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The Problem of Sufism

Anyone visiting the modern city of Cairo will surely be struck with the impression that medieval Egypt, and particularly the capital city of the Mamluk empire, remains close at hand. In fact, it remains literally at arm's length through its monumental architecture, its ordering of the cityscape, and even its design aesthetic that in the twentieth century has been reborn as the "classical" style of Islamic Egypt. This neo-Mamluk design phenomenon may rightly be interrogated, among other things, for some of the easy assumptions it makes about "high" culture and our urge, even in the modern age, to streamline the past and oversimplify our historiography.

An even greater challenge to us as historians are the various phenomena that together constituted Sufism in the Mamluk period. I point to this as a problem because it appears that within our field there has recently been a significant increase in research relating to Sufism, and yet, as the following pages will show, in many instances we continue to labor under a methodology that is far from perfect and at times even misleading. By identifying the *problem of Sufism* as my object of study, I seek to bring to light the challenge Sufism continues to represent to our historiographical methods. I will briefly survey some of the more promising recent research in this area, and follow with an inquiry into one area of particular importance to the study of Sufism. Specifically, my aim will be to show that contemporary historians' use of terminology relating to the concept of "orthodoxy" in discussions of Mamluk Sufism has failed in its account of the particular historical examples it confronts and has steered us away from the deeper methodological challenge that the phenomenon of Sufism represents for historians.

The study of Sufism has recently contributed to a number of wider debates and thematic explorations within the field of Mamluk studies. One theme rather well developed in the historiography of the medieval West, but only recently taken up in earnest by students of the Mamluk period, centers on the tension between city and countryside. Contributions to this area have come from research on particular Sufi figures and, more widely, the religious topography of the Egyptian Delta.[1] Jean-Claude Garcin's work on the Upper Egyptian city of Qūṣ has recently

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[1] Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, *Al-Sayyid al-Badawî: un grand saint de l'islam égyptien* (Cairo, 1994); idem, "Maîtres, cheikhs et ancêtres: saints du Delta à l'époque mamelouke," in *Le développement du soufisme en Égypte à l'époque mamelouke,* ed. Richard McGregor and Adam Sabra (Cairo, 2006),

become available in a re-edition; elsewhere he has revisited a phenomenon he first addressed in 1969, namely that of rural Sufis and their integration into the urban fabric of Cairo.[2] Of particular significance are his observations that, although historians have often avoided using Sufi literature, this material can in fact provide unique perspectives on the diversity of social groupings as well as popular conceptions and critiques of Mamluk political authority. In the same direction, Adam Sabra has drawn on Sufi literature to animate certain dimensions of social history.[3]

Of singular importance in urban settings are the phenomena of procession and pilgrimage. These practices go back at least to the Fatimids in Cairo, and from early on they have been studied with emphasis on the roles, both actual and symbolic, of the ruling elite.[4] But recent research into the use of public space for Sufi parading, and the impact of pilgrimage routes and visitation sites on the urban topography, has continued to develop. Analysis of pilgrimage literature, itineraries, topography, and the range of personal titles associated with venerated Sufis has shed statistical and quantitative light on lesser-known dimensions of pilgrimage and procession.[5]

Mamluk society was of course multi-religious. To date, good research has been produced on this topic, although often from the wider perspectives of Jewish history or the history of Eastern Christianity. The study of Sufism has begun to help us here, widening Mamluk studies to include these minority communities. Comparison of saint-day *(mawlid)* celebrations in the Muslim and Coptic traditions has expanded our model of popular piety across religious boundaries.[6] The role sometimes played by prominent Sufis in anti-Christian public violence has recently

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[2] Jean-Claude Garcin, *Un centre musulman de la Haute Égypte médiévale: Qûs* (Cairo, 1976 and 2005); idem, "L'insertion sociale de Sha'rani dans le milieu cairote," in *Colloque international sur l'histoire du Caire* (Cairo, 1969), 159–68; idem, "Les soufis dans la ville mamelouke d'Égypte: Histoire du soufisme et histoire globale," in *Le développement du soufisme,* 26–32.

[3] Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt, 1250–1517* (Cambridge, 2000), 8–31.

[4] Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (Albany, 1994), 83–94; Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge, 1993), 70–76.

[5] Tetsuya Ohtoshi, "*Tasawwuf* as Reflected in *Ziyâra* Books and the Cairo Cemeteries," in *Le développement du soufisme,* 299–329; May Al-Ibrashy, "Cairo's Qarafa as Described in the *Ziyâra* Literature," in *Le développement du soufisme,* 269–98; Christopher Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyâra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt* (Leiden, 1999), 65–69, 168–226.

