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PART I



THE EARLY PERIOD

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Origins and Early Sufism

Christopher Melchert

Sufism is widely defined as Islamic mysticism, particularly the form that took shape around the Baghdadi master al-Junayd (d. 298/911?). In the early eleventh century CE, biographers worked out a spiritual lineage for Sufism going back to the Companions of the Prophet. The immediate forbears of the Sufis they identified as eighth- and ninth-century renunciants known as *zuhhād*, *nussāk*, or *'ubbād* (the most important extant biographical dictionaries are those of al-Sulamī and Abū Nu'aym).¹ They underwent austerities, devoted extraordinary amounts of time to Qur'ānic recitation and prayer, and generally cultivated a solemn attitude towards life. Some spoke of thinking often and steadily of God, but the ideas of mutual love and mystical union were yet to come. A few wore wool, but express references to *ṣūfiyah* before the later ninth century usually have to do with marginal, disreputable figures not identified as forbears by the later Sufi biographers. Modern research has largely confirmed that Sufism grew out of this earlier, ascetic tradition.²

By a process not yet convincingly mapped in detail, there arose in the mid-ninth century a mystical trend, identified in Iraq with persons called Sufis. They talked of reciprocal love between themselves and God, and found that God addressed them through things of the world. This aroused opposition from pious Sunni circles determined to protect divine transcendence, and in 264/877–8, a Sufi inquisition was instituted in Baghdad. Some Sufis were arrested, although released without punishment, while others went into exile. By the end of the century, something like classical Sufism had developed in Baghdad, from where it would spread and absorb other pious movements over the next two

¹ Al-Sulamī, *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*. Edited by Johannes Pedersen (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960); Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣbahānī, *Hilyat al-awliyā'*, 10 vols (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah and Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1352–7/1932–8).

² Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*. Translated by Benjamin Clark (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

centuries. This chapter traces its emergence, as understood by twentieth-century scholarship, out of the earlier ascetical or renunciant tradition.

RENUNCIATION

The predominance of different themes in the Qurʾān and in surviving, dateable inscriptions suggests that piety was the main character of Islam in the seventh century. On the basis of inscriptions firmly dated in the seventh century, Fred Donner finds that pleas for divine forgiveness and express hopes for entry into paradise are so predominant that virtually no other features of the new religion can be made out.³ The argument here is that such a piety, however prevalent among the earliest Muslims, could not outlast mass conversion to Islam. Ascetical, renunciant piety came under suspicion of demanding too much by the later eighth century; by the late ninth century, it had given way to the admittedly élitist, mystical piety of Sufism.

As for austerity, many early exemplars of piety were notable for their poverty. When the anti-caliph Ibn al-Zubayr (d. Mecca, 73/693) came home, he saw three bed rolls (*muthul*). One sufficed for himself, he said, and one for his wife, but the third was for Satan so they threw it away.⁴ The Basran Mālik ibn Dīnār (d. 130/747–8?) gave away a pot because he feared it being stolen.⁵ He was found in a house without any light or anything but the ground to lay his bread on.⁶ The Kufan Dāwūd al-Ṭāʿī (d. 165/781–2?) moved from one room to another as his house gradually fell into ruin.⁷

There are many stories of renunciants who ate little. The Basran al-ʿAlāʾ ibn Ziyād (d. 94/712–13) ate one loaf a day, fasted till he turned green, and prayed till he dropped.⁸ Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) said that the believer was properly sad morning and evening, satisfied with what satisfies a kid, mainly a handful of *tamarrud* (probably a dish of dates softened in milk) and a drink of water.⁹ The Medinese Saʿīd ibn Muḥammad (d. 160s/777–87) made

³ F. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), chap. 2; Solange Ory, “Aspects religieux des textes épigraphiques du début de l’Islam”, 30–9 in *Les premières écritures islamiques*, Alfred-Louis de Prémare (ed.) (Aix-en-Provence: Édisud, 1990).

⁴ Ibn al-Mubārak, *al-Zuhd wa-al-raqāʾiq*. Edited by Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-Aʿzamī (Malegaon: Majlis Iḥyāʾ al-Maʿārif, 1386). Reprinted with different pagination, same numbers (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 1419/1998), no 761.

⁵ Abū Nuʿaym, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ* 2:364.

