

Chapter Title: Sufism, Ethics, and the Muslim Modernist Project

Chapter Author(s): Ahmed El Shamsy

Book Title: Mysticism and Ethics in Islam

Book Editor(s): Bilal Orfali, Atif Khalil, and Mohammed Rustom

URL: <https://www.aub.edu.lb/aubpress/Pages/Mysticism-and-Ethics-in-Islam.aspx>



This work by American University of Beirut is licensed under Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

The opinions, findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this book are entirely those of the authors and do not reflect those of the American University of Beirut, its affiliated organizations, or members of its Board of Trustees.

For requests and permissions, contact aubpress@aub.edu.lb.

SUFISM, ETHICS, AND THE MUSLIM MODERNIST PROJECT

Ahmed El Shamsy

One of the central categorizations in the study of modern Islam is the binary between Sufism and Salafism. Definitions and understandings of this binary vary: its poles may be characterized in terms of, for example, esoteric doctrines versus exoteric practices, innovation versus tradition, heterodoxy versus orthodoxy, equality versus hierarchy, or tolerance versus rigidity. But all accounts tend to assume that the two contrasting phenomena have stable and incompatible identities.¹ This assumption has generated straightforward intellectual genealogies of the opposing camps. Sufis' spiritual lineage is traced via Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (1275–1350/1849–1932) and Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) back to al-Junayd (d. 298/910), whereas Salafis are thought to owe their identity to the legacy of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), as transmitted by individuals such as Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (1115–1206/1703 or 1704–1792) and Rashīd Riḍā (1282–1354/1865–1935). As a result, the study of individual thinkers has often involved the exercise of identifying their place in these genealogies and slotting them into the appropriate category within the Sufi/Salafi binary. Was the Egyptian reformer Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1266–1323/1849–1905) a “Salafi” or wasn’t he?² Did ʿAbduh or the Damascene scholar ʿAbd al-Razzāq

1. For two very different accounts of the binary, see Ernest Gellner, “A Pendulum Swing Theory of Islam,” *Annales de sociologie marocaines* 5 (1968): 5–14, reprinted in *Sociology of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Roland Robertson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); and Stephen Schwartz, *Two Faces of Islam* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), esp. 45–60.

2. Henri Lauzière, in *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), makes the former case. Frank Griffel’s critique of Lauzière’s hypothesis seems to take “Salafi” as more an etic term; Griffel, “What Do We Mean by ‘Salafi’? Connecting Muḥammad ʿAbduh with Egypt’s Nūr Party in Islam’s Contemporary Intellectual History,” *Die Welt des Islams*, n.s., 55, no. 2 (2015): 186–220.

al-Biṭār (1253–1335/1837–1917) start out as a “Sufi” and then either transform into a “Salafi”³ or get turned into one in later portrayals?⁴

I am, of course, oversimplifying the much more sophisticated arguments and positions of the studies I refer to here and ignoring their unquestionable scholarly contributions.⁵ But I maintain that the logic of the simple Sufi/Salafi binary inevitably colors our perception of the materials and personalities we seek to understand, especially since it informs current views of Islam itself. Further, this supposedly analytic binary can easily deteriorate into a moral scale of what Mahmood Mamdani has called “good” and “bad” Muslims.⁶ For most of the twentieth century, Sufism largely stood for superstition and irrationality in scholarly discourse, while Salafism represented a rationalist return to the egalitarian and protestant roots of Islam. But toward the end of the century and particularly after the events of 9/11, Salafism became emblematic of puritanical, primitivist, and intolerant religiosity, whereas Sufism is increasingly seen as the tolerant, culturally vibrant form of Islam.⁷

Aware of this charged debate but determined to reach beyond it, I seek in this essay to eschew preconceived notions of the Sufi/Salafi binary and instead to investigate how prominent modernist reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who have often been labeled “Salafis” (including by themselves) conceived of Sufism. What role did Sufism, as they understood it, play in their analysis of Muslims’ collective problems and in their prescriptions for remedying these problems? The primary axis of my investigation is ethics, which these modernists approached both on the individual level of personal ethical formation, especially through the cultivation of virtue, and on the collective level of embodying ethical principles in social structures and interactions. What I intend to show is that Muslim modernists of this period distinguished between elements of Sufism that they disapproved of and attacked and elements that they actively embraced and tried to harness to the service of their own reform projects. The latter aspect of the modernist agenda has received little attention, even though—as I argue below—Sufi ethics played a key role in the formation and activities of prominent Arab modernist figures around the turn of the century.

I begin with a historic encounter that took place in Tripoli in the 1880s between Muḥammad ‘Abduh, who was at the time teaching in the Sulṭāniyya School in Beirut after having been expelled from Egypt for his involvement in the ‘Urābī revolt, and Rashīd Riḍā, the young man who would go on to found the influential journal *al-Manār*. The two eventually became close friends, and Riḍā’s later account

3. Itzhak Weismann, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 273–78; Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defense, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 86–97; Mohamed Haddad, “Les oeuvres de ‘Abduh: Histoire d’une manipulation,” *IBLA* 60, no. 180 (1997): 201–2.

4. ‘Abduh was posthumously turned into a Salafi by Rashīd Riḍā according to Haddad, “Oeuvres,” 221. ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Biṭār was made into a Salafi by his son Muḥammad Bahjat al-Biṭār according to David Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 40.

5. I exclude Schwartz’s book, which is merely a post-9/11 polemic, from this praise.

6. Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

7. Compare Henry Laoust’s characterization of Salafis in “Le reformisme orthodoxe des ‘Salafiya,’” *Revue des études islamiques* 6 (1932): 175–224 with the current discourse on the topic. For a polemical example, see Schwartz, *Two Faces of Islam*; for an analysis of this phenomenon, see Mark Sedgwick, “Sufis as ‘Good Muslims’: Sufism in the Battle against Jihadi Salafism,” in *Sufis and Salafis in the Contemporary Age*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

of this first meeting depicts an instant affinity born of the discovery of deep shared concerns with the state of education in the Arab world. According to Riḍā, ‘Abduh asked him whether the curriculum in Tripoli included Quran commentaries (*tafsīr*), and he answered, “No, but someone is reading [a commentary] to the people that contains fanciful stories, unsubstantiated lore, and superstitions. He is reading the commentary titled *Rūh al-bayān* by Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī the Sufi.”⁸ Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī of Bursa (d. 1127/1725) was an Ottoman scholar and intellectual whose Quran commentary is relatively obscure today.⁹ But it was hugely important in the nineteenth century; indeed, it was the first *tafsīr* to be printed in the Arab world, published by the Egyptian government’s press in Bulaq in 1839, a quarter of a century before the now famous commentary of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) was printed, and a full sixty-four years before the publication of al-Ṭabari’s (d. 310/923) magisterial commentary.¹⁰