[6] Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen "Pélerinages d'Égypte, mouleds coptes et mouleds musulmans," (Mémoire d'habilitation, Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2000).

been studied, shedding new light on inter-communal relations.[7] Finally, Paul Fenton has contextualized and illuminated important elements of the devotional life of Egyptian Jews by drawing on Sufi literature.[8]

This short list of recent work on the history of Sufism should make clear the substantial contribution of specialists in this lesser-known area to the wider field of Mamluk studies. Beyond its value to the broader historical themes outlined above, this research opens up significant new materials for analysis. Until recently, devotional and mystical literature, saintly *vitae (manāqib),* and pilgrimage manuals had rarely been exploited. It is as a corrective to this historiographical blind spot that I enumerate the studies above; however, my primary concern in this article is to refine the methodological basis upon which these and future historians will address the problem of Sufism. To this end, I will briefly explore the science of early and medieval *kalām,* paying particular attention to the boundaries of the concept "orthodoxy." For a second perspective, I will turn to the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldūn, who will nuance this methodological landscape further. With these insights in mind, I will then explore some specific examples of historical research on Sufism that suffer because of their reliance on an overly simplified conception of "orthodoxy." This oversimplification has its roots in European intellectual history, and more specifically the complex phenomenon known in our field as Orientalism.

On Theology and Authority

As we turn to the methodological issues at stake in our discussion of Mamluk era Sufism, we must consider some of the underlying conceptual structures upon which such analysis rests. While a systematic survey of terms such as "orthodoxy" and "heresy" is well beyond the scope of this article, a summary comment is certainly in order. The issue may first be considered from the perspective of institutional authority. In the Christian West the categories of "orthodoxy" and "heresy" arose from the history of church doctrine. Through various institutions the Catholic Church honed its theological positions, defended them, and variously enforced them. By the Middle Ages, in European social and intellectual history "orthodoxy" had become more than simply a measure of proper belief: it had become synonymous with the authority of institutionalized religion. In short, the Church simply was "orthodoxy." Not surprisingly, this association of institution and doctrinal authority made its way into the religious conceptions and categories

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[7] Tamer El-Leithy, "Sufis, Copts and the Politics of Piety: Moral Regulation in Fourteenth-Century Upper Egypt," in *Le développement du soufisme,* 75–120.

[8] Paul Fenton, "Juifs et soufis en Égypte mamelouke," in *Le développement du soufisme,* 121–35; idem, "Les traces d'al-Hallaj, martyr mystique de l'islam," *Annales Islamologiques* 35 (2001): 101–12.

of Western Orientalists as they produced knowledge of the Islamic world.[9] The implication of this for our present study is that modern scholarship maintains this inherited categorization. More particularly, as will be seen in detail in the final section of this article, historians have tended to project this pattern onto their analyses of the Islamic religious tradition, in essence treating the learned class (or ulama) as a functional equivalent to the Church.

Beyond this institutional association, a second issue is one of implementation. Certainly the history of synods, councils, and inquisitions in the Western tradition is complex, but for our purposes one simple point is that, in contrast to Mamluk Egypt, medieval Europe at its harshest moments asserted "orthodoxy" through Church tribunals. The situation in the Islamic context was rather different, in that questions of "orthodoxy," while also the concern of theologians and their supporters in the civil authority, were equally the concern of the jurists *(fuqahāʾ),* a class of religious functionaries that has no equivalent in the Christian context. The jurists played an essential role in translating any transgression, often articulated first by theologians in doctrinal terms, into points of religious law. One might be accused of "heresy" (e.g., *zandaqah, kufr, shirk,* etc.), and the case may have been strong, but the charge would eventually have to be put into legal terms if punishment were ever to be meted out. Despite his attacks elsewhere on the unacceptable theses of the philosophers, al-Ghazzālī (d. 505/1111) makes just such a point when he warns against the hasty use of *takfīr,* saying that unbelief is a purely legal category.[10] At the risk of overstating the distinction between theologians and jurists,[11] my point here is simply to underline the essential function of law in the Islamic equation.

This legal dimension is important to our consideration of terminology and method, in that it represents a point of significant divergence between what lies behind the common Orientalist usage of the term "orthodox" and the historical situation of medieval Egypt. Wielding the term uncritically, we evoke a process (albeit in vague non-historical terms) in which theological discourse has identified "heresy" and responded to it with censure. As carried over into the Islamic context, this picture is misleading in two important ways. First, as we have just seen, the uniquely Islamic institution of religious law will have been marginalized. But perhaps more significantly, this perspective will prevent us from understanding an important reality on the ground. In historical practice, the censure of questionable religious behavior and belief was carried out by political

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[9] Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston, 1997), xiii–xiv, 1–5.

[10] Josef van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology,* trans. J. M. Todd (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 39–40.