⁶ Abū Nuʿaym, *Ḥilyah* 2:365–6, 6:189.

⁷ Abū Nuʿaym, *Ḥilyah* 7:347.

⁸ Ibn al-Mubārak, *al-Zuhd*, no 965.

⁹ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (attrib.), *al-Zuhd*, edited by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Qāsim (Mecca: Maṭbaʿat Umm al-Qurā, 1357). Reprinted (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 1403/1983). References to the latter in *italic*.

his living from a small tract of salty land that yielded two dinars per year. He would go to banquets when invited but eat nothing, saying, “I dislike to accustom my belly to good food, which would make it dissatisfied with what I normally feed it.”¹⁰ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) doubted whether a satiated man would find softening (*riqqah*) in his heart.¹¹

Given the widespread preference for night-time devotions, it is unsurprisingly common to read of sleep deprivation. The Kufan Masrūq (d. 63/682–3?) did not sleep on pilgrimage save in prostration (i.e. overcome as he performed supererogatory ritual prayers).¹² The wife of the Medinese *qāḍī* Abū Bakr ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Amr ibn Ḥazm (d. 110/728–9?) testified that he did not lie on his bed at night for 40 years.¹³ The Basran Mu‘ādha al-‘Adawīya (*fl.* early 8th cent.) would not sleep by day, fearing it would be her last, or by night, likewise fearing it would be her last, and wore thin clothes so that the cold would keep her awake.¹⁴

Some preferred at least short-term withdrawal from society. The Mu‘tazilah (literally, “withdrawers”) were probably distinguished at first by their renunciant piety rather than a peculiar theology,¹⁵ and they were by no means the only ones who practiced withdrawal from sinful society. The Kufan al-Rabī‘ ibn Khuthaym (d. 63/682–3?) and the Basran Muṭarrif ibn Shikhhkhīr (d. 95/713–14) are quoted as calling for one to learn jurisprudence, then withdraw.¹⁶ A Shi‘i source quotes Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765): “Bowling in the mosque is the monasticism (*rahbānīyah*) of the Arabs. The believer’s session is his mosque and his cell is his house.”¹⁷ Others restricted their conversation, at the very least. The Companion Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. Medina, 33/653–4?) said, “By God, if a man speaks a frivolous word (*kalimah fi al-rafāhiyah*) for his companions to laugh at, his downfall will be greater than between heaven and earth.”¹⁸ There are many injunctions to restrict

¹⁰ Ibn Sa‘d, *K. al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, edited by Eduard Sachau et al., 9 vols in 15 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1904–40). Reprinted as *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 9 vols (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957–68). References to the latter in *italic*: 5:305, 5:411.

¹¹ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (attrib.), *Kitāb al-Wara’*, edited by Zaynab Ibrāhīm al-Qārūṭ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1403/1983). Also edited by Muḥammad Sayyid Basyūni Zaghlūl (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1409/1988). References to latter in *italic*: 100 82.

¹² Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*, no. 975; Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 349, 418.

¹³ Ibn Ḥajar, *Kitāb Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*, 12 vols (Hyderabad: Majlis Dā‘irat al-Ma‘ārif al-Niẓāmīyah, 1325–7) (repr. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 12:39.

¹⁴ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 208, 257.

¹⁵ Sarah Stroumsa, “The beginnings of the Mu‘tazilah, reconsidered”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, no 13 (1990), 265–93.

¹⁶ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 240, 333, 294, 401–2.

¹⁷ Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfi*, k. *al-‘ishrah, bāb al-ittikā’ wa-al-ihtibā’*; edited by ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, corrected by Muḥammad al-Ākhundī, 8 vols (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmīyah, 1389, 1391/2010–12), 2:662.