What were the “fanciful stories” that Riḍā decried? A look at the very beginning of Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī’s commentary offers some insight.¹¹ The first section addresses the question of why the Quran begins with the letter *bā’* (in *bismillāh*) and proposes ten reasons, all of which are of a vaguely edifying but utterly speculative type. For example, according to Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī, the *alif* stands tall and arrogant, which is why God did not allow it to begin the Quran, whereas the *bā’* is low and humble and was therefore raised to a place of honor. Further, the *bā’* carries the short vowel *kasra* (*bi-*); God is said to be with the brokenhearted, *al-munkasira qulūbuhum*,¹² so the *bā’* with its *kasra* (which shares a root with the word *munkasira*, *k-s-r*) is close to God. The other reasons cited are of a similar nature. The author also claims that Muḥammad’s son-in-law ‘Alī is the dot under the *bā’*. This comment is a reference to a longer tradition according to which all knowledge is contained in the Quran, all knowledge in the Quran is contained in its first chapter, all that knowledge is in turn contained in the dot under the initial *bā’*, and ‘Alī is this dot. The origins of this statement lie in Shi‘i doctrine, but it came to be embraced fully by Sunni Sufis.¹³

Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī’s work contains countless other instances in which he interprets the Quran using elements that we today would consider only marginally related to

8. Rashīd Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-ustād̄h al-imām al-shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh* (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1907–31; repr. Cairo: Dār al-Faḍīla, 2006), 1:390.

9. The *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, for example, has no entry on Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī or his exegesis. However, a recent English-language translation of and commentary on the Quran draws extensively on Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī’s work; see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lombard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

10. Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 70, 78, 162.

11. Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī, *Rūh al-bayān* (Beirut: Dār lhyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 1:7.

12. This *ḥadīth qudsī* is a staple of Sufi and pietistic literature, despite its seemingly universal rejection by actual *ḥadīth* scholars. For endorsement of the *ḥadīth*, see, e.g., Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *lhyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma’rifā, 1987), 4:199; for its rejection, see, e.g., Ismā‘īl al-‘Ajlūnī, *Kashf al-khafā’*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Hindāwī (Beirut: al-Maktabat al-‘Aṣriyya, 2000), 1:230.

13. William Graham, “Basmala,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill Online, 2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00024. By the time of ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 832/1428), the statement had reached the status of a *ḥadīth*; see al-Jīlī, *al-Kahf al-raḥīm* (Hyderabad: Dā‘irat al-Ma’arif al-Nizāmiyya, 1918), 5–6. Riḍā would later point out and critique this crossover from esoteric Shi‘ism into Sunni Sufism in a series of articles titled “Debates between a Reformist and a Conformist” that he published in his journal, *al-Manār*. See especially Rashīd Riḍā, “Muḥāwarāt bayn al-muḥliḥ wa-l-muqallid,” part 4, *al-Manār* 3, no. 32 (February 6, 1901): 795–809.

Islamic fields of scholarly inquiry. For example, he refers approvingly to esoteric sciences such as letterism (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*)¹⁴ and to the hugely popular medieval author of works of magic Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. 622/1225), quoting the latter’s statement that the tree of existence grows out of the *basmala*.¹⁵ Al-Būnī was an extremely controversial figure because he explicitly acknowledged that at least part of his teaching consisted of black magic.¹⁶ It is thus not difficult to imagine why Riḍā might have found the work rather ill-suited to serve as a teaching text on Quranic exegesis, particularly as the sole work on the subject to be taught in his home town.

This part of ‘Abduh’s and Riḍā’s exchange supports the general idea of modernist hostility to Sufism. But immediately afterward, according to Riḍā’s account, the discussion turned to ethics, with Riḍā lamenting, “The study of ethics has disappeared; neither students nor teachers can be found for it,” and ‘Abduh replying, “This is how religion disappears.”¹⁷ Riḍā describes being pleased with this statement, because it corresponded to his own conviction in the importance of ethics. He reports having a keen interest in ethical literature, particularly al-Ghazālī’s (d. 505/1111) *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, arguably the most famous Sufi work in Arabic.¹⁸

In his description of his encounter with ‘Abduh, Riḍā mentions the personal importance of al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’* for him only briefly, but he fleshes it out in full in an autobiographical sketch of his youth, which he published one year before his death. The *Iḥyā’* is the most often cited and discussed work in Riḍā’s book, and on several occasions Riḍā dwells on the centrality of al-Ghazālī to his own intellectual and spiritual development. He says, for example:

My favorite work on Sufism was *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* by the “proof of religion” Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī. I read it in full and returned countless times to some of its chapters. Then I read it out to people. It had the most profound impact on my religiosity, my morals, my knowledge, and my actions. Its effect was overwhelmingly positive; it was negative only in traces, which I remedied as I learned more. The mistakes in it I abandoned gradually after immersing myself in the study of *ḥadīth*, particularly its determinism, speculative interpretations of Ash’arī and Sufi provenance, extreme forms of worldly renunciation, and some ritual innovations.¹⁹

Riḍā thus indicates that al-Ghazālī’s work was formative for him but simultaneously stresses that his enduring admiration of the work was not uncritical and that over the years he came to disagree with parts of it. A little later, he remarks:

Sufism was made dear to me by the “proof of religion” Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī. I was disciplining my soul according to the Sufis by abstaining from the best foods, making do with a little zaatar, salt, and sumac, sleeping on the bare ground, and other such things. Eventually it was no

14. Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī, *Rūḥ al-bayān*, 6:7, 8:511.

15. Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī, *Rūḥ al-bayān*, 1:9, 4:373.

16. Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Būnī, *Shams al-ma‘ārif al-kubrā* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Nūr, 2005), 69.

17. Riḍā, *Tārikh al-ustādḥ al-imām*, 1:390.

18. I admit that there is no single genre of “Sufi works,” and the *Iḥyā’* has also been described as primarily a work on ethics. But the Sufi element in it is clear enough, and as I show below, Riḍā considered it a work of Sufism.

19. Rashīd Riḍā, *al-Manār wa-l-Azhar* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Manār, 1934), 140.

longer difficult for me to abstain from good food in front of me. But when I attempted to neglect physical hygiene in my body and clothes, I could not do it; it was contrary to the divine law.²⁰

This passage makes it clear that Riḍā not only absorbed al-Ghazālī's intellectual arguments but also used the *Iḥyā'* as a practical handbook for his own spiritual struggle, which included engaging in practices of worldly renunciation. But he reports that he could not bring himself to adopt certain practices advocated by some Sufis of his time, such as disregard for physical cleanliness.²¹ Interestingly, Riḍā notes that when he told 'Abduh about his use of the *Iḥyā'* as a spiritual handbook, 'Abduh replied that he, too, had used the book in the same way and had balked at the same elements of Sufism that Riḍā had. The parallel suggests that Riḍā and 'Abduh underwent similar formative experiences, which may help explain why they became so close.²²

Riḍā clearly assigns a formative and overall positive role to Sufi literature and practices in his personal development, and his autobiographical sketch as a whole reads very much like a Sufi autobiography. Yet he wrote the sketch at the end of his life, by which time he had, according to the standard account of his trajectory, become a religious conservative, if not an outright Wahhābī. Clearly, then, this evidence of his strong Sufi inclinations complicates the Sufi vs. Salafi dichotomy through which figures such as Riḍā and 'Abduh are usually perceived.

