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Sufism: reconsidering terms, definitions and processes in the formative period of Islamic mysticism

Sara Sviri

The meaning of a word is its use in the language game
L. Wittgenstein

Terms and Definitions: Introductory Notes

This paper stems from a wish to question accepted uses and definitions of terms pertaining to the formative period of Islamic mysticism, as well as from a wish to review the conventional understanding of processes in this historical context. The examination of terms, definitions and processes pertaining to a given historical context shows that a “term” may, at a given time, point to a certain “definition”, but while in the course of time the “term” remains, its “definition” shifts and may be reapplied. This statement is not necessarily philosophic, linguistic, cultural or political; it is rather historical and contextual, its historical and textual framework being the early phases of what became known as Sufism. Two generally accepted postulations, which require reconsideration, present themselves at the outset of my inquiry: first, that the term Sufi is, to a certain extent, synonymous with the term Islamic mystic; second, that the formative period of Sufism reveals a transitional process from an early stage of “asceticism” to full blown “mysticism”. Before addressing these postulations, and since I cannot ignore the fact that both “mysticism” and “Sufism” are terms which have been challenged by scholars of both religious studies and of Islamic studies, I shall take a pause to consider them in a general way.
Observing the term mysticism, one cannot avoid noticing that Islamicists as well as scholars of religions at large have strongly challenged its use as a pointer to that religious aspect which has customarily been called mystic or Sufi. Omid Safi, for example, in a lengthy paper which deals with two eminent eleventh-century Persian Sufis, takes issue with the term mysticism on two grounds: firstly as a “category” which, like “religion”, is “not a given... but... must be constructed” and is, therefore, “imagined”'; and, secondly, as a category which, being “steeped in a Western, Protestant Christian tradition”, its “usefulness to studies of non-Christian (and even non-Protestant) mystics is dubious”. Such a critical approach is hardly unique. The critique of mysticism as term and category, raised firstly by scholars of religious studies, has been endorsed by scholars of Islamic as well as of Jewish mysticisms. It bears the clear hallmark of the “new” school of historians of religion; in particular those post-Eliade scholars who have questioned enduring paradigms within the study fields of religious phenomena and have attempted “reconstructing a History of Religion”. But it is not only terms such as mysticism which have “fallen from theoretical grace”. In the field of Islamic studies, attempts at dethroning old terms have been coupled with the postcolonial and anti-orientalist critique stemming from the Saidian School. Among scholars with such orientation, the use of the term Sufism has likewise been questioned. Carl Ernst, to take one example, writes: “Since the very concept of Sufism is hotly contested among both Muslims and non-Muslims today, it is important first of all to examine briefly the historical development of the European study of Sufism... The modern concept of Sufism emerged from a variety of European sources, including... Orientalist constructions of Sufism as a sect with a nebulous relation to Islam... Outsider terminology for Sufism stressed the exotic, the peculiar, and behavior that diverges from modern European norms; in the context of colonialism, this terminology emphasized the dangers of fanatic resistance to European rule.”

Against these calls for a reexamination of previously accepted nomenclature, my seemingly innocuous, historical inquiry into terms and their implications throws me, whether I like it or not, into a sticky debate where contemporary scholars (“outsiders”, according to the lingo) strive for a safer, more politically-correct ground upon which to build their theses and discourse. Why sticky? Because what I have set out to articulate in this paper is also motivated by the wish, stemming from critical observations, to reexamine terms and definitions which customarily, and often uncritically, have been employed in the study of early Islamic mysticism. At the same time, however, I have no quarrels with either the term mysticism or the term Sufism. In the case of the former, I do not wish to invent a neologism to replace “mysticism” neither do I see much point in substituting it with “spirituality”, “piety”, “devotion” and similar alternatives. True: both Arabic and Hebrew lack a home-grown term for this discipline – and scholars of (so-called) mystical texts and phenomena in these fields are, no doubt, aware of this. It should also be noted that modern Arabic has borrowed the term taṣawwuf in rendering what in European languages is named mysticism. But regardless of its genealogy and derivation, and in spite of its terminological shortcomings, I consider mysticism a useful term for pointing to certain human attitudes vis-à-vis the sacred and the extraordinary. For the purpose of this paper, therefore, I shall assume the understanding that mysticism is a current within religions and cultures associated with voluntary efforts aimed at gaining an intensified experience of the sacred. A mystic, by the same token, is an individual desirous of such an experience, confident (or, at least, hopeful) that it can be gained during his/her life span and willing to commit him/her-self to the efforts whereby
such an experience can be gained. Admittedly, this is no more than a useful, working
definition offered from the perspective of the Islamic material at hand; I have no claim
of offering an all-inclusive definition of mysticism. So much for mysticism.