[11] They were often the same individuals, and jurists regularly generated their own cases against "heresy."

authorities, not as an implementation of a ruling of "heresy" as identified by theologians, but rather more typically in their role as protectors of public order, itself a concept defined within Islamic law. In other words, to echo al-Ghazzālī, the censure of "heresy" should stand primarily as a matter of law. If we as historians turn to such phenomena with the conceptual assumptions of "orthodoxy" and "heresy" transferred from the Christian context, our analysis will suffer due to an incongruity of categories and actors. Insisting, for example, on characterizing a censured miracle worker as a "heretic" will evoke a theological reflection and procedure that very likely never occurred, while blinding us to the much more plausible explanation that representatives of the regime were carrying out censure within a conceptual framework of response to infractions against public order.

Despite my somewhat abstract presentation so far, it should be noted that these methodological issues are in fact anchored in the history of texts, schools of thought, and religious movements. The danger, however, is that students of this history, if employing the terms "orthodoxy" and "heresy" uncritically, will produce analyses that, in the words of one historian, "disregard the intrinsic pluralism and complexity characteristic of the religious life of the Muslim community. . . ."[12] This overlooked complexity inheres in the discourse itself and calls for an open-ended historical elaboration. In other words, the attempts made to speak for "orthodoxy" in the Islamic tradition have always succeeded only temporarily. On the one hand, the essential elements of the discourse remain constant, but the competition to speak authoritatively for them continues. It is this ongoing process of negotiation that is in danger of being lost to us if our historiography insists on a static determination of "orthodoxy." The tenth-century heresiographer al-Shahrastānī reflects this reality in his typologies and descriptions of the *Religious and Philosophical Sects.*[13] His overarching presentation of Muslim debate on right belief describes "a perpetual collision of individual opinions over an invariant set of theological problems that eventually leads to a transient consensus that already contains the seeds of future disagreement."[14]

This insight into the continuously evolving historical reality of "orthodoxy" is not only a challenge to our methodology; it is also a challenge to much of the Islamic tradition's self-understanding. Joseph van Ess has recently made just such a point. In the context of a wide-ranging study of Islamic theology, he describes an early landscape in which "local orthodoxies" rose and fell. Developing one of these trends, he expands on the case of Muʿtazilism, attributing its success to its ability to extend its relevance beyond its original locale, Basra, largely by

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[12] Alexander Knysh, "'Orthodoxy' and 'Heresy' in Medieval Islam: an Essay in Reassessment," *The Muslim World* 83, no. 1 (1993): 62.

[13] Muḥammad al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa-al-Niḥal,* ed. W. Cureton (Piscataway, NJ, 2002).

[14] Knysh, "'Orthodoxy' and 'Heresy' in Medieval Islam," 57.

broadening its theoretical base and making its rationalist approach relevant to several of the perspectives it was competing against. But this success was not a simple triumph—despite the *miḥnah*—nor was its eventual defeat ever complete. Not only when it was the "orthodox" position did it fail to do away with its rivals (e.g. the Shiʿah, Kharijites, Murjiʿites, Qadarites), but when replaced by other "orthodoxies" it continued to exert a significant influence on them and other subsequent movements. Van Ess's point as it relates to our concern here is that from a historical perspective, doctrinal positions and their authority over the determination of right practice and belief, far from being complete, unmoving or final, in reality adapt to the various realities they find themselves in. They rise and fall, wax and wane, compete and often compromise. Van Ess's study goes on to make clear that as historians we would do well to avoid the anachronistic and oversimplified narratives that later perspectives routinely impose upon earlier ones: "Theological problems may be eternal, but they are not static. The responses that befit a given situation at a given time quickly become rigid stereotypes."[15] These anachronisms, it should be restated, loom not only over the work of the historian, but are also well entrenched in the Islamic tradition itself.

In light of these comments from Knysh and Van Ess as to the rivalrous and diverse historical reality underlying these constructed "rigid stereotypes," we may expand further on the category of "orthodoxy." My argument here is that ultimately the only academically defensible use of the term "orthodox" is one that takes it simply as a qualifier, and not a signifier of any particular doctrine, school or practice. In other words, the terms "orthodox" and "orthodoxy" have no universal content to them, nothing outside of their immediate historical reality.

The Historian Ibn Khaldūn on Sufism

To conceive of a full history of Sufism is itself a daunting challenge. The variety of associated phenomena, institutions, texts, and practices, to say nothing of the social, political, and economic roles it played in Mamluk Egypt, together make for an object of study almost beyond circumscription. However, impressive studies have been completed, focusing on particular aspects of Sufism. One approach centers on the development of buildings dedicated to Sufism;[16] others have treated individual figures of the period.[17] By far the most wide-ranging study in the area to date is that of Éric Geoffroy, which is a work truly impressive in scope.[18]

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[15] Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology,* 5–7.