A further challenge to the dichotomy comes from the evidence contained in 'Abduh and Riḍā's collaborative Quranic commentary, *Tafsīr al-Manār*. The commentary was based on 'Abduh's famous lectures on Quranic exegesis at al-Azhar, which Riḍā subsequently published with his own comments—first in his journal, *al-Manār*, and later as a separate publication.²³ In the commentary, 'Abduh's analysis of a Quranic verse on people who set up equals beside God digresses into a discussion on Sufism.²⁴ He reports that some thinkers have blamed Sufism for the pitiful state of the contemporary Muslim world, but he rejects this blanket claim, instead providing a historical account of the origins and development of Sufism. According to 'Abduh, Sufism began as a movement of ethical self-cultivation and experiential exploration of the human soul that attracted the ire of jurists who conceived of religion as a formalistic system of outward performance of obedience to God. These jurists enlisted the help of political authorities to suppress Sufism, which prompted Sufis to develop a system of apprenticeship and initiation that tested the seriousness of each aspiring apprentice and only gradually familiarized him or her

20. Riḍā, *al-Manār wa-l-Azhar*, 147.

21. Whereas al-Ghazālī himself promoted hygiene and criticized cleanliness only when it is deployed as an outward show of piety (*Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 3:297 [*Kitāb fi dhamm al-jāh wa-l-riyā'*]), 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī's biographical dictionary of Sufis contains tales of saints for whom uncleanness of their persons and their surroundings was an essential spiritual practice. See, e.g., al-Sha'rānī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (Bulaq, 1870), 2:159 (entry on Barakāt al-Khayyāt).

22. Riḍā, *al-Manār wa-l-Azhar*, 147. On 'Abduh's spiritual development, see Muḥammad 'Abduh, "Siratī," in *al-A'māl al-kāmila li-l-Imām Muḥammad 'Abduh*, ed. Muḥammad 'Imāra (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 1980), 2:315–37.

23. Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ḥakīm al-mushtahar bi-ism Tafsīr al-Manār* (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1906–35). See also Johanna Pink, "'Abduh, Muḥammad,'" in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill Online, 2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_050483.

24. For a discussion of this passage, see 'Adil Sālim Jād Allāh, "Mawqif al-Imām Muḥammad 'Abduh al-naqđ min ba'đ mumārasāt al-mutaṣawwifa fi 'aṣrih," *Islāmiyyat al-ma'ārif* 82 (2015): 79–110.

with Sufi teachings. Over time, however, the initiative system of masters/shaykhs and aspirants/*murīds* created a system of personal authority (*sulṭa khāṣṣa*) in which the apprentice was expected to submit to the master blindly, like “a corpse in the hands of a corpse washer,”²⁵ and to follow without question any command issued by the master, to the point that “even if [the master] ordered [the apprentice] to disobey God, [the apprentice] was obligated to believe that this was the right thing to do.”²⁶ ‘Abduh’s description of the absolute authority enjoyed by the Sufi master was not mere hyperbole or polemics: his contemporary Muḥammad Amīn al-Kurḍī (1265–1332 /1865–1914) stated definitively in a popular handbook of Sufism that the Sufi apprentice “does not object to anything [the shaykh] does, even if it is seemingly impermissible.”²⁷ Sufi masters’ spiritual authority endured beyond their deaths, giving rise to a flourishing culture of grave veneration and a robust cult of saints who were believed to exercise hidden power over the affairs of this world and its inhabitants.

In ‘Abduh’s view, the Muslim religious establishment’s acceptance of such inflation of the Sufi master’s authority was a detrimental accommodation because it wrongly accepted a hierarchy that subordinated the science of the sacred law or revelation more broadly (*‘ilm al-sharī‘a*), which was the province of the *‘ulamā’*, to the “science of reality” (*‘ilm al-ḥaqīqa*), which was the realm of the Sufis.²⁸ For ‘Abduh, the coup of Sufism was the culmination of the gradual deterioration of Muslim legal discourse into empty formalism:

Once Sufism had become inverted into its polar opposite, in contradiction to its original purpose, and the study of sacred law had turned into terminological squabbling about expressions in the later legal literature, the narrow-minded jurists and the ignorant Sufis came to an understanding. The former attributed to the latter secret knowledge and miracles, accepting from them what contravenes both revelation and reason because it was based on the “science of true reality”; so you would see a scholar who had studied the Quran, the Sunna, and the sacred law pledge his allegiance to an ignorant illiterate, thinking that the latter will lead him to God. If the Book of God, the example of His Prophet, the understandings of the imams, and the derivations of the jurists are not enough for knowledge of God, or what is referred to as “reaching God,” why did God establish this religion in the first place if people have no need of it because of such illiterates and quasi-illiterates? And does this then mean that the inadequacy lies in what God has revealed, or in what the Prophet has explicated, or in the explanations of the imams of what God has revealed and the Prophet brought? God forbid! There is no path to knowing God and attaining His pleasure beyond the clarification and guidance that He has revealed. The original aim of the true Sufis was to

25. For this trope, see ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī’s formative statement in *al-Anwār al-quṣṣiyya fi ma‘rifat qawā‘id al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. Tāhā ‘Abd al-Bāqī Surūr and al-Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Id al-Shāfi‘ī (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Ilmiyya, 1992), 1:189. For its influence, see ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jamal, *Naṣīhat al-murīd fi ṭarīq ahl al-sulūk wa-l-tajrīd wa-yusammā ayḍan al-Yawāqīt al-hisān fi taṣrīf ma‘āni al-insān*, ed. ‘Āṣim al-Kayyālī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2005), 351, and Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), chap. 7.

26. ‘Abduh and Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 2:73.

27. Muḥammad Amīn al-Kurḍī, *Kitāb Tanwīr al-qulūb fi mu‘āmalat ‘allām al-ghuyūb* (Aleppo: Dār al-Qalam al-‘Arabi, 1991), 587.

28. ‘Abduh and Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 2:73 (on Quran 2:166).

understand the Book and the Sunna, to realize what these two contained, to improve their character and manners through them, and to transform the soul by acting according to them, without blindly following those concerned with mere superficialities and without focusing narrowly on the outward.²⁹

At this point, one might legitimately ask whether ‘Abduh is not in fact endorsing the claim he ostensibly set out to refute, namely, that Sufism bears significant responsibility for the present situation of, as he puts it, “Muslims falling into ignorance regarding their religion.” But ‘Abduh’s argument is a historical one: he contends that although Sufism began as an ethical movement of individual self-cultivation, over time it developed institutions, beliefs, and practices that were inimical to this original mission. Foremost among these, for ‘Abduh, was the new role of Sufi saints: their insights were deemed superior to those of religious scholars, they were not held accountable by any external standard, and they acted as powerful intermediaries between God and ordinary believers, since they were thought capable of influencing the lives of their followers even from beyond the grave. ‘Abduh thus distinguished two distinct and incompatible phenomena within Sufism—the original religious and intellectual movement, whose profound ethical mission was an important aspect of the development of Islamic religiosity, and later Sufism, which had, for contingent reasons, abandoned its ethical mission in favor of establishing an absolutist model of religious authority. This model entailed compromising Islamic teachings, subjecting natural ethical sentiments to inscrutable Sufi authority, and substituting the ideal of illiteracy for the previous appreciation for learning.³⁰