Turning our attention now to the terms Sufism and Sufi, we should consider the
following: Can the above characterization of mystics and mysticism apply also to Sufis
and Sufism – in other words, were Sufis mystics? Here the textual evidence requires a
suspension of judgement: if the terms apply to Sufis and Sufism as they have become
known from, approximately, the second half of the third/ninth century on, then yes:
Sufism is, without doubt, a mystical current within Islam, one that revolves around
the search, preferably within some communal affiliation and under the supervision of a
master, of an intensified personal experience of God; and, yes, a Sufi is someone who
willingly strives, by means of special practices – preferably under the guidance of an
expert master and within a certain community – to gain such an experience. According
to the Sufi lore as it developed and was written down from the second half of the third/
ninth century on, supererogatory practices (nawāfil, ṭāʾāt) such as fasts, prayers, vigils,
remembrances, periods of seclusion, and contemplation, should be diligently carried out
alongside a careful observation of the obligatory religious rituals (ʿibādāt). The exertion
of voluntary efforts is motivated by the understanding that efforts are indispensable for
attaining a here-and-now experience of the divine realm. From this perspective Sufis are,
indeed, mystics. However, if our attention is directed toward certain individuals or
groups in earlier phases of Islamic history (mainly the second and the first half of the
third centuries) to whose name the chroniclers attach the label al-ṣūfī, then the answer is
not at all straightforward, as it turns out that not all Sufis were mystics and that not all
mystics were named Sufis.

It is from this perspective that the term Sufism and its cognates will be examined in my
paper: not because of any search for political correctness nor from a malaise with the “–
ism” ending, but because of the semantic shifts and cultural adaptations through which it
went in the course of its historical development. My wish, therefore, is to revisit the
primary sources in order to tease out of them answers to these questions. These answers I
will weigh vis-à-vis previous scholarly evaluations in an attempt to offer new
interpretative options. This is not to say that the scholarly works referred to above do not
engage with primary sources. However, in my view, they tend to invest too much thought
in imposing culturally-dependent postmodern models and constructs of discourse upon
the relevant material, at the expense of revisiting the material itself. Indeed, for the
scholar, one advantage that primary sources have is that they are free from the
constraints of either following or rejecting the sets of postmodern dogmas and
methodologies such as counter-Orientalism, Postcolonialism, Post-enlightenment and the
like. One may argue, as some scholars do, that the term Sufism, or even the term Islam,
are an orientalist and colonial invention – in the same way that Hinduism, Buddhism or
Judaism are – but one must concede that the Arabic term taṣawwuf and its cognates ṣūfī
and ṣūfiyya, from which Sufism directly derives, are attested to and self-consciously
discussed in primary, medieval sources, which have consequently constituted Sufi
literature. In other words: while I, too, aim at readdressing terms pertaining to Islamic
mysticism, I am not motivated by a wish to align with contemporary positions but rather
by perturbing questions arising from primary sources concerning the shifting meanings
and usages of terms such as Sufi during the formative period of Islam.
Wool-wearing Sufis: ascetics rather than mystics