¹⁸ Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*, no 993.

speech, especially in the mosque; for example, from the Medinese Sa'īd ibn al-Musayyab (d. after 90/708–9): “Whoever sits in the mosque sits with God, so how much he should not say anything but good.”¹⁹ But whereas reports of conversations between Muslim ascetics and Christian hermits are numerous, reports of long-term withdrawal by Muslims seem rare; for example, al-'Abbās al-Majnūn (*fl.* early 3rd/9th cent.?), who lived in Mount Lebanon, wore wool, ate only twice a month, and gave himself over to ritual worship for 60 years.²⁰ The famous Companion Ibn Mas'ūd is supposed to have actively discouraged some Kufans who had established themselves out of town to worship: “What induced you to do what you have done?” They said, “We wished to go away from the crowd.” Ibn Mas'ūd said, “If the people did what you have done, who would fight the enemy? I will not go away till you return.”²¹

As noted, some early renunciants wore wool (Arabic: *ṣūf*), which was scratchy, smelly when wet, and liable to become ragged. Mālik ibn Dīnār wore a woollen garment.²² The Kufan 'Awn ibn 'Abd Allāh (d. before 120/738) wore wool so that people would not be afraid to sit with him (i.e. so as to appear properly humble).²³ It was often related that the pious forbears had worn wool; for example, the Kufan Khaythamah ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān (d. after 80/699) related that 'Īsā and Yaḥyá (Jesus and John) had been cousins, the first wearing wool, the second skins.²⁴ However, the term “Sufi” did not appear until the later eighth century, and few of the renunciants whom later Sufi writers regarded as their forbears were expressly called ‘Sufis’ in their lifetimes.

More than particular austerities, early Muslim renunciants had in common their devotion of extraordinary amounts of time to Qur'ānic recitation and ritual prayer. The Meccan 'Amr ibn Dīnār (d. 126/743–4) divided his nights into a third each for sleep, *ḥadīth* (i.e. reviewing his own notebooks), and ritual prayer.²⁵ The Basran Sulaymān al-Taymī (d. 143/761) would spend all night in prayer, praying the dawn prayer on the previous evening's ablution. He would circulate among mosques with his son all night, praying here and there until dawn.²⁶

¹⁹ Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*, no. 416.

²⁰ Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilyah* 10:145.

²¹ Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*, no. 1104.

²² Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilyah* 2:368.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4:246.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:117.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:348.

²⁶ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* 7/2:18, 7:253.

Early renunciants were so devoted to reciting the Qur'an that *qāri'* ("reciter") became another term for "renunciant". The Companion Ibn Mas'ūd is said to have recited the Qur'an every three days, seldom making use of daylight,²⁷ although he is also quoted as saying, "Recite the Qur'an in seven; do not recite it in three."²⁸ The Basran Abū 'Amr ibn al-'Alā' (d. 154/770–1?), one of the famous seven readers of the Qur'an, burnt his books when he devoted himself entirely to Qur'anic recitation, according to one source,²⁹ or when he devoted himself more generally to worship according to another,³⁰ indicating the equivalence of recitation with the life of devotion. Rather than reciting the whole Qur'an, some ascetics meditated on small parts of it; for example, al-Rabī' ibn Khuthaym would recite one verse all night, bending and prostrating himself.³¹ Night-time devotions had the advantage of taking place outside of most people's observation, and hence were less likely to be performed merely to impress them. A *ḥadīth* report from the Prophet states that "There are three eyes that will never be burnt by the fire: an eye that has wept from fear of God, an eye that has stayed awake at night with the Book of God, and an eye that has kept watch on the path of God."³²

Celibacy was not unknown among early ascetics. 'Āmir ibn 'Abd Qays (d. ca. 55/674–5), usually associated with Basra, is a prominent early example.³³ More common are those who married but did not maintain normal conjugal relations. For example, the Kufan 'Amr ibn 'Utba (d. early 30s/650s) married at the insistence of his parents, reinforced by pressure from the caliph 'Uthmān. But he divorced two wives in succession after they said they would not give birth to children (from lack of sex), after which his parents left him alone.³⁴ The Kufan traditionist Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/777?) said, "Do not be

²⁷ Ibn Abī Shaybah, *al-Muṣannaf*, k. *al-ṣalāh* 826, *fi al-Qur'ān fi kam yukhtam*. Edited by Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh al-Jum'ah and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Luḥaydān, 16 vols (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1425/2004), 3:575.

²⁸ Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Muṣannaf*, k. *al-ṣalāh* 826, *fi al-Qur'ān fi kam yukhtam* = ed. Jum'ah & Luḥaydān, 3:578.

²⁹ Al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa-al-tabyīn*. Edited by 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn. Maktabat al-Jāhīz 2, 4 vols in 2 (Cairo: Maṭba'at Lajnat al-Ta'līf wa-al-Tarjamah wa-al-Nashr, 1367–9/1948–50), 1:321.