The later parts of *Tafsīr al-Manār* do not rely on ‘Abduh’s lecture notes and seem to have been written entirely by Riḍā. These sections nonetheless paint a similar historical picture of Sufism with even clearer outlines. In his discussion of the concept of “God’s friends” (*awliyā’ Allāh*), the term that came to be used for saints, Riḍā draws a comparison between the great Sufis described in al-Qushayrī’s eleventh-century epistle on Sufism, such as al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) and Sarī Saqaṭī (d. 253/867), and the Sufis mentioned in ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī’s sixteenth-century biographical dictionary. Whereas in al-Qushayrī’s time, he argues, “you will not find significant differences between the lifestyles of *ḥadīth* scholars, jurists, and prominent Sufis in terms of devotion, piety, knowledge and wisdom,” “the saints of al-Sha‘rānī’s time are madmen, shameless and filthy, with lice dripping from their hair and clothing, which they do not wash except maybe once a year [...] yet they consider themselves superior to prophets, some claiming unity with God, or even divinity.”³¹ Riḍā then provides examples of particularly objectionable behavior by Sufis in al-Sha‘rānī’s work. One, he reports, lived in a brothel and detained its patrons on their way out in order to intercede for them with God until

29. ‘Abduh and Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 2:74.

30. Adam Sabra, “Illiterate Sufis and Learned Artisans: The Circle of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī,” in *Le développement du soufisme en Égypte à l’époque mamelouke = The Development of Sufism in Mamluk Egypt*, ed. Richard McGregor and Adam Sabra (Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 2006).

31. ‘Abduh and Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 2:73 (on Quran 10:64), 11:421.

they were forgiven. Another once began his Friday sermon with the words, “I bear witness that you have no God but Satan, peace and blessings be upon him,” but the congregants excused his apparent blasphemy when they discovered that he had miraculously given thirty parallel sermons in different locations. A third Sufi was in the habit of sitting in mosques and reciting verses that the common people believed to be from the Quran but that were in fact composed by him. Given his saintly charisma, no one dared to criticize him.³² Riḍā concludes:

If al-Shaʿrānī, one of the greatest Azharī scholars and authors, considered this madman a saint, invoking God’s pleasure on him whenever mentioning him even when he is mentioned several times on one line, and his [al-Shaʿrānī’s] master ‘Alī al-Khawwāṣṣ received from this man the solutions to divine mysteries and relied on his unveilings, would we be mistaken in saying that anyone who testifies to his saintliness and miracles is a superstitious madman like him? What value did reason, knowledge, and religion have in his age? And what stronger evidence could there be that this madness was due to satanic influence rather than divine inspiration than the fact that the man compared his incoherent rantings to the Quran, as al-Shaʿrānī himself witnessed?³³

Riḍā’s discussion of Sufism, including his comparison of earlier and later models of piety, has to be understood in the context of mainstream Sufism as encountered by Muslim modernists such as ‘Abduh and Riḍā. Al-Shaʿrānī was arguably the most widely read author of religious literature in Arab lands in the centuries before ‘Abduh,³⁴ and his importance in defining the image of Sufism and exporting Akbarian Sufism³⁵ into other disciplines cannot be overstated.³⁶ Riḍā’s juxtaposition of early and later forms of Sufism is aimed at exposing later Sufi authorities such as al-Shaʿrānī for having deviated from the original purpose and foundational doctrines of Sufism and for having normalized unethical behavior through the excuse of saintly immunity from ethical norms.

Al-Shaʿrānī’s works were by no means unique in this respect. Another illustrative example, compiled around the same time as Riḍā was writing his critique of al-Shaʿrānī, is Yūsuf al-Nabhānī’s collection of stories about saintly miracles, *Jāmiʿ karāmāt al-awliyāʾ*. One of the miracles recounted in al-Nabhānī’s book, performed by a certain ‘Alī al-‘Umarī, who died at the very beginning of the twentieth century, consisted of al-‘Umarī’s growing his penis to an extraordinary length, whipping his servant with it, and then shrinking it back to its normal size. Al-Nabhānī reports having been told the story in al-‘Umarī’s presence, and at its conclusion al-‘Umarī grabbed al-Nabhānī’s hand and pushed it into his pants, where, al-Nabhānī says, he could not feel anything at all; the implication was that al-‘Umarī was also able to retract his penis into complete nonexistence, “as if he wasn’t a man at all,” as

32. ‘Abduh and Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 11:424–26. See al-Shaʿrānī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:165 (entry on ‘Alī Waḥīsh), 2:118 (entry on Muḥammad al-Khuḍarī), 2:205 (entry on Shaʿbān al-Majdhūb).

33. ‘Abduh and Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 11:426.

34. Leila Hudson, “Reading al-Shaʿrānī: The Sufi Genealogy of Islamic Modernism in Late Ottoman Damascus,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15, no.1 (2004): 39–68.

35. “Akbarian Sufis” refers to followers of Ibn ‘Arabi, who was known as *al-shaykh al-akbar*.

36. El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics*, 45–46.

al-Nabhānī puts it.³⁷ What is particularly noteworthy about this remarkable account is that al-Nabhānī does not seem to have questioned al-‘Umarī’s actions or expressed any shock at them—not at al-‘Umarī’s whipping of his servant, not at his obscene manner of doing so, nor at his forcing of al-Nabhānī’s hand into his pants to feel for his genitalia.

This normalization of behavior that would ordinarily be considered unacceptable is also evident in the hagiography of the influential eighteenth-century Moroccan Sufi ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dabbāgh. The work contains pages and pages of descriptions of al-Dabbāgh’s miracles, which consisted primarily of knowing every detail of his followers’ sex lives; he even assured them that he was always with them when they had sex with their wives.³⁸ The aim of such stories is clearly not to model or promote ethical behavior in any ordinary sense. Rather, they serve to reinforce the principle that Sufi saints are not subject to ordinary moral rules and standards. Such stories were not considered merely fanciful fictions or metaphors. For example, in the nineteenth century, the shaykh of the Sa‘diyya Sufi brotherhood in Egypt participated in important religious festivals by riding his horse over the prostrated bodies of his disciples. The fact that most of his disciples emerged with no obvious wounds was celebrated as a miracle enacted by the shaykh; meanwhile, those who did sustain injuries (even deaths were reported) were blamed for their insufficient spiritual preparation.³⁹ The practice was eventually outlawed in Egypt. ‘Abduh lauded the ban—not because he objected to Sufi practices in general, but because for him the issue was first and foremost an ethical one. In his view, the shaykh’s actions not only endangered the apprentices’ health but, more fundamentally, violated the Quran-mandated dignity of all humans by subjecting the apprentices to the hooves of the shaykh’s horse. Such public spectacles thus represented the sacrifice of ethical norms in the quest to bolster saints’ authority and display their alleged miracles.⁴⁰ On a more quotidian level, Sayyid Quṭb’s (1323–85/1906–66) memoir of his childhood in an Egyptian village in the early twentieth century features a madman whom the villagers deemed a potential saint despite his habit of running around naked and caked in filth, attacking children. The young Quṭb was bewildered to see that the adults around him willfully ignored the man’s behavior, choosing to see it as supernaturally inspired and thus beyond the norms applicable to normal social conduct.⁴¹ It is this facet of the Sufism of their time—the unquestioned authority attributed to saintly figures and its use to justify seemingly unethical conduct—that drew repeated criticism from modernists of ‘Abduh’s and Riḍā’s generation.