Writing about groups and movements that have made up Islamic culture in its formative period requires a careful examination of the terms and the definitions by which they have been identified. In what follows I shall engage with the term Sufi and attempt to understand its implications and applications. Linguistically, it is obvious that the term Sufi (and in Arabic al-ṣūfī) derives from ṣūf, wool. Indeed, there were people in early Islam, as well as in Late Antiquity, who wore coarse woolen garments as a token of their ascetical inclinations and, allegedly, in imitation of prophets and holy men, such as Elijah or John the Baptist. Wearing coarse woolen garments by way of exhibiting aversion to worldly luxuries is well established in classical literature in Arabic. For example, it is related that the poet Abū al-‘Atāhiyya went through a “spiritual” crisis and consequently stopped writing poetry except ascetical (fī al-zuhd). In his withdrawal he took to wearing wool. Chronicles of the first centuries of Islam have preserved references to several individuals who were nicknamed al-ṣūfī. There is no indication that these individuals exhibited mystical features. For example: Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-ṣūfī in Alexandria, ca. 200/815, led a group of moralistic political dissidents, who rised against the local governor. The group, according to the chroniclers, was named al-ṣūfiyya. Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Yahyā, a descendent of ‘Umar b. ʿAlī b. Ṭalib, was nicknamed ibn al-ṣūfī al-‘alawī. In 253/867 he rebelled against Ṭūlūn in Upper Egypt. From a different region comes the example of Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim, an Alid Zaydi leader who, in 219/834, rebelled against the Ṭāhirid governor in Juzjān. He, too, was nicknamed al-ṣūfī. Writing about him in Maqātil al-ṭālibiyyin, Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī says: “His kunyā was Abū Ja’far but the general public nicknamed him the Sufi as he was constantly wearing white woolen garments. He was one of the renowned men of learning, jurisprudence, religion, asceticism and fine conduct. In his [theological] orientation he accepted the doctrine of ‘Justice and Unity’ and he subscribed to the views of the Jārūdīyya Zaydis...”

The fact that Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim followed the theological doctrine of al-ʿadl wa-l-tawḥīd associated with the Muʿtazila is worth noting, especially since another interesting example of individuals who were collectively named Sufis is the so-called ṣūfiyyat al-muʿtazila. We should note that the term ṣūfiyyat al-muʿtazila presents a double semantic loop: not only does it bring together two denominations which are commonly perceived as antagonistic to one another, but there is no certainty as to what each of these denominations in its own right had denoted at the outset. In other words: though we customarily identify muʿtazila with a theological, rationalist movement within Islam and ṣūfiyya with the almost antithetical mystical movement within it – we cannot be sure that these were the defining features of the two denominations to begin with. The use of the term ṣūfiyya in this ‘double loop’ requires attention and I shall therefore attempt to examine it at some length.

Considering (or, rather, reconsidering) the early definition and use of the term muʿtazila, Sarah Stroumsa explores the semantic and practical contents of “the verb i’tazala” and concludes that it denotes abstinence: “from sexual activity, from worldly pleasures or, more generally, from sin.” She points out that “[T]here can be little doubt as to the meaning of the term Muʿtazila when applied to ‘Amr [Ibn ‘Ubayd]’s disciples” and concludes that “asceticism was their most striking characteristic. They were given the term ‘Muʿtazila’ in reference of their pious asceticism, and they were content with this...”

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term". What is particularly relevant is another historical conclusion articulated by Stroumsa, namely, that "by the first quarter of the second Islamic century ascetics, or even loosely organized groups of ascetics, were called mu’tazila". Hence: the early followers of Wāṣil b. Ṭātā and ‘Amr b. ‘Ubayd “were Mu’tazilite before the existence of a Mu’tazila as we know it"... Such an understanding, if endorsed, reduces our perplexity vis-à-vis the odd coupling of mu’tazila and ǧāḥiyya, at least in so far that the mu’tazila component may allude to an ascetical streak in this denomination rather than to, strictly speaking, a theological or political one. It also confirms the observation stated above that terms may remain whilst their definitions shift.