[16] Leonor Fernandes, *The Evolution of a Sufi Institution in Mamluk Egypt: The Khanqah* (Berlin, 1988).

[17] Th. Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Fāriḍ, his Verse and his Shrine* (Columbia, SC, 1994).

[18] Eric Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie sous les derniers mamelouks et les premiers ottomans:*

However, for a discerning first-hand perspective on Mamluk-era Sufism we may turn to an author who, though not a Sufi himself, was directly involved with the phenomenon. This would be Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406),[19] who had traveled from Tunis to Cairo in the 1380s, took up the post of Grand Qadi of the Maliki school of law, and was appointed director of the Sufi hospice Saʿīd al-Suʿadāʾ (or *khānqāh* Sultan Baybars Jashankīr), the most prominent official institution of its kind. Although certainly best known today for his innovative philosophy of history, Ibn Khaldūn's detailed discussion of Sufism in his *Muqaddimah* preserves for us a careful and nuanced presentation, with particular emphasis on the position of Sufism among the other religious sciences.[20]

We are told from the start that Sufism is an essential dimension of the Islamic religious impulse: it is "one of the lawful sciences of the (Islamic) community. Its basis is the path that was established among the earliest ancestors and the most prominent companions (of the Prophet), their immediate successors, and those who followed. It is a true path that leads to devotion and divine worship, and freedom from the temptations and distractions of a worldly life. . . . All of this was common among the ancestors and companions."[21] For Ibn Khaldūn the origin of Sufism is clearly identified with the origin of the Islamic community itself; but as a good historian, he goes on to nuance its subsequent developments.

In addition, Ibn Khaldūn was clearly familiar with the practices of Sufism. He summarizes for his readers central concepts such as remembrance of God *(dhikr),* asceticism *(zuhd),* and spiritual retreat *(khalwah),* and he singles out the Sufi concern for the self-scrutiny and self-discipline that for them lay behind the common acts of worship and obedience to the Law. We are told that by the second century, worldly matters had become the primary concern of most Muslims. At that point a minority who devoted themselves fully to worship came to be designated

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orientations spirituelles et enjeux culturels (Damascus, 1995).

[19] He was buried in Cairo in the northern section of the Qarāfah cemetery, but his tomb was destroyed in 2003 in the course of a road-widening project.

[20] The *Muqaddimah* was composed shortly before leaving the Maghreb for Egypt. Ibn Khaldūn had written even earlier on Sufism. For a discussion of his *Shifāʾ al-Sāʾil li-Tahdhīb al-Masāʾil,* ed. M. al-Tanjī (Istanbul, 1957), translated by R. Pérez as *La Voie et la voie, ou le maître et le juriste* (Paris, 1991), and more on his understanding of Sufism that with time seems to have hardened particularly against the school of thought identified with Ibn ʿArabī and Ibn al-Fāriḍ, see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: the Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany, 1999), 187–97.

[21] *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn,* ed. Aḥmad al-Zuʿbī (Beirut, 2001), 517. Also in English translation as *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History,* trans. Franz Rosenthal, 3 vols. (Princeton, 1967), but cf. Fritz Meier, "Khurasan and the End of Classical Sufism," in *Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism,* trans. John O'Kane (Leiden, 1999), 189–90.

as Sufis *(al-ṣūfīyah wa-al-mutaṣawwifah)*.[22] Due to this concern, and the concepts and terminology specific to such reflections, the Sufis emerged as a distinct class among the ulama. According to Ibn Khaldūn, the Sufis had become specialized in a kind of knowledge *('ilm)* that no other branch of the lawful sciences covered.[23] The Sufis systematized their field of inquiry, just as the jurists and exegetes did. We are told that, "Once the sciences *('ulūm)* were collected and recorded, and the jurists *(fuqahāʾ)* began writing on jurisprudence and its principles, as well as speculative theology, Quran exegesis, and similar things, the men of this path (i.e., Sufis) wrote on their discipline *(ṭarīqah)*."[24] Thus emerges a clear early division within the tradition, each branch with its own area of focus and expertise. The simple model here is one of increasing specialization among the Islamic sciences, and the attendant development of classes of religious specialists.