The basis of the saints’ authority lay primarily in their performance of miracles, and by the fourteenth century accounts of such miracles had become the principal

37. Yūsuf al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi‘ karāmāt al-awliyā’*, ed. Ibrāhīm ‘Aṭwa ‘Iwaḍ (Porbandar: Markaz Ahl-i Sunnat Barakāt-i Riḍā, 2001), 2:396–97.

38. Aḥmad b. al-Mubārak al-Sijilmāsī, *al-Ibriz min kalām sayyidi ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dabbāgh* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2002), 31. I am grateful to Jonathan Brown and Janan Delgado for the references to al-Nabhānī and al-Dabbāgh.

39. Meir Hatina, “Religious Culture Contested: The Sufi Ritual of Dawsa in Nineteenth-Century Cairo,” *Die Welt des Islams*, n.s., 47, no. 1 (2007): 41–42; Sirriyeh, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis*, 93.

40. Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-ustadh al-imām*, 2:136–43. See also Kei Takahashi, “The Abolition of Dawsa and the Rise of the *Tariqa* Criticism in Modern Egypt,” *Bulletin of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan* 53, no. 1 (2010): 58–81.

41. Sayyid Quṭb, *Ṭīf min al-qarya* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1973), 8–15.

staple of Sufi biographies. The idea was that saints proved their sainthood by means of saintly miracles, the same way that prophets proved their prophethood through prophetic miracles. Once somebody was determined to be a saint, the person's actions became for all intents and purposes unquestionable. Later Sufi writers developed arguments to render such accounts unassailable by conflating the standard Sunni position on the possibility of saintly miracles (namely, that they are possible) and the credibility and truthfulness of individual miracle reports. An example is found in the work of a contemporary of 'Abduh's, Abū al-Hudā al-Ṣayyādī (1266–1328/1849–1909), the Syrian shaykh of the Rifā'iyya brotherhood, who led the Sufi shaykhs in Istanbul under 'Abd al-Ḥamīd II.⁴² Al-Ṣayyādī ridicules Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 738/1328) position of accepting the occurrence of saintly miracles in principle while rejecting the miraculousness of the fire-walking Sufis of his day:

This really is a most curious thing, as if Shaykh Ibn Taymiyya, may he be forgiven, conceded the existence of and believed in some miracles but denied others; this is more than enough [to show his error]! All might and power belongs to God! It is clear that the existence of saints among the Muslims is established by the text of the Quran and that the miracles of these saints are a miracle of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace and blessings be upon him; to deny the miracles of the saints is tantamount to denying the saints, and denying them constitutes disbelief, since it contradicts the clear text of scripture.⁴³

'Abduh responded to this conflation forcefully:

What is imperative to keep in mind is that both Sunnis and others agree that there is no obligation to believe in any particular claimed miracle on the part of any particular "saint" since the rise of Islam. By communal consensus, it is permissible for every Muslim to deny the occurrence of any particular "miracle" performed by any saint, whoever he be. Such denial in no way contravenes anything in the fundamentals of Islam, in no way diverges from the authentic tradition, and in no way deviates from the straight path. ... How far this unanimously held principle is from the ill-considered tendency of great numbers of Muslims today to suppose that miracles and supernatural phenomena are produced at will, with "saints" in mutual rivalry and competition! None of this has anything whatsoever to do with God, religion, the saints, or any rational intelligence.⁴⁴

What I hope to have established thus far is that 'Abduh and Riḍā held a positive view of what they saw as the "original" form of Sufism and believed in its power to effect ethical improvement, but that they objected vehemently to certain aspects of Sufism in their own day. But how did they conceive of the connection between these positive and negative aspects of Sufism? On this issue, 'Abduh and Riḍā parted ways. 'Abduh's writings indicate that he embraced the theory of Akbarian Sufism

42. On al-Ṣayyādī, see Butrus Abu-Manneh, "Sultan Abdulhamid II and Shaikh Abulhuda al-Sayyadi," *Middle Eastern Studies* 15, no. 2 (1979): 131–53.

43. Abū al-Hudā al-Ṣayyādī, *Qilādat al-jawāhir* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, n.d.), 207–11.

44. Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1949), 207; translated as *The Theology of Unity*, trans. Iṣḥāq Musā'ad and Kenneth Cragg (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), 158 (my translation diverges slightly).

and absolved it of blame for the excesses of contemporary Sufis. *Risālat al-Wāridāt*, an early work of ‘Abduh’s, contains philosophical, theological, and Sufi elements, including a section in which ‘Abduh affirms his belief in the oneness of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), the key ontological doctrine of the school of Ibn ‘Arabī.⁴⁵ ‘Abduh wrote the book at the age of twenty-five, and, as he admits in the introduction, its ideas were shaped by his mentor Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1254–1314/1838 or 1839–1897). The book was not published during ‘Abduh’s lifetime but only posthumously by Riḍā in 1908 and again in 1925. No direct statement from an older ‘Abduh regarding the doctrine of the oneness of being survives, so we do not know whether he maintained his youthful position on this particular issue, but we do have a transcript of a 1904 conversation between ‘Abduh and a Sufi called al-Dalāṣī that suggests that ‘Abduh’s mature stance toward Akbarian Sufism remained favorable.⁴⁶ In the transcript, ‘Abduh states:

The books of Muḥyī al-Dīn b. ‘Arabī are littered with statements that contradict the doctrines and fundamentals of religion, and the book “The Perfect Man” [*al-Insān al-kāmil*] by Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī is, on the surface, closer to Christianity than it is to Islam, but this surface is not what is intended; rather, the text consists of allusions that only those able to unlock them can understand. If I were in charge of book publishing, I would forbid the publication of “The Meccan Openings” [*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*, by Ibn ‘Arabī] and similar works, because these books should not be read by the unqualified.⁴⁷

This statement appears to reaffirm the theory that Sufism emerged as an underground movement that had to develop a specialized terminology that would be incomprehensible and even dangerous to non-initiates. ‘Abduh acknowledges that the writings of Akbarian Sufis contain elements that seem to violate basic principles of Islam, but he insists that such violations are illusory, not reflective of the works’ true essence, which can be accessed only by the select. ‘Abduh also gives credence to al-Sha‘rānī’s strategy of invoking “credible deniability,”⁴⁸ arguing that seemingly problematic sections in Ibn ‘Arabī’s work must in fact have been inserted there by others, and extending this excuse also to other Sufi writers of controversial material, including al-Sha‘rānī himself.⁴⁹ Through these two maneuvers, ‘Abduh effectively shields the revered figures of Akbarian Sufism from critique and responsibility for the failings that he criticizes in Sufis contemporary to himself.