³⁰ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāyah fi ṭabaqāt al-qurrā'*. Edited by Gotthelf Bergsträßer, 3 vols (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1351–2/1932–3); (repr. Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthannā, n.d.; repr. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 1400/1980), 1:290.

³¹ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 336, 405.

³² Ibn al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Jihād*. Edited by Nazīh Ḥammād (Beirut: Dār al-Nūr, 1971/1391). Reprinted with different pagination, same nos, (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Aṣrīyah, 1409/1988), no 188; Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Muṣannaf*, k. *al-jihād* 1, *mā dhukira fi faḍl al-jihād* = Jum'ah & Luḥaydān, 7:21; sim., Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilyah* 5:209.

³³ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* 7/1:74–7, 7:104–8.

³⁴ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 354–5, 424–5.

fooled by someone with dependents”, since the need to support them would tempt him to attract presents by dictating invented *ḥadīth*.³⁵

Licit gain (*kasb*) was a major concern of early Muslim ascetics. The most prominent sources of gain that they tried to avoid were payments from rulers and the yield of land improperly appropriated. For example, the Basran Muḥammad ibn Wāsi' (d. 123/740–1) reproached Mālik ibn Dīnār for accepting something from a ruler, even though he had spent it on buying a slave to set free.³⁶ “He ate only by the gain of his hand” is a common characterization, showing that someone ensured that his provision involved no fraud. Some statements indicate distrust of all trading. Mālik ibn Dīnār said, “The market increases wealth but takes away religion.”³⁷ A Shi'i source quotes Ja'far al-Šādiq as saying, “A believer's profit off a believer is usury [*riḥ al-mu'min 'alā mu'min ribā*].”³⁸ Some stories commend economic recklessness. For example, 'Amr ibn 'Utba is said to have bought a mare for 4,000 dirhams. When it was objected that he had paid too much, he said he would not like to have a dirham for each time it raised and put down its hoof.³⁹ But trade also had its defenders: the Basran Ḥassān ibn Abī Sinān (*fl.* first half 2nd/8th cent.) traded for the sake of giving alms to the poor.⁴⁰

Morally, the early ascetics cultivated sadness and fear – especially sadness over past sins and fear of judgement to come. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said, “The believer is sad in the morning and sad in the evening.” Asked to describe al-Ḥasan himself, someone said, “When you saw him, it was as if he had just buried his mother. When he sat, it was as a prisoner sits who is about to have his head struck off. When he talked, he talked the talk of a man who has been condemned to the Fire.”⁴¹ Extreme fear of the Last Judgement is attributed to a number of early figures; for example, the Kufan Abū Maysara (d. 63/682–3) took to his bed and said, “Would that my mother had never borne me.” His wife said, “Abū Maysarah: God has done well by you, having guided you to Islam.” He said, “Yes, but God has made it clear to us that we are bound for the Fire, without making clear to us that we are going out of it.”⁴² Early

³⁵ Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilyah* 6:381–2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:353–4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:385.

³⁸ Al-Barqī, *Kitāb al-Maḥāsīn* (Najaf: al-Maṭba'ah al-Ḥaydariyah, 1384/1964), 77.

³⁹ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 352–422.

⁴⁰ Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilyah* 3:115–16.

⁴¹ Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *K. al-Jāmi' fi al-'ilal wa-ma'rifat al-rijāl*. Edited by Muḥammad Ḥusām Bayḍūn, 2 vols (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyah, 1410/1990), 1:65–6; *sim.*, Jāhiz, *Bayān* 3:171.

⁴² Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*, no. 312, alluding to Q. 19:71.

ascetics interpreted the Qur'ān as enjoining such sadness and fear. Many examples are quoted of weeping at hearing the Qur'ān recited. Al-Rabī' ibn Khuthaym wept all night over Q. 45:21: "Or do those who commit evil deeds reckon that We shall make them as those who believe and do righteous deeds . . . ?"⁴³