Ibn Khaldūn's historical analysis of Sufism continues with the introduction of a further distinction, that between ancient and recent Sufis. This distinction is largely, but not wholly, temporal. In a discussion of the various positions taken on the existential relationship of God to creation, Ibn Khaldūn surveys the jurists, the hadith scholars, the speculative theologians, and the philosophers. In this mix of opinions he identifies a mainstream position—one that emphasizes the distinctiveness and separateness of God's essence and attributes from those of creation—and ascribes it to most of the religious scholars, including the ancient Sufis. Interestingly, these "ancients" are identified as those represented in al-Qushayrī's *Risālah* and those who follow their example.[25]

According to Ibn Khaldūn, the recent Sufis include those who more closely identify God with creation, some even going as far as adopting the doctrine of divine indwelling or *ḥulūl*. Another distinction to be made is that between the ancients' commitment to cultivating speculation on spiritual matters, along with the language and terminology required for such, and the recent Sufis' concern with themes such as divine self-disclosure *(tajallī)* and manifestation *(maẓhar)*.[26] The latter category of recent Sufis is further divided between those who hold to this "oneness" shared by God and creation, and those who hold an even more integrative position identified in short by the term "absolute oneness."[27] Ibn Khaldūn further nuances his categories by identifying the Sufis of veracity *(al-*

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[22] *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn,* 517.

[23] Ibid., 519.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 529. Al-Qushayrī wrote in the fifth/eleventh century.

[26] Ibid., 522.

[27] For more on the polemical context of some these doctrinal positions see Michel Chodkiewicz, "Le procès posthume d'Ibn 'Arabi," in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics,* ed. Frederick De Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden, 1999), 101–3.

muḥaqqiqūn min al-mutaṣawwifah) among the recent Sufis. These are a later group whose doctrine allows them to bridge the earlier differences between the ancient and recent Sufis, specifically relating to the existential question of God's relationship to creation. These Sufis of veracity recognize the reality of the "oneness" perspective or experience; however, they move beyond this stage to reassert the distinction *(farq)* between the created individual mystic and God.[28] These categories and concepts would reward further inspection in light of the wider intellectual history of Mamluk-period Sufism, but for our present purposes the central point is one of the diversity within the science of Sufism. Ibn Khaldūn's breakdown of the Sufism of his day along temporal and doctrinal lines gives us an insight into the complexity of this religious discourse.

However, our historian is not content simply to describe the doctrinal hairsplitting that went on among Sufi theorists, nor does he shy away from condemning what he sees as unacceptable behavior. To his credit, and perhaps not surprisingly, Ibn Khaldūn presents a nuanced picture of one of the more controversial practices among Sufis (both ancient and recent), the ecstatic utterances known as *shaṭaḥāt.* These were the inspired statements, often cryptic or startling, that most branches of Sufism took to be a form of legitimate inspiration. Our historian opens his discussion by describing some of the responses to this issue from the wider ulama. We are told that, "Many of the jurists and muftis are intent on rejecting these recent Sufis . . . and insist that everything on the (Sufi) path is loathsome. However, the truth is that their discourse is quite complex."[29] Here Ibn Khaldūn is making the point that such blanket condemnations are a disservice, particularly where informed critique is vital for discerning which Sufi positions are to be challenged. To the *shaṭaḥāt* he argues that three responses are possible: approval, interpretation, and condemnation.[30] He claims that since Sufis are simply overcome by these inspirations, and that such unusual experiences cannot easily be put into common speech, we must judge the status and character of the individual, rather than the content of the utterances themselves. The premise is that, in this state, Sufis "are beyond the sensory realm and are overwhelmed by their spiritual inspirations such that they speak out in unintended ways. This enraptured individual is beyond reasoning with, and *he who is compelled is excused.*"[31] Thus, Ibn Khaldūn argues that the character and sincerity of the individual Sufi are grounds for discerning when these utterances are objectionable. Those Sufis who are meritorious and worthy of emulation are not to be condemned for

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[28] *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn,* 524.

[29] Ibid., 526.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid, 527.

their *shaṭaḥāt,* but those whose character and background are unknown should indeed be censured if they make such declarations, since there would be no basis for properly interpreting such speech. The instances that categorically require censure are those in which the individual is insincere by virtue of having retained his faculties—that is, he declares *shaṭaḥāt* while in control of his senses, and is thus indeed the author of his own speech. Such an individual then assumes responsibility for his transgression. Ibn Khaldūn makes it clear that such censure would come as much from other Sufis as from the jurists. Of the famous case of al-Ḥallāj, we are told that for this very reason the jurists and the prominent Sufis *(akābir al-mutaṣawwifah)* of the time together issued a legal opinion calling for his execution *(aftá . . . bi-qatl al-Ḥallāj).*[32]