Riḍā, by contrast, took a different stance, drawing a direct link between the doctrines of Ibn ‘Arabī and Sufi practices in his day. It is plausible that the shift in attitude is connected to Riḍā’s publication, through his Manār Press, of a collection of writings by Ibn Taymiyya shortly after ‘Abduh’s death. The most relevant text for the present context is Ibn Taymiyya’s *Bughyat al-murtād*, a critique

45. Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *Risālat al-Wāridāt*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Manār, 1925), 6; see also Oliver Scharbrodt, “The Salafiyya and Sufism: Muḥammad ‘Abduh and His *Risālat al-Wāridāt* (Treatise on Mystical Inspirations),” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70, no. 1 (2007): 100. ‘Abduh also wrote an early *Risāla fi waḥdat al-wujūd*, but this work appears lost. See Riḍā, “Tatimmat sirat al-ustādh al-imām,” *al-Manār* 8 (1905): 492.

46. Muḥammad ‘Abduh, “Ḥiwār fi al-taṣawwuf wa-l-wilāya,” in *al-A‘māl al-kāmila*, 3:541–49.

47. ‘Abduh, “Ḥiwār fi al-taṣawwuf wa-l-wilāya,” 3:547.

48. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī, *al-Yawāqit wa-l-jawāhir* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā‘ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 16–17.

49. ‘Abduh, “Ḥiwār fi al-taṣawwuf wa-l-wilāya,” 3:546–47.

of Akbarian Sufism.⁵⁰ As Alexander Knysh has argued, Ibn Taymiyya's treatment is one of the most extensive critiques of Akbarian Sufism ever written, but his writings were still being discovered at the time of 'Abduh's death and were not yet available to 'Abduh.⁵¹ Ibn Taymiyya's aim in the *Bughya* is to refute Ibn 'Arabī's cosmology, to demonstrate its incompatibility with Abrahamic scripture, to reveal the genealogical indebtedness of its core ideas to Neoplatonic philosophy, and to trace its pernicious consequences—ethical relativism and belief in saintly powers. In other words, Ibn Taymiyya connects the high theory of Akbarian Sufism with the phenomena of popular Sufism that 'Abduh and Riḍā had criticized on ethical grounds in their own time. Whereas 'Abduh had harbored misgivings about the printing of Ibn 'Arabī's writings, fearing that ordinary people might misunderstand them and wrongly think that they supported current superstitious practices,⁵² Riḍā seems to have become convinced that the Akbarian intellectual tradition had in fact given rise to these practices. Tellingly, in his second printing of 'Abduh's *Risālat al-Wāridāt*, which came out after Ibn Taymiyya's *Bughya*, Riḍā changed the subtitle from "on the secret of God's self-disclosures" (*fi sirr al-tajalliyyāt*) to "on the opinions of the Sufis and the philosophers," thereby creating the impression that the book described the opinions of these groups rather than 'Abduh's own ideas.⁵³ The rediscovery of Ibn Taymiyya's critique closed the distance that 'Abduh had still defended between the theory and contemporary practice of Sufism by arguing persuasively for a direct connection between the two. Nevertheless, even as Riḍā criticized the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* as "the fundamental doctrine of Sufi extremists ... with manifold corrupting effects,"⁵⁴ he did not reject it outright but rather took the Sufi experience of the world as a unified phenomenon seriously. In his journal, he reprinted sections of Sufi works by al-Ghazālī and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) that discussed theorizations of this experience but did so in terms that avoided Akbarian metaphysics.⁵⁵

The belief in the centrality of ethics that animated 'Abduh's and Riḍā's engagement with Sufism is also discernible in the work of a number of other Muslim modernists. Tāhīr al-Jazā'irī (1268–1338/1852–1920), a descendant of Algerian immigrants who is well known for his role in establishing the Zāhiriyya Library in Damascus, shared 'Abduh's and Riḍā's interest in classical ethical literature as well as their criticism of certain elements of contemporary Sufi practice. An anecdote recounted by his student Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī (1293–1372/1876–1953) illustrates the subtle way in which al-Jazā'irī sought to divert Sufi practitioners from what he saw as objectionable ideas toward an emphasis on ethics:

50. Ibn Taymiyya, *Bughyat al-murtād*, published in *Kitāb Majmū'at fatāwā shaykh al-Islām Taqī al-Dīn b. Taymiyya al-Ḥarrānī* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Kurdistān al-Ilmiyya, 1908–11), vol. 3.

51. Alexander Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), ch. 4; El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics*, 187.

52. 'Abduh, *al-A'māl al-kāmila*, 3:547.

53. Haddad, "Oeuvres," 202; Scharbrodt, "Salafiyya and Sufism," 95.

54. Rashīd Riḍā, "al-Ta'rif bi-kitābay Manāzil al-sā'irīn wa-Madārij al-sālikīn," *al-Manār* 19 (1916): 53. It is noteworthy that Riḍā never mentions Ibn 'Arabī in these discussions but rather points to 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jilī's *al-Insān al-kāmīl* as an example of the worst excesses of the theory.

55. Rashīd Riḍā, "Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī wa-ra'yuhū fi al-tawḥīd wa-l-tawakkul wa-yadkhul fihī bayān waḥdat al-wujūd wa-l-jabr wa-l-kasb" [excerpt from al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*], *al-Manār* 12 (1909): 833–55; and Riḍā, "Maqām al-mushāhada wa-'ayn al-jam': al-Darajat al-'ulyā fi al-mushāhada wa-l-farq fihā bayn al-tawḥīd wa-takhayyulāt waḥdat al-wujūd" [excerpt from Ibn al-Qayyim's *Madārij al-sālikīn*], *al-Manār* 18 (1915): 372–79.

[Al-Jazā'irī] once encountered a group that had attached itself to a Sufi brotherhood, reciting its litany. He found in some of [the group's members] a readiness to learn. So he kept the company of their master, acting as his student, until he could convince the group to spend their time reading a work on Sufism that both was good literature and called for virtuous conduct [*al-akhlāq al-fādila*]. He had to endure suspicious looks, so he entered their gatherings claiming that he was seeking to learn, eager to listen to their master's lesson. Meanwhile, he brought manuscripts of the work to collate them with the printed copy [that they were reading]; then he tried to teach some of them how to use linguistic reference works, so misreadings could be corrected and the work would receive the service it deserved. In this way, he managed to bring those of them who were ready from books on Sufism to works on other Islamic sciences and literature. [...] Capable intellectuals emerged from this group, yet before that [intervention] they had been entirely occupied with inspirations, imaginings, and dreams.⁵⁶

This anecdote illustrates the complex and ambiguous attitude of modernists such as al-Jazā'irī toward Sufism: on the one hand, they acknowledged the ethical value of Sufi literature, but on the other, they decried what they saw as the intellectual “deficiencies” of institutional Sufism and its preoccupation with mystical experience.

