sunna. He did not reject Sufism itself, only the

claim that mystical experience could yield truths *beyond*, or independent of, revelation. The *sharīʿa* was therefore in his view, not merely the beginning of the mystical path but its enduring horizon and ultimate measure.

This is an approach that again is quite mainstream in most Sufi orders around the world today. For example, the diverse branches of the Qadiriyya one finds in Syria and Iraq observe this rule. Those orders that tend to be more flexible with this are so, not because they do not want to obey sharia but because they follow a school of law that is more flexible and open to incorporate *ʿurfī* (customary) practices into the sharia (Hanafism in Central Asia being a case in point), can produce Sufi orders that are sharia compliant and still “religiously syncretic”.

Summing up. By the fourteenth century, Sufism exists as a distinct tradition, and there is a cluster of features found nowhere else in Islam.

The doctrinal foundation mostly consists of four features being in place: the epistemological claim that God is knowable only through intuitive cognition reserved for an elect; the staged path (*maqāmāt*), already present in al-Kharrāz; the hierarchy of sainthood, given its formative account by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī; and the informal master–disciple bond, lived custom in Junayd’s circle but not yet codified doctrine.

Part II. The Institutionalisation of Sufism (13th–14th Centuries)

From Experiential Knowledge to Spiritual Guidance

If *maʿrifa* is a form of knowing that no rational discipline can produce and that even sustained effort cannot guarantee, a practical question immediately arises: how is it acquired? The answer that early Sufism developed, and that the classical tradition consolidated into an elaborate institution, was simple; through the guidance of a master.

The Rise of the Shaykh

The shaykh, the realised guide who has himself traversed the path, stands at the centre of Sufi life as the indispensable human channel through which *maʿrifa* is cultivated. At first the relationship was informal, a matter of instruction and example offered to an aspirant or circle of listeners; during the eleventh century it shifted, as the shaykh assumed active responsibility for his aspirants’ progress, directing, supervising and correcting their conduct.

The Formalisation of the Master–Disciple Relationship

Qushayrī’s *Risāla* articulates the logic with particular clarity. In his views, an aspirant must train with a shaykh, without a master, he will never succeed. As Bāyazīd said, “*The leader of one who does not have a master is Satan.*” In the concluding section of the *Advice to Aspirants*, Qushayrī sets out the conditions a novice must fulfil before training can begin: having repented, renounced attachment to possessions and status, and found a master willing to accept him, the aspirant submits completely to that master’s authority in outward conduct and inner disposition, after which the master begins the work of formation, most notably by imparting a formula of invocation (*dhikr*) to be internalised from the tongue to the heart. (see slide) . The master–disciple relationship thus becomes a prerequisite grounded in the very structure of *maʿrifa* itself.

It is the *bayʿa*, the oath of allegiance, that has proved the most durable element of this bond, functioning as a kind of exclusivity contract. Thanks to the oath, the disciple pledges himself to one shaykh and undertakes not to take allegiance elsewhere. In today’s Sufism how strictly this is enforcement varies across groups and in relation to different “religious marketplaces”.

The Tijaniyya, a reformist order founded by Aḥmad al-Tijānī in late eighteenth-century North Africa and now dominant across West Africa, stands at the strict pole, where exclusive allegiance is doctrinally mandatory and famously policed; the Algerian-born Shādhilī-derived orders are much looser, by contrast, they are oftentimes ok with seeing disciples of other groups joining their ritual congregations. What it is often true is that each group has a distinctive ritual performance programme, and this is, in some orders, much more secretive than in others.

Orders also differ in how they manage the tension between sober discipline and ecstatic abandon, and some have developed ingenious internal divisions of labour to hold the two together. The Khatmiyya in Sudan, the country's largest order and a characteristically sober, scholarly one, offers a striking example. At its ritual gatherings the licence for the more ecstatic, exalted performances is devolved onto particular dervishes, marked out by brightly coloured robes, while the ordinary members of the order, dressed in white, are held to the restrained, sober style. The ecstatic register is thus permitted but quarantined, performed on the community's behalf by a designated few rather than by the membership at large. In place of the intensive, individually supervised correction of conduct envisaged by Qushayrī, the tie is now sustained largely through collective *dhikr*, periodic gatherings and a charismatic attachment to a frequently distant shaykh. The Budshishiyya's vast annual gatherings at Madagh exemplify this mass, low-supervision allegiance, mediated in such transnational orders through deputies (*muqaddamūn*) and increasingly through digital channels rather than face-to-face formation.

Crucially however, the more loose the bond the easiest it is to gain but also to loose disciples. The strictest the discipline the most difficult too. It is a u-shape function.