The events surrounding the execution of al-Ḥallāj in 309/922 were hardly so neat, but that is not our historian's central point. What is of concern here is that questions of censure and legitimacy were not categorical; that is, Sufis condemned *some* Sufis, and the better jurists also condemned *some* Sufis.[33] Ibn Khaldūn extends this illustration to include other practices. Although some ulama express reservations, exercises for spiritual discipline and discussions of saintly miracles are for the most part sound *(ṣaḥīḥ)* and should not be criticized. Our historian again takes the middle ground when he comes to the question of mystical discourse on "realities of the higher order."[34] Here he suspends judgment, saying such language should be left un-interrogated and un-interpreted, much as the ambiguous passages *(al-mutashābihāt)* of the Quran are.[35]

Writing More Clearly

With Ibn Khaldūn's observations in mind, we turn now to the problem of Sufism as it has more recently appeared among modern historians of the Mamluk period. More precisely, my claim here will be that in applying the terms "orthodoxy" and "heresy" with little qualification, or as supposedly self-evident terms, our historical analyses can be seriously misdirected. In the remaining pages I will attempt to show exactly how this has happened.

In one particularly influential study of medieval Egyptian society, Boaz Shoshan throws light on what life would have been like for the popular classes.

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[32] Ibid.

[33] This diverse reality is reflected in the case of the third/ninth century ascetic Ghulām Khalīl, who led the persecution in Baghdad of the Sufi Abū al-Ḥasan al-Nūrī. See Josef van Ess, "Sufism and its Opponents: Reflections on Topoi, Tribulations, and Transformations," in *Islamic Mysticism Contested,* 26–27. On the complex relationship between Sufis, Hanbalis, and Muʿtazilites, see Florian Sobieroj, "The Muʿtazila and Sufism," in *Islamic Mysticism Contested,* 68–92.

[34] *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn,* 527.

[35] Here the reference is to Quran 3:7.

The essays presented in this study are innovative in conception and thorough in documentation; however, the treatment of Sufism undoes one of the central aims of the book. Shoshan's otherwise nuanced treatment of popular versus elite runs into trouble when it turns to an analysis of Sufism. The author makes clear that he is trying to substantiate "that there was 'another' Islam in medieval Cairo (as elsewhere)—an Islam practiced and experienced by the commoners."[36] This thesis is a worthy one, and the collection and presentation of such data relating to culture and religion on the popular level is a service in itself as a corrective to the more prevalent "top down" approach to social history. However, in this case the effort is undone by a flawed conception of Sufism. In the heart of his study he moves to nuance the high versus low dichotomy and identifies Sufism essentially with lower culture, in contrast to the elite who are the agents of "orthodoxy." However, the historical data will not cooperate, and Shoshan is left with a dilemma. The problem is (and Shoshan deserves credit for resisting any selective presentation of the facts) that the historian is quickly confronted with Sufis who do not belong to the popular class. That Sufis of this upper social class are prevalent undoes the earlier claim that Sufism is to be associated with the popular classes. Sufism among the elite of Cairo is in fact easily found; one thinks simply of the early Shādhilīyah (Ibn Bākhilā, Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Iskandarī), or al-Shaʿrānī's beloved Wafāʾīyah.[37] But Shoshan, as a good historian who has committed himself to a less than perfect argument, tries to save his sinking thesis with a patch. He endeavors to explain away the historical inconsistencies by proposing that Sufism was allowed to "climb up the social ladder." That is, despite being essentially popular, Sufism had somehow obscured its origins and "found its way not only into the ruling body, but also into the world of orthodox scholars."[38] We will return to the problem of "orthodox scholars" in another context below, but here we can address this confusion of category by simply returning to Ibn Khaldūn. The latter clearly presents Sufism as a branch of religious knowledge *(sharīʿah)* and not as the religious pursuit of one social class or another. Ibn Khaldūn is not reductive in his analysis, nor is he idealistic in his account of Sufism; we noted earlier the series of distinctions he identifies within Sufi doctrine, and the variety of positions he entertains with regard to censure. Before running up against data that would not fit into his model, Shoshan would have done better to incorporate some of Ibn Khaldūn's insights, which would have forced Shoshan to nuance his stark untenable binary of popular Sufism versus elite "orthodoxy."

Shoshan is not alone in struggling under this burden. Other important studies

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[36] Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo,* 10.

[37] Richard McGregor, *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt: The Wafāʾ Sufi Order and the Legacy of Ibn ʿArabī* (Albany, 2004), 56–61.