Another Damascene modernist with an interest in Sufi ethics was Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (1283–1332/1866–1914), the author of a Quranic commentary and various works on theology who was, like 'Abduh, Riḍā, and al-Jazā'irī, involved in the discovery, editing, and publication of a wide range of classical works.⁵⁷ One of his central concerns was to find and edit important works on ethics, some of which clearly belonged to the Sufi intellectual tradition. Among the latter was a collection of epistles that included, among others, ethical works by al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā (d. 427/1037) and a text misattributed to Ibn 'Arabī that was in fact authored by Yaḥyā b. 'Adī (d. 363/974).⁵⁸

Al-Qāsimī also composed abridgments of two Sufi works, *Qūt al-qulūb* by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) and al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*. Al-Qāsimī's account of his decision to abridge the *Iḥyā'* is interesting. In the introduction to the abridgment, he reports that he had experimented with various texts in his classes and had found excerpts from the *Iḥyā'* particularly useful. When he visited Egypt in 1903, he had mentioned this experience to Muḥammad 'Abduh, who had encouraged him to write an abridgment of the *Iḥyā'* to make it more suitable for teaching. Al-Qāsimī agreed, noting that the work also contained many elements that were obscure and of little relevance to ordinary people.

56. Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī, *Kunūz al-ajdād* (Damascus: Maṭba'at al-Taraqqī, 1950), 15.

57. El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics*, chap. 7.

58. *Hādhihi majmū'at al-rasā'il* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Kurdistān al-'Ilmiyya, 1910).

The mention of “ordinary people” is important because it points to a key reason for the interest of al-Qāsimī and his fellow reformers in editing, publishing, and popularizing classical works and particularly ethical texts: social reform in an age in which expanding education and literacy were rapidly making written texts accessible to a growing portion of the population. In a letter, al-Qāsimī explains:

This service is necessary these days given all the schools that are about to be opened; they cannot be established except with such [texts].... The idea is that in the present time it is obligatory for everyone to consider what they can contribute to the raising of the community. If people like us cannot bring about political reform, then at least [we should bring about] intellectual reform.⁵⁹

In a parallel vein, Ṭāhir al-Jazāʾirī edited and published a small but significant ethical treatise written by the early Abbasid secretary Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (d. ca. 139/756). In his introduction to the booklet, al-Jazāʾirī stresses the importance of the field of ethics (*ʿilm tahdhīb al-akhlāq*) for society and individuals alike. Al-Jazāʾirī also advocated for the publication of Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī’s (d. 354/965) *Rawḍat al-ʿuqalāʾ*, a work containing reports about virtuous conduct throughout early Islamic history. The work’s editor, Muḥammad Amīn al-Khānjī (1282–1358/1865–1939), recounts that he initially became aware of the work through al-Jazāʾirī, who lauded the work’s potential for wide-reaching social benefits—not only for men but also for women.⁶⁰ Neither Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ nor Ibn Ḥibbān were Sufis, but the modernists’ focus on these works illustrates the importance they attributed to classical works dealing with ethics of any kind.

In 1883, ʿAbduh laid out his view on the status of ethics, and especially virtue ethics, in a series of lectures at the Sulṭāniyya School which were subsequently published as *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*. ʿAbduh connected virtue ethics, religion, and the fate of society to argue that virtues lay at the heart of every true religion, and God bestowed His favors on societies that nurtured and enacted these virtues:

The spirit which God has implanted in all of His Divine laws for the right ordering of thought and reflection, the discipline of desire and the curbing of ambition and lust. It is the spirit which bids us to assess every question on its proper merits and pursue all objectives soundly, keeping faith, holding brotherly affection and co-operating in right dealing, with mutual loyalty through thick and thin, *and other fundamental virtues*.⁶¹ ... God will never deprive a nation of His favor as long as this spirit animates them. Rather He will multiply their blessings in proportion to its strength and diminish them when it is weak.⁶²

59. Muḥammad b. Nāṣir al-ʿAjmī, ed., *al-Rasāʾil al-mutabādala bayn Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī wa-Maḥmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī* (Beirut: Dār al-Bashāʾir al-Islāmiyya, 2001), 78–79.

60. Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī, *Rawḍat al-ʿuqalāʾ*, ed. Muḥammad Amīn al-Khānjī (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Kurdistān al-ʿIlmiyya, 1910), bāʾ.

61. The translation is missing the phrase in italics.

62. ʿAbduh, *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*, 177–78; *Theology of Unity*, 137–38.

This statement illustrates the importance that ‘Abduh and other Muslim modernists attributed to ethics on a societal scale and casts their ambiguous attitude toward Sufism into sharp relief. In their view, the subjugated position of Muslim peoples, their poverty and backwardness vis-à-vis Europe, and their obvious decline relative to the early centuries of Islam could be explained as products of a deficiency in collective virtue. They attributed some responsibility for this state of affairs to recent and contemporary Sufi thought and institutions, because these had given rise to a system of religious authority that precluded challenge and critique and that, instead of teaching and nurturing virtue, promoted obscurantism and holy ignorance, to the point of violating ethical sensibilities in the name of claims to inspired knowledge. For the modernists, then, the way to reform religious discourse and improve Muslim societies was to accomplish an ethical reformation through, among other things, the rediscovery of the ethical heritage of Islam as found in the various branches of Islamic literature—including, importantly, early Sufi literature. None of the figures discussed here rejected Sufism wholesale. They were engaged in a project of reconstructing Islamic thought that entailed a continuous evaluation of what elements to pursue and what to dismiss.