Where do we find this combined denomination ǧāḥiyyat al-mu’tazila? It is attested to in an early heresiographical work which had been attributed to al-Nāshi’ al-Akbar (d. 293/906) but was probably penned by Ja’far b. Ḥarb (d. 236/850). According to this text (titled by the editor Kitāb ʾusūl al-nihāl), which deals with the question of the necessity of rulership (imāma, Imamate, Caliphate), the group thus named included a few almost obscure personalities. In the context of the question under discussion, the ǧāḥiyyat al-mu’tazila maintained that rulership was not absolutely necessary. Patricia Crone defines them therefore as “anarchists”. But in the short paragraph dedicated to them in the Ps. Nāshi’ text, it is also mentioned that they objected to paid labour and held the principle known as taḥrīm al-makāṣib. Indeed, Faḍl al-Ḥadathī, one of those mentioned there, is criticized by al-Samānī (d. 562/1166) for his extreme, Manichaen-type asceticism. As for the principle of taḥrīm al-makāṣib, forbidding paid labour, we find a vigorous critique of those who hold it by al-Ǧāḥīz in Kitāb al-Ḥayawān. He objects to those who, out of laziness and vanity, falsely assume an ascetical appearance (nusk) by abstaining from work, living off charity and “forbidding paid labour.” While criticizing this type of parasitic, show-off behavior, al-Ǧāḥīz remarks on its similarity with the conduct of some Christian scroungers who feign monasticism by wearing wool in order to gain social favours and admiration. A Muslim beggar of this kind al-Ǧāḥīz names ǧūfī. Al-Ǧāḥīz’s criticism is by no means unique: it is in line with the disapproval leveled by various second-third/eighth-ninth-centuries authors against wool-wearing and other extraverted ascetical behaviour. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidī (d. ca 300/912) offers one such example when he compares what he considers the false asceticism of his time with the false monasticism in the wake of Jesus’s death. Earlier and closer to al-Ǧāḥīz’s hometown of Basra, al-Ḥasan al-ṣūfī al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) reputedly rebuked his disciple, Farqad al-Sabakhī, for his show-offish wool wearing. Suleiman Ali Mourad, who wrote an overall remarkable study on al-Ḥasan al-ṣūfī al-Baṣrī, discusses the fact that Sufis, as well as their opponents, claimed an affiliation to al-Ḥasan. He adduces from Ibn Sa’d’s (d. 230/845) Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kubrā an anecdote that, according to Mourad, allegedly shows how “[t]he anachronistic association of al-Ḥasan with mysticism was not limited to the followers of the mystical movement. Their opponents made use of him to utter condemnations of mystics and the mystical tradition”. According to this early source, Mourad argues, “the ǧūfīs (those who wear wool) were once mentioned in the presence of al-Ḥasan, and he described them by saying: ‘They shelter arrogance in their hearts but show modesty in their dress. By God, each one of them is more proud in his dress than the owner of the shawl in his shawl”. Now, the term ǧūfī does not at all occur in Ibn Sa’d’s text. It is Mourad who adds it by way of offering an identification – obviously erroneous – of those whom Ibn Sa’d describes simply as “those who wear wool” (allaḫāhīna yaḥbasūna al-ṣūfī). Evidently, Mourad (and he is not the only one) confused the ascetic wool-wearers – frowned upon by al-Ḥasan al-ṣūfī, al-Ǧāḥīz, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidī and others – with Sufis.
in the conventional, though later, sense of mystics. As the textual evidence shows, “those who wear wool” were indeed sometimes nicknamed “Sufis”, but they are not to be identified with the later mystics thus named, nor should the critique leveled against their extrovert ascetical behaviour be confused with any critique which might have been leveled later against the mystics. To do so is, indeed, anachronistic, but not in the sense that Mourad wishes to convey (i.e., an anachronism on the part of those who objected to the mystics); rather, the anachronism is on the part of Mourad, since before the consolidation of Sufi mystical identity, the term ṣūfī designated plainly a wool-wearing ascetic, not a mystic.

Let us go back now to the ṣūfiyyat al-mu’tazila. As far as I am aware, most studies which mention this group seem, at least by implication, somewhat hesitant concerning the juxtaposition of Sufis with Mu’tazilite. Though van Ess, Stroumsa, Crone and others agree that the second-third/eighth-ninth-centuries ṣūfiyyat al-mu’tazila were, for all intents and purposes, ascetics, they do not sound too sure about the ṣūfiyya component and seem to suggest a certain affinity with mysticism. Among these scholars one should also mention Florian Sobierjoj who has explicitly tried to follow possible affiliations between a few Mu’tazilites and later Sufis. I am inclined to take a less equivocal position and argue that the group or individuals referred to as ṣūfiyyat al-mu’tazila were thus nicknamed because of their extreme ascetical and moralistic – sometimes to the point of rebelling against rulers – features which, among other things, manifested also in wool-wearing. It is also most probable that their extreme stance as regards paid labour and worldly possessions went hand-in-hand with their radical political, moralistic and theological attitudes. By way of exhibiting their extreme aversion to worldly luxuries they, like other groups and individuals, were wearing coarse woollen garments and were consequently labeled, often in criticism, ṣūfī and ṣūfiyya. Historically, these early Sufis reflect a phase in the social and religious development of early Islam in which individuals as well as groups were, knowingly or unknowingly, engaged in ascetical practices which have been practiced throughout Late Antiquity, especially by Christian and Manichaean monks and ascetics.