The chief point of austerity was, of course, moral, so as to keep one's attention on the important things, mainly God and the judgement to come. Ṭalḥa ibn 'Ubayd Allāh (d. 36/656) sold an estate for 700,000 dirhams but stayed awake all night fearing for the money and so gave it away in the morning.⁴⁴ Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said, "Beware of the distractions of the world. The world has many distractions. A man can scarcely open one door of distraction to himself without that door's leading on to ten more doors."⁴⁵ Because the point of austerity was mainly moral, early ascetics are often associated with measures to conceal their austerities from public view. Ibn Mas'ūd said, "Ritual prayer at night is worth more than by daytime as secret almsgiving is worth more than public."⁴⁶ Many wore wool underneath more respectable fabrics, so that people could not see that they were suffering from scratchiness; for example, the Basran Hārūn ibn Rabāb (*fl.* early 2nd/8th cent.).⁴⁷ Several persons are said to have covered up the Qur'ān from which they were reading if someone approached, such as Ibrāhīm al-Nakha'ī.⁴⁸

Concomitant with concern for attention to God was a certain indifference to good works in the world. We certainly have stories of almsgiving. For example, 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn (d. Medina, 93/711–12?) gave alms in secret. His back was found to have been blackened from carrying sacks of food at night for the poor of Medina.⁴⁹ But many are also quoted as preferring ritual devotions. For example, Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. late 30s/650s) said, "By him in whose hand is my soul, I should prefer to weep from fear of God until my tears flow down my cheeks to giving in alms a mountain of gold."⁵⁰ Many ascetics spent time in warfare on the frontier. The Kufan Abū Wā'il (d. *ca.* 99/717–18) had a reed house for himself and his horse, which he would dismantle and give away as alms on going to war, then rebuild if he safely returned;⁵¹ the emphasis here is on his willingness to die. But the statement of the Meccan

⁴³ Jones's translation; Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 329, 397.

⁴⁴ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 145, 181.

⁴⁵ Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*, no. 535.

⁴⁶ Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Muṣannaf, zuhd* 12, *kalām Ibn Mas'ūd*, = ed. J&L, 12:213.

⁴⁷ Abū Nu'aym, *Hilyah* 3:55.

⁴⁸ Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*, nos 1100–1; Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 365, 437.

⁴⁹ Abū Nu'aym, *Hilyah* 3:136.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 5:366.

⁵¹ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt* 6:68, 6:101; Aḥmad, *Zuhd* 357, 427–8.

‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Amr (d. 63/683?) – “The recollection of God morning and evening is better than breaking swords in the path of God and pouring out wealth” – apparently indicates that private spiritual struggle might take priority over the physical.⁵² Sufyān ibn ‘Uyayna calculated that spiritual *jihād* was worth ten times as much as war on the infidels.⁵³

Miracle stories seem less prominent in the literature of early Islamic asceticism than in, say, biographies of contemporary Christian saints. Still, they can be found. Answered prayer (*al-da‘wah al-mustajābah*) is mentioned fairly often (there are many examples in Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Mujābū al-da‘wah*).⁵⁴ One of the most common forms of miracle has to do with performing the ritual prayer; for example, ‘Amr ibn ‘Utba was protected by a lion as he prayed.⁵⁵ Another is the appearance of food, as when the Basran Ḥabīb al-Fārīsī (fl. late 1st/early 2nd cent.) bought grain to relieve famine, then paid it back miraculously from sacks he had put under his bed empty before praying.⁵⁶

THE EVOLUTION OF RENUNCIATION

The historical study of renunciation remains undeveloped. Modern scholarship follows the medieval Islamic consensus in considering the renunciants of the eighth century the forbears to the Sufis of the later ninth century and after. Scholars have long been exercised by the problem of whether Islamic renunciant piety and later Sufism were originally Islamic or were borrowed from other religious traditions. The thesis of Buddhist origins would seem to require that the earliest signs of Islamic mysticism were manifest early on, when Buddhism was strongest, and in the easternmost parts of the Islamic world, whereas mysticism seems to show up first in the ninth century, not the late seventh, and in Egypt and Iraq, not Khurasan. The same goes for alleged Indian origins more generally. Louis Massignon argued strongly for the endogenous development of Islamic renunciation and subsequent mysticism, although allowing for some influence from Christian monasticism.⁵⁷ He adduced the Qur’ānic origin of the Sufis’ technical vocabulary.

⁵² Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*, no. 1116.

⁵³ Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyah* 7:284.

⁵⁴ Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Mujābū al-da‘wah*. Edited by Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1406/1986).

⁵⁵ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 353, 423.

⁵⁶ Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyah* 6:150.

⁵⁷ Massignon, *Essay*.