There is a further regularity, one can observe in modern Sufi as well as in Salafi groups. Cutting across the Sufi–Salafi divide, we can observe that the intensity of what a group demands from followers tends to vary inversely with the durability of commitment. Where a group asks a great deal, an arduous round of devotions and a totalising claim on daily life, loyalty runs strong but is normally quite short-lived. On the contrary, where a group asks from devotees less, or little, commitment is correspondingly slight.

The stablest forms of religious formation cluster at a routinised middle, less exalted but more sustainable, as in for example, Iranian groups such as the Nimatullahi. The same holds among so-called Salafi groups, a Qur'ān-reading circle of modest, periodic attendance persists for years, whereas a group built around the constant enactment of purity and intense ritual burns through its members. Among Sufi orders the contrast is equally clear, the demanding, retreat-centred Naqshbandī groups sustaining small, highly committed cohorts renewed over time, while the lighter festival-and-litany model of other orders draws very large and stable followings precisely because membership sits comfortably alongside ordinary working and family life.

Back to the premodern formation, the institutional consolidation of this bond gave rise to the Sufi order, which depended in turn on the *silsila*, the chain of transmission connecting a living master to his predecessors and, through them, to the Prophet. The shared heritage of a master's students gave rise to spiritual genealogies that authenticated a Sufi's outlook by reference to an unbroken pedigree, and this master–disciple relation is the essential bond that held otherwise loose communities together, shaping their evolution from informal circles into hierarchical institutions.

From here onward these paths are perhaps the most distinctive feature of Sufism. There is a master that trained disciples who themselves became masters and gathered their own followers, and through this reproduction of Sufi networks, we can observe the mechanism of expansion of Sufism across the Muslim world, establishing lodges as centres of communal life and instruction.

If the core and content of what these institutions did, have been to larger extent lost, the institutional carcass is preserved quite intact. Something, considering the strong scrutiny and sometimes direct violence to which these institutions were submitted in the advent of the colonial period and beyond, until today, this is to say the least, surprising.

The Sufi Path as Constitutively Mediated

The centrality of the role of the shaykh has significant implications for how Sufism relates to broader philosophical accounts of mysticism. In some of the Western understandings of mysticism, mysticism is the individual's immediate, *unmediated* encounter with the divine, immediacy is the defining feature.

I would like to bring here to the conversation the perspectives of Schleiermacher, James and Otto. Schleiermacher's pre-reflective feeling of union with the Infinite and Otto's non-rational encounter with the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* both locate the essence of mysticism beyond all doctrinal and institutional mediation. William James famously defined religion as the experiences of individuals "in their solitude," and named the sense of direct insight into ultimate reality a hallmark of genuine mystical experience. On this view the mystic is precisely the one who bypasses institutions and intermediaries to reach God directly. Sufism, so read, becomes Islam's version of this universal phenomenon. It is a turn away from the exterior religion of law toward a personal experience of the divine. This one may argue may account quite fittingly, for the earlier Sufi experience.

This account, however, fundamentally misrepresents Sufi practice today. As we have seen, the classical Sufi path is constitutively *mediated*, knowledge of God cannot be sought by the individual alone but must be transmitted through an authorised human chain. The shaykh is essential and without a master, Qushayrī warns, there is no reliable progress, and the seeker's guide becomes by default Satan. The *silsila* is the guarantee that the knowledge transmitted is authentic and that the conditions for receiving it are correctly established. The most vivid contemporary instance of the chain still doing this work is the Ba 'Alawiyya, a sayyid lineage and ṭarīqa rooted in the Ḥaḍramawt valley of southern Yemen and now globally influential through the teaching of Ḥabīb 'Umar bin Ḥafīz and his seminary, Dār al-Muṣṭafā, founded in 1993 in the historic Hadrami scholarly town of Tarīm, which today draws students from across the Sunni world. Its appeal among young Sunnis worldwide rests precisely on an unbroken and publicly displayed *silsila* reaching back to the Prophet through the Prophet's own descendants, so that the authority of the teaching is made to rest visibly on the integrity of the chain that carries it. But virtually all Sufi orders have a very strong discourse articulated around the necessity of the master in order to adequately "reach God". A common claim for example is about how for example, one develops psychosis if engages in *dhikr* individually, without the group and the official guidance and supervision of the master of the order.