This said, one should note that the social and historical picture becomes more compound when we encounter in the chronicles individuals or groups with the label al-ṣūfī attached to their names but without the harsh ascetical characteristics exhibited by most of the groups and individuals discussed above. Studying the early mystical schools of Baghdad and Nishapur, I was surprised to find in Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bayhaqī’s Lubāb al-ansāb, an important but seldom consulted Shi’ite genealogical text, several eminent Alids who were nicknamed al-ṣūfī. Apparently, in Nishapur, the medieval capital of Khurāsān, there resided a Shi’ite community, consisting mostly of descendants of martyred Zaydi rebels who, during the second/eighth century, had been exiled there by the Abbasid Caliphs or by their governors. By the middle of the third/ninth century they seem to have become a wealthy and respected community in Nishapur.

Interestingly, in contradistinction to the criticism leveled against the extreme ascetics discussed above, these Alid “Sufis” are presented in a laudable, even glorifying way: those among them who, due to wearing wool, were nicknamed Sufis, are presented as pious leaders and as paragons of virtue, sincerity and piety. It should be noted that the wool garment worn by several of them is said to have been white.

What to make of the discrepancy in the attitudes presented by the source material? This is an interesting question that should be further studied and discussed in terms of the
history of social and religious groups in early Islam, taking into account, needless to stress, the biases of the chroniclers. It is possible, however, to conjecture that the wearing of white woolen garments by community leaders reflects a practice which differs from the wearing of coarse woolen garments by austere ascetics. The white woolen garment seems to carry different iconic connotations than the undyed, rough wool of extreme ascetics. Dāwūd, i.e. David, is said to have dressed his son Sulaymān (Solomon) in a dress made of white wool as was the custom of the prophets. According to a tradition attributed to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the mark (sīmā) of the angels during the Battle of Badr was white wool on the sides of their horses and their tails. That in post-Biblical Jewish circles white garments denoted dignity and piety is borne out by commentaries to Ecclesiastes 9:7-9: “Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labor which thou takest under the sun.” Clearly, this passage advocates a way of life which has nothing ascetical about it; rather, according to the Rabbinic tradition, the white garments are understood as a token of a virtuous, blameless religious, but not ascetical, life.

It is, therefore, possible that in the wearing of wool in the early Middle Ages, we can discern residues of two different late antique practices: on the one hand side, the rough and undyed woolen garment which, in early Islam, shows the persistence of late antique Christian or Manichaean ascetical and monastic practices; and, on the other hand, the white (fine?) woolen garment which reflects the continuation of late antique icons of leadership, religious rank and exemplary conduct in religious communities. In the sociohistorical context of early Islam, the different cultural connotations of white woolen garments vis-à-vis the rough undyed woolen habit should be further studied. However, even at this stage of research, it is my contention that the possibility that the label Sufi in the first centuries of Islam had been attached to two different social types – the rough-living, harsh and controversial ascetic on the one hand, and the honorable, pious, well-to-do religious leader on the other – should be taken into consideration when this label crops up in the literature.

To conclude this part, it can be comfortably suggested that, based on the textual evidence culled from a variety of sources, the label al-ṣūfī, to begin with, did not refer to mystics at all, but rather, often with criticism and derision, to people whose code of dress exhibited extroverted ascetical practices coupled with radical moral-political attitudes. In a different “language game”, however, it seems that the same label was also applied to individuals of a Shi‘ite affiliation who were honored for their dignity, leadership, piety and virtue.

A few after-thoughts: A) the title Sufi attached to Shi‘ite personalities may explain why individuals such as the sixth Imam Ġa‘far al-Ṣādiq (148/765), or his alleged disciple the alchemist Ġābir b. Ḥayyān, were included in lists of early mystics in the Sufi manuals and even in some silsilas. B) this study may help in shedding light on the dialectical attitude of Sufism towards asceticism (zuhd, nusk). It is well known to students of Islamic mysticism that most, if not all, Sufi manuals bear witness to the sharp criticism against the hypocrisy and show-off of ascetics wearing woolen garments. To blame extroverted ascetical practices of riyā‘ (hypocrisy, duplicity) and shuhra (conspicuous behavior) became part and parcel of the Sufi lore and one of the corner stones of Sufi mystical...
discourse and teaching. C) It may also shed light on the reluctance of many Muslim mystics to etymologically derive the label ṣūfī, by which they were eventually identified, from ṣīf, wool, but offered also, and at times preferred, to derive it from other roots in Arabic which share with it the consonants š and f, such as ṣafāʾ (purity), safwa (the best chice), al-ṣaff al-awwal (the first row in prayer, or of the angels) or ahl al-ṣūfīa (the People of the Bench) 39.

