



University of Kentucky
International Seminar

Taşawwuf & Traditionalism in Medieval Islam: Texts, Authors and Discourse

Organizers:

Dr. Mehdi Berriah (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

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University of Kentucky



Introduction:

The concepts of *taṣawwuf* (Sufism) and *athar* (tradition) are often perceived as antagonistic or, at least, as being hardly complementary/linked. The persistence of this assumption has been furthered by two trends in the study of Sufism. The first is that a significant part of the Western scholarly production of the 20th century has often treated and considered *taṣawwuf* primarily through the prism of mysticism and esotericism with little - sometimes negligent - interest in the relationship with tradition. The second reason is the heightened criticism and condemnation of *taṣawwuf* in the post-colonial period with the rise of Islamic modernism (Salafism) and neo-Traditionalism in the form of the Wahhabī sect of Islam, which arose in the Arabian Peninsula in the middle of the 18th century in conscious opposition to what Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792) considered to be Sufi decadence. The combined critiques of Islamic Modernism along with Wahhabism in the early 20th century, fueled by an infusion of petrodollars, led to the wide dissemination of an image of *taṣawwuf* as being an innovative and heterodox set of practices and beliefs within Islam. The result has been a concerted effort by Muslims who espouse anti-Ṣūfī sentiments to characterize Muslims who are connected with a Sufi *tariqa* (Ṣūfī brotherhood) as being other than *ahl al-sunna* (the people of *sunna*). A parallel argument has sought to promote Ṣūfī tariqas as aligned with non-Sunnī groups such as the Shī‘a. At the same time, in Europe and the United States during the latter part of the 20th century, New Age and mystical trends have sought to promote Sufism as a mystical approach divorced from Islam as a religion.

In seeking to ground their claims in the Islamic scholarly tradition, Islamic modernists along with neo-Traditionalists have relied heavily on eminent medieval scholars, particularly Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) among others. The use of Ibn Taymiyya as the purported *shaykh al-islām* has given this Hanbali theologian an image as the paragon of the intransigent traditionalist fighting against Sufi heterodoxy and extravagance.

Nevertheless, the questionable hypothesis that Ibn Taymiyya was a stubborn opponent to Sufism no longer holds as Henri Laoust, George Makdisi, Thomas Homerin, Qays Assef and more recently Carl Sharif El-Tobgui have demonstrated by highlighting Ibn Taymiyya's links with *taṣawwuf* and especially with the Qādirī Ḥanbalī brotherhood.¹ Ibn Taymiyya's book *al-Istiqāma* showcases the importance of *taṣawwuf* as a spiritual path, bringing one closer to God and clarifies Ibn Taymiyya's interest in the topic. *Al-Istiqāma* is, in itself, another argument bringing into question to notion that Ibn Taymiyya was staunchly anti-Sufi.²

Reading the works of such early Sufi masters such as al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), al-Junayd (d. 298/910), al-Ḥakīm (d. 405/1012) and 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) among others, shows us that that these early figures of Sufism were not only interested in a spiritual quest via experiences and *ma'rifa* (gnosis), but were also champions of the prophetic *sunna*. Denis Gril has shed light on this phenomenon in his recent book³. The works of Gavin Picken, Feryal Salem and, more recently, of Aiyub Palmer, have brought new elements to light in our knowledge of the *taṣawwuf* of great figures of Sufism for whom tradition was paramount.⁴ These works constitute a dynamic development in the renewal of the study of *taṣawwuf* and tradition given the multi-pronged attack that Sufism has faced in the modern period for its perceived antinomianism and supposed ignorance of prophetic tradition. These works constitute important contributions to the historical and theoretical underpinnings

¹ Henri Laoust, *Le hanbalisme sous les Mamelouks Bahrides (658-784/1260-1382)* (Paris: Geuthner, 1960), 35; Henri Laoust "Le réformisme d'Ibn Taymiyya", *Islamic Studies*, 1/3 (September), 1962: 33; George Makdisi "Ibn Taymiyya: A ṣūfī of the Qādiriyya Order", *American Journal of Arabic Studies*, 1 (1973): 118-29; Thomas Homerin "Ibn Taymīya's al-Ṣūfiyyah wa-al-Fuqarā'", *Arabica* 32 (1985): 219-244; Qays Assef "Le soufisme et les soufis selon Ibn Taymiyya", *Bulletin d'études orientales*, 60 (2012): 91-121; Carl S. El-Tobgui, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation. A Study of Dar' ta'āruḍ al-'aql wa-l-naql*, (Leyde: Brill 2019), p. 88 fn. 32

² Mehdi Berriah, "Ibn Taymiyya's Methodology regarding his Sources: Reading, Selection and Use. Preliminary Study and Perspectives", *Filologie medievali e moderne. Serie orientale*, 26/5 (2022): 49-50.

³ Denis Gril, *Le Serviteur de Dieu. La figure de Muhammad dans la spiritualité musulmane* (Paris: édition du Cerf) 2022.

⁴ Gavin Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Works of al-Muhasibi* (London: Routledge, 2011); Feryal Salem, *The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunnī Scholasticism: 'Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak and the Formation of Sunni Identity in the Second Islamic Century* (Leyde: Brill, 2016); Aiyub Palmer, *Sainthood and Authority in Early Islam: Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī's Theory of wilāya and the Reenvisioning of the Sunnī Caliphate*, (Leyde: Brill, 2019).

that have informed our understanding of the genesis of Sufism, its organization and development and ultimately its crisis in the modern period.

This conference seeks to contribute to our understanding of the concept of *taṣawwuf* in relation to tradition/Traditionalism by providing a platform for specialists in the field to present and share their latest findings. Participants will provide key understandings to questions at the heart of this project, including but not limited to:

- What relationships between *taṣawwuf* and tradition can be highlighted through a deep analysis of medieval texts?
- What does *taṣawwuf* mean for medieval traditionists?
- What is tradition according to the *mutaṣawwifūn*?
- What about the oft-heard antipathy between traditionalism and *taṣawwuf*?
- Are they really at odds with one another? If so, to what extent?
- Can a traditionalist not be a *mutaṣawwif* and vice versa?

The proceedings of this seminar will be published in a monograph with Brill.

Guidelines for Papers:

Due to the wide range of topics that relate to both *taṣawwuf*/Sufism and *athar*/Traditionalism, we expect that some papers may focus on one of these two elements more than another. Interested participants are requested to submit the following:

- (a) **An abstract** (300-500 words)
- (b) **A brief biography** (max. 500 words) that includes the academic background of the author, his or her academic publications, and his or her research interests.

Seminar Format: Hybrid. Participation may be online or in person.

Financial Support: The conference will cover accommodation costs for two nights and the meal of the conference day. Transportation costs are not covered.

Important Dates:

- January 15, 2023 – Submission of the abstract and bio
- February 15, 2023 – participants of the seminar will be contacted about their acceptance
- October 30, 2023 – Seminar at the University of Kentucky
- April 30, 2024 – Final draft of the chapter article due.

Contact: Submissions should be sent to Aiyub Palmer: aiyub.palmer@uky.edu