Part III. The Salafi Critique and Modern Sufi Responses

We come, finally, to the modern confrontation, and to the paradox the preceding analysis has been building towards. In the terms of this debate it is not Sufism but Salafism that insists on the believer's *unmediated* access to the divine. Salafism rejects all intermediaries between believer and God, saints, shaykhs, and in most cases even the established schools of jurisprudence. The individual believer, armed with the Qur'ān and authenticated *ḥadīth*, reaches God's will directly through the text; any added human channel is by definition an illicit innovation, and the Sufi path, with its graduated disciplines and dependence on a master, is recasted as exactly such an addition to a religion already complete in its sources.

In following this logic, the paradox, then, is that the tradition that has long been associated with a privileged interior encounter with God turns out to at least allegedly be the one most committed to

mediation as doctrinal necessity, while the trend that most fiercely attacks the Sufi claim to experiential knowledge does so in the name of unmediated scriptural access, Salafism, a vision that resembles the very definition of mysticism that James and Otto defend and that others have problematically projected onto Islam.

Central to the Salafī critique of Sufism is the key concept of *tawhīd*, the absolute oneness and incomparability of God. This stands in direct tension with the Sufi vision of a God who is at once incomparable and intimately close, a tension that, at its most radical, issues in the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, something that from the Salafī point of view, verges upon polytheism. The basic issue here is, oversimplifying, how close God is to creation. Salafīs hold that God is utterly unlike anything created, separate, beyond comparison and beyond reach. The concept of *tanzīh*, absolute incomparability, encapsulates this. Sufis hold that God is both incomparable and, in some sense, close, present to creation and to the heart of the believer, and the mystic's whole project is to draw nearer to Him, making the heart a dwelling place of the divine. From the Salafī point of view this is dangerous, because to say that a human heart can *literally* become a site of divine presence is to imply that something created shares in what belongs to God alone, *shirk*, the gravest sin in Islam. So when a mystic says “my heart has become a mirror of God,” the Salafī interprets this not as a form of devotion but as a claim that encroaches with and on God's uniqueness.

This polemic found its most systematic modern elaboration in Egypt, in the figure of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Wakīl (1913–70), who is celebrated within Egyptian Salafī circles as the “Hammer of Deviations.” Al-Wakīl's central objection to the idea of the shaykh–disciple relationship, which he elaborates partly through a hostile reading of Qushayrī's *Risāla*, is that the *murīd*–master bond is a mechanism of exploitation and a departure from the principle that each believer stands in a direct, unmediated relationship to scripture. His attack on al-Ghazālī, are based on the idea of him being the “Proof of Islam”, the claim that he is the person who had most successfully integrated Sufi epistemology within Sunni orthodoxy. Al-Wakīl objects that al-Ghazālī is dangerous precisely *because* he is so treated; scholars interpret the Qur’ān in light of what he has decided rather than doing it directly by themselves, returning to the sources. For al-Wakīl no human figure, however learned, can serve as Proof of Islam, “aside from the Book of God and the *sunna* of the mighty Prophet.”

Salafism, then by rejecting mediation, rejects the entire epistemological hierarchy on which Sufism is founded. The claim that *ma‘rifā* reaches what *‘ilm* cannot is here, worth noticing, inverted, since all legitimate knowledge of God is already fully available in the revealed sources, and any claim to a supplementary mode of knowing is, by definition, an innovation. As Itzhak Weismann has rightly observed in his study of modernist critiques of Sufism in the Levant, this critique emerged from a socio-political context in which Sufism was casted as responsible for the decline of Islamic civilisation, backward and superstitious, and as the primary internal obstacle to achieve a by then well established goal of reforming Islam to face “modern challenges”.

Sufi responses to the Salafī critique

Confronted with a critique that struck at its core, the Sufi tradition has responded in ways that resist reduction to a single strategy, varying with context and never coalescing into a unified counter-position. All the Sufi responses, however, share a common aim; to demonstrate compatibility with the sources the Salafī critique invokes.

A first response has been the development of political alliances with the state. As Sufi orders in several Muslim-majority contexts have aligned themselves with governments seeking to counter Salafī

influences, Sufi groups have presented themselves as a moderate, nationally rooted form of Islam in counterposition to transnational proposals typical of some Salafī trends. There are three paradigmatic cases within the Naqshbandī tradition that seem to me good examples of this. In Syria, Shaykh Aḥmad Kuftarū collaborated with the Ba‘thist state in exchange for freedom to develop his *ṭarīqa*; in Turkey, the Iskenderpaşa mosque under Shaykh Zāhid Kotkū cultivated a network that engaged the public sphere despite official bans; and in the West, the Ḥaqqānī branch lobbied Western governments against Wahhābī influence. Of these state-sponsored attempts, only Morocco achieved even partial success, perhaps because there the Salafī movement was itself deeply ingrained within the Sufi tradition.