From asceticism to mysticism?

In descriptions of the historical development of Islamic mysticism, it has become paradigmatic to postulate a transition from an early phase of asceticism (zuhd) to the full fledged mysticism of the Sufi way. This diachronic paradigm has become, in the words of Christopher Melchert, “a scholarly commonplace” 40. Indeed, the list of scholars subscribing to this paradigm includes Goldziher 41, Nicholson 42, Massignon 43 as well as most of the more recent scholars in this field. In fact, this outlook can be traced down to the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldūn. In his Muqaddima, in the chapter devoted to “The Science of Sufism” (ʿilm al-ṭaṣawwuf), Ibn Khaldūn presents a developmental outlook of Islamic mysticism: The origin of the Sufi system, he says, is to be sought in the devotional and ascetical conduct of the first pious generations. Then, in the second century and later, when interest in worldly things increased and people became drawn to this world, those who had kept to the early pious and ascetical ways took to wearing wool, in contra-distinction to the luxurious garments worn by the worldly and haughty rich. Hence, they became known as ṣūfīyya and mutaṣawwīfā. Subsequently, they became distinguished also by their discernment of special methods of exertion and disciplined training (mujāhada, riyāḍa). For those who practiced them, these methods resulted in a gradual climb (taraqqī) through mystical stages and stations (maqāmāt wa-āḥwāl), as well as in the acquisition of exceptional mystical perception (dawq). These culminated in revelation and insight into divine truths (kašf, idrāk ḥaqāʾiq al-wujūd). 44

As we saw, in the second/eighth–third/ninth centuries there were, indeed, groups and individuals associated with wearing woolen garments, mostly out of ascetical and worldly-denying leanings, who were nicknamed Sufis. But were these ascetics proto-mystics? Were they, or their immediate successors – communally or individually – necessarily interested in, or involved with, the special methods described by Ibn Khaldūn, which, according to him, were prerequisites for developing mystical prowess and for attaining mystical awareness? Can we accept the postulated transition from asceticism to mysticism at face value? In fact, the neat linear paradigm suggested by Ibn Khaldūn and adopted by modern scholarship obscures a much more complex picture. Previous research, especially of early mystics of Khurāsān such as al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmīḍī 45 and of the early mystical schools such as the Malāmātiyya of Nishapur, 46 has shown that the tapestry of early Islamic mysticism is more variegated than this paradigm allows for. In the second and third centuries of Islamic history, there were mystics, such as al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmīḍī, who were not named Sufis 47 and there were those named Sufis who were not mystics. There is no clear evidence for the “transition” that Ibn Khaldūn implies and which scholars have picked up. In fact, mysticism in Islam existed before it became known as Sufism. As for ascetical tendencies, they had existed in Islam from very early on and went on to exist alongside Sufism, independently, when the latter became established as Islamic mysticism. From the perspective of my own studies, it seems evident that
diachronic, linear paradigms are not sufficient for describing and explaining the complexity of the religious life in Islam during its formative period. Both ascetical and mystical movements in early Islam exhibit complex socio-historical structures which have been overlooked in the adoption of the simplistic transition theory. The historical paradigm offered by Ibn Khaldūn and his followers requires, therefore, a more critical scrutiny, to be followed by systematic attempts at reconstructing its versatile components – historical, sociological, phenomenological and comparative.

In conclusion: It is evident that asceticism and mysticism represent two separate and independent trends within Islam, at times at odds with one another and at times interwoven into one another. Each trend has created its own literary corpora, its own social affiliations, its own theoretical paradigms and its own ethical and behavioral codes. In fact, each one of these trends is itself versatile and can be broken down into various branches and typologies which may, or may not, be associated with one another. One can speak of “transition” (or “transformation”) in individual cases, such as in the case of Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, who transformed from a wealthy young prince into an ascetic and mystic seeker, or in the case of the poet Abū-‘Atāhiyya mentioned above who, after a rather hedonistic existence, took to an ascetical way of life. However, a historical and paradigmatical “transition” from asceticism into mysticism seems to me a fallacy.