Bibliography

- ‘Abduh, Muḥammad. *Al-A‘māl al-kāmila li-l-imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh*. Edited by Muḥammad ‘Imāra. Beirut: al-Mu‘assasa al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 1980.
- _____. “Ḥiwār fī al-taṣawwuf wa-l-wilāya.” In ‘Abduh, *al-A‘māl al-kāmila*, 3:541–549.
- _____. *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*. Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1949.
- _____. “Sīratī.” In ‘Abduh, *al-A‘māl al-kāmila*, 2:315–337.
- _____. *Risālat al-Wāridāt*. 2nd ed. Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Manār, 1925.
- _____. *The Theology of Unity*. Translated by Ishāq Musa‘ad and Kenneth Cragg. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966.
- ‘Abduh, Muḥammad, and Rashīd Riḍā. *Tafsīr al-Qur‘ān al-ḥakīm al-mushtahar bi-ism Tafsīr al-Manār*. Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1906–35.
- Abu-Manneh, Butrus. “Sultan Abdulhamid II and Shaikh Abulhuda al-Sayyidi.” *Middle Eastern Studies* 15, no. 2 (1979): 131–153.
- al-‘Ajlūnī, Ismā‘īl. *Kashf al-khafā’*. Edited by ‘Abd al-Ḥamid Hindāwī. Beirut: al-Maktabat al-‘Aṣriyya, 2000.
- al-‘Ajmī, Muḥammad b. Nāṣir, ed. *Al-Rasā‘il al-mutabādala bayn Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī wa-Mahmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī*. Beirut: Dār al-Bashā‘ir al-Islāmiyya, 2001.
- Bashir, Shahzad. *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- al-Būnī, Aḥmad b. ‘Alī. *Shams al-ma‘ārif al-kubrā*. Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Nūr, 2005.
- Commins, David. *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- El Shamsy, Ahmed. *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Gellner, Ernest. “A Pendulum Swing Theory of Islam.” *Annales de sociologie marocaines* 5 (1968): 5–14. Reprinted in *Sociology of Religion: Selected Readings*. Edited by Roland Robertson, 127–138. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
- al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥamid. *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*. Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifa, 1987.
- Graham, William. “Basmala.” In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur‘ān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Leiden: Brill Online, 2015. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00024.
- Griffel, Frank. “What Do We Mean by ‘Salafī’? Connecting Muḥammad ‘Abduh with Egypt’s Nūr Party in Islam’s Contemporary Intellectual History.” *Die Welt des Islams*, n.s., 55, no. 2 (2015): 186–220.
- Haddad, Mohamed. “Les oeuvres de ‘Abduh: Histoire d’une manipulation.” *IBLA* 60, no. 180 (1997): 197–222.
- Hādhihi majmū‘at al-rasā‘il*. Cairo: Maṭba‘at Kurdistān al-‘Ilmiyya, 1910.
- Ḥaqqī, Ismā‘īl. *Rūḥ al-bayān*. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.
- Hatina, Meir. “Religious Culture Contested: The Sufi Ritual of *Dawsa* in Nineteenth-Century Cairo.” *Die Welt des Islams*, n.s., 47, no. 1 (2007): 33–62.
- Hudson, Leila. “Reading al-Sha‘rānī: The Sufi Genealogy of Islamic Modernism in Late Ottoman Damascus.” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15, no.1 (2004): 39–68.
- Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī. *Rawḍat al-uqalā’*. Edited by Muḥammad Amīn al-Khānjī. Cairo: Maṭba‘at Kurdistān al-‘Ilmiyya, 1910.
- Ibn Taymiyya. *Bughyat al-murtād*. In *Kitāb Majmū‘at fatāwā shaykh al-islām Taqī al-Dīn b. Taymiyya al-Ḥarrānī*, vol. 3. Cairo: Maṭba‘at Kurdistān al-‘Ilmiyya, 1908–11.
- Jād Allāh, ‘Ādil Sālim. “Mawqif al-Imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh al-naqdī min ba‘ḍ mumārasāt al-mutaṣawwifa fī ‘aṣrih.” *Islāmiyyat al-ma‘ārif* 82 (2015): 79–110.

- Jamal, ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān. *Nasīhat al-murīd fī ṭarīq ahl al-sulūk wa-l-tajrīd wa-yusammā ayḍan al-Yawāqīt al-ḥisān fī taṣrīf ma‘ānī al-insān*. Edited by ‘Aṣīm al-Kayyālī. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2005.
- al-Jilī, ‘Abd al-Karīm. *Al-Kahf al-raqīm*. Hyderabad: Dā‘irat al-Ma‘ārif al-Nizāmiyya, 1918.
- Knysh, Alexander. *Ibn ‘Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Kurd ‘Alī, Muḥammad. *Kunūz al-‘ajdād*. Damascus: Maṭba‘at al-Taraqqī, 1950.
- al-Kurdī, Muḥammad Amīn. *Kitāb Tanwīr al-qulūb fī mu‘āmalat ‘allām al-ghuyūb*. Aleppo: Dār al-Qalam al-‘Arabī, 1991.
- Laoust, Henry. “Le reformisme orthodoxe des ‘Salafiya.” *Revue des études islamiques* 6 (1932): 175–224.
- Lauzière, Henri. *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2004.
- al-Nabhānī, Yūsuf. *Jāmi‘ karāmāt al-awliyā’*. Edited by Ibrāhīm ‘Aṭwa ‘Iwaḍ. Porbandar: Markaz Ahl-i Sunnat Barakāt-i Riḍā, 2001.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: HarperOne, 2015.
- Pink, Johanna. “‘Abduh, Muḥammad.” In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur‘ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe. Leiden: Brill Online, 2015. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_050483.
- Quṭb, Sayyid. *Ṭifl min al-qarya*. Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1973.
- Riḍā, Rashīd. “Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī wa ra’yuhu fi al-tawḥīd wa-l-tawakkul wa-yadkḥul fihi bayān waḥdat al-wujūd wa-l-jabr wa-l-kasb” [excerpt from al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*]. *Al-Manār* 12 (1909): 833–855.
- _____. *Al-Manār wa-l-Azhar*. Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Manār, 1934.
- _____. “Maqām al-mushāhada wa-‘ayn al-jam‘: al-Daraja al-‘ulyā fi al-mushāhada wa-l-farq fihā bayn al-tawḥīd wa-takhayyulāt waḥdat al-wujūd” [excerpt from Ibn al-Qayyim’s *Madārij al-sālikīn*]. *Al-Manār* 18 (1915): 372–379.
- _____. “Muḥāwarāt bayn al-muṣliḥ wa-l-muqallid.” Part 4. *Al-Manār* 3, no. 32 (February 6, 1901): 795–809.
- _____. “Al-Ta‘rīf bi-kitābay Manāzil al-sā‘irīn wa-Madārij al-sālikīn.” *Al-Manār* 19 (1916): 50–59.
- _____. *Tārīkh al-ustādḥ al-imām al-shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh*. Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1907–31. Reprint, Cairo: Dār al-Faḍīla, 2006.
- _____. “Tatimmat sīrat al-ustādḥ al-imām.” *Al-Manār* 8 (1905): 487–495.
- Sabra, Adam. “Illiterate Sufis and Learned Artisans: The Circle of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī.” In *Le développement du soufisme en Égypte à l’époque mamelouke = The Development of Sufism in Mamluk Egypt*. Edited by Richard McGregor and Adam Sabra, 153–168. Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 2006.
- al-Ṣayyādī, Abū al-Hudā. *Qilādāt al-jawāhir*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.
- Scharbrodt, Oliver. “The Salafiyya and Sufism: Muḥammad ‘Abduh and His *Risālat al-Wāridāt* (Treatise on Mystical Inspirations).” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70, no. 1 (2007): 89–115.
- Schwartz, Stephen. *Two Faces of Islam*. New York: Doubleday, 2002.
- Sedgwick, Mark. “Sufis as ‘Good Muslims’: Sufism in the Battle against Jihadi Salafism.” In *Sufis and Salafis in the Contemporary Age*. Edited by Lloyd Ridgeon, 105–117. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- al-Sha‘rānī, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. *Al-Anwār al-qudsiyya fī ma‘rifat qawā‘id al-ṣūfiyya*. Edited by Ṭāhā ‘Abd al-Bāqī Surūr and al-Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Īd al-Shāfi‘ī. Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Ilmiyya, 1992.

_____. *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*. Bulaq, 1870.

_____. *Al-Yawāqīt wa-l-jawāhir*. Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, n.d.

al-Sijilmāsī, Aḥmad b. al-Mubārak. *Al-Ibrīz min kalām sayyidī ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Dabbāgh*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2002.

Sirriyeh, Elizabeth. *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defense, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World*. Richmond: Curzon, 1999.

Takahashi, Kei. "The Abolition of Dawsa and the Rise of the Ṭarīqa Criticism in Modern Egypt." *Bulletin of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan* 53, no. 1 (2010): 58–81.

Weismann, Itzchak. *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafīyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus*. Leiden: Brill, 2001.