[38] Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo,* 76.

of religious and social history of the Mamluk period are methodologically hamstrung by a messy and less than rigorous conception of Sufism. The following passage is illustrative of some of this: "It is extremely difficult to generalize about the connections between orthodoxy and Sufism, owing to the complexity and subtlety of these ties and the different nature of each of these two aspects of Islam. While orthodoxy was quite uniform, Sufism was amorphous and multifaceted. The education and attitudes of the ulama were similar everywhere throughout the (Sunni) Islamic world, despite local scholastic differences. By contrast, the Sufi movement revealed a confusing diversity. . . ."[39]

The first problem to note here is that of the category of "orthodoxy." It is presented simply as the antipode to Sufism, which in such an equation would constitute the "heretical" or "unorthodox." We may object to this inasmuch as "orthodox"—according to our arguments above—does not indicate a substantive category, but only primacy of position, and thus in this passage we are facing a false comparison. Further, and perhaps more substantively, we might appeal to Ibn Khaldūn's presentation of censure. As we saw above, he is careful to show that censure did not simply follow the dividing lines between the sciences. That is, censure (the identification of "heresy") was neither a distinguishing feature of any particular science, nor was it essential to the relationship between any of the sciences. Ibn Khaldūn is happy to expand on the distinctions between branches of religious knowledge, but "heresy" will not be part of such categorization. One might object further to Winter's statement above by asking about the other side of the equation, that is, who exactly is intended by the term "orthodox"? Ibn Khaldūn is of little help here, since in his schema the sciences were fundamentally present but undifferentiated in the earliest community, and were later distinguished from one another only as they became more systematized among later generations. In this analysis none is more or less "orthodox" than any other. The only remaining possibility would be to identify the "orthodox" as the adherents of all the other sciences put together. To speculate, this is likely the answer most in the spirit of Winter's passage quoted above. However, such a conception is unsustainable as a category since we can hardly say that all religious thought other than Sufism is to be automatically taken as "orthodox." Another point raised in the above passage points to the *unity* of the "orthodox" ulama, contrasting it to the *diversity* of Sufism. Here we would do well to recall Van Ess's warning (albeit specifically within the field of theology) against the blind spot that a stereotypical snapshot has for diversity of opinion. But beyond this, the deeper problem is that the passage assumes the religious culture of the "orthodox" is different from that of the Sufis. This is untenable historically. Sufis were very often the same people who were

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[39] Michael Winter, *Egyptian Society Under Ottoman Rule 1517–1798* (London, 1992), 129.

muftis, judges, jurists, traditionists, theologians, etc.[40] The ulama class contained many Sufis, and every learned Sufi could claim membership in the ulama.

This use of "orthodoxy" as synonymous with the ulama, identified essentially by their common opposition to Sufism, is also problematic in that it retroactively projects clear distinctions that in fact were never there.[41] Following the quotation above, we read: "From earliest times, orthodoxy and Sufism were rivals." And more specifically, that this rivalry opposed "the mystics on the one hand and the theologians, jurists, and *madrasa* teachers on the other. . . ."[42] This characterization of permanent categorical conflict, as we saw above, runs contrary to Ibn Khaldūn's understanding of how the sciences are divided and how censure should be properly exercised. But just as importantly, this categorization fails to reflect the historical reality that a great many theologians, jurists, and madrasah teachers were themselves trained in Sufism and retained some affiliation with a Sufi order or teacher. Although we cannot quantify the numbers involved,[43] in the Mamluk period many prominent individuals embodied just such an overlap.[44] At least as significant is the fact that: "No single ʿālim [Ibn Taymīyah included] can be named as disapproving of Sufism in principle."[45] That is, this categorization was never even a rhetorical reality. The wider methodological problem represented here again rests in the use of the term "orthodox." The characterization is that Sufism is a category universally opposed to that of the "orthodox." The presentation of Sufism here is oversimplified, but more importantly the category of the "orthodox" is thrown up as if it were a historically identifiable entity. The reality is much more complex, rendering the category of the "orthodox" of little analytical value.

A strikingly different use of the term "orthodoxy" appears in discussions of some of the doctrinal (and ritual) disputes among Sufis of the Mamluk period. Here again, inappropriate terminology hinders analysis and argument. One such discussion opens with the question of the identification of the various Sufi

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[40] In a study of urban elites of Damascus, Michael Chamberlain's categories of learned elites as distinct from Sufis leads him to the untenable claim that: "The learned elite were often Sufis themselves . . . but they still competed with Sufis for the capacity to represent ʿilm [religious knowledge]." Here of course epistemologies compete, not social classes. See *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (New York, 1994), 128.

[41] Th. Emil Homerin makes this point explicitly in "Sufis and Their Detractors in Mamluk Egypt: A Survey of Protagonists and Institutional Settings," in *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, 226.

[42] Winter, *Egyptian Society Under Ottoman Rule,* 129.

[43] For a quantitative study of such overlapping identities as represented in the Qarāfah, see Ohtoshi, "*Taṣawwuf* as Reflected in *Ziyâra* Books and the Cairo Cemeteries," 305–14, 327.

[44] Eric Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie,* 145–65. See also his "La Voile des apparences, ou la double vie du grand Cadi Zakariyya al-Ansari (m. 926/1520)," *Journal Asiatique* 282, no. 2 (1994).