The second response works on the terrain of scripture itself, and does so in two opposite directions. The first by trying to grant Sufism with *scriptural legitimisation*, defending existing Sufi practice by grounding it in the sources, Quran and Sunna. At the Baghdad shrine of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, for example, custodians and scholars have engaged in sustained apologetic work defending the practices of saint veneration, shrine visitation, and the *dhikr* on the basis of the *sharī‘a*; in Morocco, most orders likewise frame their healing practices as Qur’ānically grounded prophetic medicine rather than as popular custom.

The second direction goes further and *concedes* the ground introduced by the Salafis; some Sufi actors adopt the Salafī framework outright, producing what Weismann calls a *scripturalist Sufism*, a form of Sufism that distances itself from the very practices, shrine cults, the powers of living saints, most virulently condemned by the Salafis. This is, quite interestingly, the most widespread development in the Sufi world today, a tendency we may want to define as a kind of Salafisation of the Sufi field. These scripturalist forms of Sufism coexist with the more popular forms of Sufism oftentimes within the same religious space, for example, “scripturalist zawaya” in which learned students coexist, because the Sufi centers tend to be “open doors” with the folk and customary practices of rural peasants that continue to use Sufi spaces to perform the practices, the same students of those orders, openly condemn. It is here interesting to see that neither of the two strands engage with these debates, there is simply coexistence of the two trends, one may argue in keeping with one of the most distinctive features of Sufism as a religious phenomenon, its malleability and adaptability to changing and evolving circumstances.

Most of the orders in Egypt are a case in point, but also the Budshishiyya in Morocco, aligned with the Moroccan monarchy, which has promoted it as a quietist, nationally rooted Islam, the order increasingly presents itself in a scholarly register, foregrounding sober devotion and learning while downplaying the shrine-centred and miraculous dimensions of its own past; a comparable register is visible as well in the Turkish Naqshbandī milieu of the Iskenderpaşa community.

The convergence of these features is, it seems to me double-edged; it may secure legitimacy within the Islamic scholarly field, to a certain extent, but at the cost of those dimensions of Sufi life most distinctive to the tradition, defending Sufism by somehow, at least at the intellectual level, conceding the very ground on which it was attacked.

It is worth recalling, by way of wrapping up, that this scripturalist register is not entirely new. The sober pole that today’s Salafised Sufism approximates is the very one the medieval antinomians once defined themselves against, a register that disciplines ecstatic practice, prefers restrained or silent audition (*samā‘*) over wilder enthusiasm, intellectualises devotional life by tying it to scholarly learning, and grounds practice in the Qur’ān read in an increasingly literal rather than freely allegorical key. What the Salafī critique has done is not to create this pole anew but to push the mainstream of the Sufi field decisively towards it.

Concluding remarks

By way of conclusion, of the tradition I have described, what has survived, and what has changed beyond recognition? The honest answer is that a great deal of the lived content has been transformed almost past recognition. The graded path of *maqāmāt*, once a verifiable ascent supervised station by station, now survives in most orders as little more than an oath of allegiance and a shared litany.

The intensive, individually supervised master–disciple bond has thinned into mass, low-supervision allegiance to a frequently distant shaykh, mediated by deputies and increasingly by digital channels. World-renunciation has all but vanished; nearly every living order is now world-accommodating, pursued alongside an ordinary career and family life.

The esoteric reservation of *maʿrifa* for an initiated elect has been democratised into an interior self-improvement open to all comers. And under the pressure of the Salafī critique, the mainstream of the field has drifted towards a sober, scripturalist register that quietly sheds the shrine cults, the miracles, and the saint veneration that were once central to its public life.

And yet something definite remains, and it is precisely the feature with which this paper began. What endures, and what still makes these movements recognisably Sufi, is the principle of *mediation*, the conviction that knowledge of God is not seized by the solitary individual but transmitted through an authorised human chain. The institutional carcass distinctive of Sufism, the Sufi orders, remarkably, has outlived much of the rest of its original features. This yields the final paradox the paper has tracked, namely, that the tradition popularly casted as the home of the unmediated mystical experience turns out to be defined, in the modern period above all, by its commitment to mediation, while that the Salafism that attacks it, defends precisely the direct, unmediated access to God that Western theorists such as Otto and James took to be the essence of mysticism. The paradox however, perhaps says more about the imprecision and narrowness of the Western understanding of mysticism, than of any potentially mystical ascription to the Salafī orientation, which, and on this, we are certain, it has not.

Thank you.