It is also evident that themes and practices of mystical and ascetical natures, which existed in late antique traditions – Hellenistic, Judaic, Christian, Gnostic and others – survived in Islam after its rise. While developing within Islam as indigenous systems, they retained some of their late antique traces. The study of the formative period of Islamic mysticism should, at this stage, take these givens into account and reconsider them from historical as well as from comparative perspectives. In practice this means re-venturing into and re-opening study fields which have become neglected in the study of Islam since the second half of the 20th-century on.

NOTES

2. See ibid., p. 260 ff; for the ubiquitous adjective « imagined », see J. Z. Smith, Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1982. This adjective seems by now rather laden with references to cultural constructions such as “statehoods”, “territories,” “communities”, etc. – cf. B. Anderson’s influential book Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, 1983; cf. also the likewise influential Saidian concept of “imaginative geography”.
in the disrepute of its multiple occlusions.” However, Schmidt also cautions: “The process of mysticism’s reinvention in departicularized form needs itself to be particularized and seen in its own historical complexity.” For a critique of the use of “mysticism” in the field of Jewish Studies, see Boaz Huss, “Jewish Mysticism in the University: Academic Study or Theological Practice”, Zeek: A Journal of Jewish Thought and Culture, December 2007: “‘Mysticism’ is not a universal category that should be used as a basis of academic study; rather, it is a Christian theological term, that was used in the modern period due to political or theological motivations – in order to classify and categorize phenomena from non-Christian cultures.” Zeek can be accessed online: http://www.zeek.net/12academy. For a rejection of the term “mysticism” in relation to Sufism on somewhat different grounds, see W. C. Chittick, “Mysticism and Discipline” in Faith and Practice in Islam: Three thirteenth century šūfī texts, Albany, State University of New York, 1992, p. 168 ff.

4. See Schmidt, the previous note.


6. That this is not just about semantics can be gleaned from C. Ernst’s statement: “…[scholars who work on non-European studies, particularly in relation to cultures of the Middle East, sooner or later find that their studies have political relevance],” see The Shambala Guide to Sufism, p. 2.

7. Jewish mysticism is thus rendered al-tašawwuf al-yahūdī, Hindu mysticism al-tašawwuf al-hindi and so on.

8. See with the above citation from Omid Safi (at note 2).

9. See, for example, C. Ernst, The Shambala Guide to Sufism, p. xiv: “Historically, the term Islam was introduced into European languages in the early nineteenth century… as an explicit analogy with the modern Christian concept of religion; in this respect, Islam was just as much a neologism as the terms Hinduism and Buddhism were”.

10. For reservations of this etymology raised by Sufi authors, see below note 39.

11. See, for example, Abū al-Faraj al-ʾIsḥāḥānī, Kitāb al-ʾAqānī, Beirut, Dār al-kutb al-ʾilmīyya, 1992, iv, p. 33, 113-114; cf. the anecdote narrated by Muḥammad b. Umayya in XII, p. 171:

12. That this is not just about semantics can be gleaned from C. Ernst’s statement: “…[scholars who work on non-European studies, particularly in relation to cultures of the Middle East, sooner or later find that their studies have political relevance],” see The Shambala Guide to Sufism, p. 2.

13. See with the above citation from Omid Safi (at note 2).

14. On wearing white woolen garments, see below notes 32-34; on Alids who were nicknamed al-sūfī, see below note 30.

15. See Abū al-Faraj al-ʾIsḥāḥānī, Maqāṭīl al-ṭalībīyyīn, Cairo, Dār iḥyāʾ al-kutb al-ʾarabīyya, 1949, p. 577-578, concerning Muhammad b. al-Qāsim, an Alid who, in 834, revolted against the Tāḥirids in Juzjān:
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26. See Ahmad b. Hanbal, *Kitāb al-zuhd*, Beirut, Dar al-jīl, 1994, p. 396. I have read Frédéric’s book on the subject: *Le monde des frères de l'ordre des sœurs*, 1993, p. 396, and I think that Frédéric is right in saying that the Alawīs are a branch of the Alawīs, as the Alawīs are a branch of the Alawīs. I have also read Frédéric’s book on the subject: *Le monde des frères de l'ordre des sœurs*, 1993, p. 396, and I think that Frédéric is right in saying that the Alawīs are a branch of the Alawīs, as the Alawīs are a branch of the Alawīs.