[45] Winter, *Egyptian Society Under Ottoman Rule,* 161.

orders, some being "orthodox" and others not.[46] However, at the same time these orders "were capable of transforming themselves from orthodoxy to heterodoxy and vice versa."[47] The context for this statement is the variety of doctrines and practices that could be found under a single order designation—in particular those of the Shādhilīyah and the Aḥmadīyah. Here some individuals within an order are described as agents of true and uncorrupted Islam, making them the "orthodox" Sufis. (At this point we are quite far from the juxtaposition of Sufism with "orthodoxy" we saw earlier.) In one sense, this recognition of dissent and diversity within single orders is welcome—and Ibn Khaldūn's argument for censure certainly resonates here. However I would argue that the utility of the term "orthodox" remains questionable. Ibn Khaldūn would not have understood proper censure (which we remember for him is not a simple binary of "heresy" versus "orthodoxy") as Sufis doing the job of non-Sufi ulama; rather, all the ulama, including educated Sufis, should engage in censure of objectionable practices or ideas. But more importantly, in these discussions the qualifying term "orthodox" is inconsistent. At times it is used to denote the practices of certain dominant Sufi groups, while in other instances it evokes the entire non-Sufi ulama.

The unfortunate assumptions behind such uses of the term "orthodoxy" can quickly lead us to historically indefensible positions. One such dead end is the argument tying Sufism to cultural decline. The reasoning here seems to be that "orthodoxy" is civilization's bulwark against chaos and barbarity. This methodological assumption, when fused with an amorphous and unchanging ulama identified as "orthodox" and pitted categorically against Sufism, can lead to clearly false conclusions. One analysis describes a rise in prominence of Sufism shortly after the establishment of Ottoman rule in Egypt. This ascendancy is apparently inversely proportionate to a "decline of the ulama." The argument is that this decline was precipitated by the Ottoman regime's removing the Egyptian elite from important positions such as judgeships, and appointing Turks to these key offices. The attendant rise of Sufism is described thus: "All these developments were the result of Egypt's relegation from an Empire to a province, which may have caused a widespread malaise that was favorable for Sufism. The strengthened position of Sufism may serve as a barometer of the Egyptian people's general cultural and intellectual decline during the Ottoman period."[48] Here the association of Sufism with cultural decay could not be stated more clearly. This argument, however, can only be sustained by an un-inspected assumption of Sufism as somehow anti-ulama—and thus a degenerate force—and certainly not by historical evidence.

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[46] Ibid., 132.

[47] Ibid., 134.

[48] Ibid.

In fact, the latter speaks to the contrary, even in the pages of this same study. Sensibly, elsewhere we are told that Mamluk-era Sufism was well positioned, and that "there was no lack of support for Sufis among the Mamluk emirs. Although the Ottomans' patronage of the Sufis is well documented, Mamluk support for them did not lag far behind."[49] To assert that Sufism was present, even flourishing, in the Mamluk period is hardly contentious. However, to sustain the argument above, one would have to claim that the Mamluk period, in order to reach the cultural and intellectual heights it did, was instead free of Sufism, or at least had held such a destructive force at bay. This was clearly not the case. Simply put, the problem here is that in the Mamluk period Sufism and the ulama of the remaining branches of religion thrived under shared political and cultural conditions. The characterization above of an unchecked Sufism pulling society towards decline is contrary to the historical evidence. This argument fails because of its commitment to an untenable characterization of Sufism.

The wider intention of this study has been to set forth a more nuanced and accurate conception of Sufism, not by presenting new and better definitions, but rather by pointing out methodological bottlenecks that obstruct sound historical treatment of the subject. I have argued that the terms "orthodoxy" and "heresy" should not be used without first exploring the theological baggage they usually carry with them. My efforts here have also been aimed at illustrating how this baggage can tilt and even overturn the analyses of the best historians among us. Sufism becomes a problem for the historian when perspectives such as those of Ibn Khaldūn are pushed aside in preference for terminology and categories that are more familiar and easily applied. Ibn Khaldūn's portrayal of a Sufism diverse in both doctrine and practice, along with his wider view of the process of censure—one that places it above the lines dividing the various branches of the ulama—obliges us to nuance, if not abandon, our common use of the terms "orthodoxy" and "heresy." However, if we choose to preserve these categories, we would do well to incorporate Van Ess's observations on the fluid and impermanent historical reality of the "orthodox." In this spirit, my own proposal would be simply that we apply the term "orthodox" as a historically determined qualifier, one that indicates a position of relative dominance, rather than allowing it to continue to function as the signifier of a supposedly unchanging and ahistorical core of doctrinal commitments.

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[49] Ibid.