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

Organizers

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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 Muhammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792) considered to be Sufī 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 Sufī *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 Shīʿa. 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 Sufī 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 Hanbali brotherhood. Ibn Taymiyya’s book al-Istiqlāma showcases the importance of taṣawwuf as a spiritual path, bringing one closer to God and clarifies Ibn Taymiyya’s interest in the topic. Al-Istiqlāma is, in itself, another argument bringing into question to notion that Ibn Taymiyya was staunchly anti-Sufi.

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-Ḥākim (d. 405/1012) and ʿAbd 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 maʿrifā (gnosis), but were also champions of the prophetic sunna. Denis Gril has shed light on this phenomenon in his recent book. 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. 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.

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

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