31. See Svirı, ibid.

32. Note, however, that the poet Abū ‘Alā' at-Ṭāhā, who turned to an ascetical way of life (see above, note 11), is said to have worn white woolen clothes – see Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Al-Aqānī*, IV, p. 113-114: “وَلْيَصْبِرَ الْأَشْهَارَ وَتَحْيَىَ الْأَشْهَارَ”. See Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī, *Nīḥayat al-arab fī fīnān al-adab*, Cairo, Dār al-kutub al-miṣriyya, 1923-1924, XIV, p. 72-3: لباس، النسيم من الصوف”.


34. My thanks go to Prof. Ben-Shammai for alerting me to this relevant passage.

35. See, for example the commentary ascribed in Mi'drash Rabba, Megillat Kohelet, parasha 9, verse 8 to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai: “This [verse] speaks about nothing else but the commandments, good deeds and the Torah”.

37. For more on this, see, again, S. Svirı, “The Early Schools”, p. 457-458 and the references there.


47. See, for example, the intriguing comment made by Ḟâr al-Khûlîlî (d. 348/959), who had allegedly collected over a hundred and thirty collections of Sûfî writings. When asked whether he had any work by al-Ḥâkîm al-Tîrmiẓî, he replied: “I do not reckon him among the Sûfîs” (ما، see Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulâmî – عدته في الصوفية – ,Tabâqât al-ṣûfîyya, Leiden, Brill, 1960, p. 454.

RÉSUMÉS

Cet article aborde plus particulièrement deux questions en relation avec la période de formation de la mystique musulmane : l’une a trait aux différentes significations des termes ṣâfî et taṣâwuf et aux déplacements sémantiques qu’ils ont connus dans les phases initiales de l’islam. La deuxième question, en relation avec la première, se rapporte à la différence et aux interactions entre le zîdâh et le taṣâwuf, autrement dit entre l’ascétisme et la mystique. Les sources historiques montrent à l’évidence que le terme ṣâfî ne désignait absolument pas à l’origine un mystique mais plutôt un ascète vêtu de bure. Il y avait aussi des groupes connus comme ʿalâmîs ne présentant aucune des caractéristiques de la mystique. Tandis que de nombreux mystiques affichent un mépris envers le port de la laine considéré comme un acte ostentatoire visant à la notoriété (ṣûhra). Dans la deuxième moitié du ixesiècle, les mystiques de l’école de Bagdad, sous la conduite de ʿUbayd, adoptent cette appellation de ṣâfî, mais avec une connotation différente. Depuis lors, celle-ci s’est attachée à la mystique musulmane et a souvent été source de confusion. L’objet de cet article est de contribuer à la dissiper. Comme pour la question du zîdâh versus taṣâwuf, je tente de mettre en cause la vision conventionnelle d’un processus linéaire de déplacement de l’ascétisme vers une mystique épanouie. Cela correspond à la sagesse admise depuis Ibn Khalûdûn mais les matériaux à notre disposition suscitent le doute sur la validité de cette conception.

This paper is mainly concerned with two questions which relate to the formative period of Islamic mysticism: the one has to do with the variant meanings of the terms ṣâfî and taṣâwuf and the semantic shifts which they went through in early Islamic eras. The second question, which is associated with the first, relates to the distinction and interrelationship between zîdâh and taṣâwuf, that is, asceticism and mysticism. The historical sources make it evident that originally the term ṣâfî had not designated a mystic at all but rather an ascetic wearing rough wool. There were also groups known as ʿalâmîs which did not portray any mystical traits. Whilst many mystics display an open disdain to wool-wearing and see it as an extravert act of showing off (ṣûhra), in the second half of the 9th century, the mystics of the Baghdadi School led by al-Junayd seem to have adopted the nickname ṣâfî in a different connotation. This connotation has adhered to Islamic mysticism ever since and has often caused confusion. The paper wishes to make a contribution towards the alleviation of this confusion. As for the question of zîdâh vs. taṣâwuf, I try to challenge the convention which envisions a linear process of gradual shift from asceticism into full-blown mysticism. This has been the accepted wisdom since Ibn Khalûdûn, but the material at hand throws doubts as to the validity of this conception.
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Les maîtres soufis et leurs disciples des IIIe-Ve siècles de l’hégire (IXe-XIe)