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*Sufism, Salafyya, and Arabism
in Late Ottoman Damascus*

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limit it to their lifetime, thus denying the value of visiting their tombs and there asking for help.⁹¹

Muṣṭafā al-Shaṭṭī's second treatise was meant to illuminate the Salafīs, who thus attacked Sufism, and to prevent others from following their example, by explaining the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* and by demonstrating its full compatibility with the shari'a. Like with the case of 'Umar al-'Aṭṭār and Mahmūd Abū al-Shāmāt, Shaṭṭī's presentation follows the conventional interpretation of Ibn 'Arabi's teaching. All genuine sufis have held this doctrine, he claims, both the classical masters like Bistāmī, Junayd and Ghazālī, and the eponyms of the orders such as Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshband and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī.⁹² In his desire to defend Sufism against the growing rationalist tendencies of his day, however, Shaṭṭī comes closer to Ahmad al-Jazā'iri's arguments. Like him, he claims that though direct spiritual experience is superior, it is possible to comprehend the sufi science by reading its expositions, on the condition that this is done with God's help, or under the guidance of a qualified shaykh. Moreover, Shaṭṭī promises that this science, by its very nature, contains no secrets and conceals no truths. Sufi authors have written nothing that contradicts the common sense or the straight path. Their source was simply knowledge received from God (*ilm ladunī*), delivered through the Qur'an and the sunna, and revealed to those for whom the Lord had opened their inner vision or sounded the message in their hearts.⁹³ Belief in "the unity of being" does not contradict the shari'a; on the contrary, it is its source and heart. For Muṣṭafā al-Shaṭṭī, thus, all sufis profess a Muhammadī salafī belief which they have gained from the source of the shari'a by means of revelation, after being convinced by speculative proof and deliberation.⁹⁴

PART 3: RESISTANCE TO THE EMERGING MODERN STATE—THE SALAFIYYA

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 37-40.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-49.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Khayr umma' al-qarn alladhina bu'ithu fihim thumma alladhina yalunahum thumma alladhina yalunahum.
The best of my nation is the generation to whom I was sent, then those who follow them, then those who follow them.
Sahih Muslim, Kitab Fada'il al-Sahaba, 213.

Tagi al-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyya,¹ from whose call to follow the path of the forefathers the Salafiyya derived its name, was born in 1263 into a learned Hanbali family of Harran, five years after the destruction of Baghdad and the actual end of the 'Abbasid Caliphate. At the age of six, his family moved to Mamluk Damascus, there seeking refuge from the advancing Mongol armies. Ibn Taymiyya acquired an extensive religious education, centered on Hanbali jurisprudence and theology, but including also the jurisprudence of the other three legal schools, as well as philosophy and mysticism. In the latter field, he not only immersed himself in sufi expositions, particularly those of Ibn 'Arabi, but was also affiliated to the Qadiriyya order.² Ibn Taymiyya went on to distinguish himself as one of the most original religious men of his day. At the same time he proved to be an uncompromising advocate of the absolute unity of God, as well as an untiring fighter against innovations threatening it. At times he was supported in his struggles by the Mamluk amirs, especially in periods of external threat when they benefited from his exhortations for jihad against the infidel, but for most of his life Ibn Taymiyya was persecuted by the leading 'ulama and sufi shaykhs, who incited these rulers to act against him. He died imprisoned in the citadel of Damascus in 1328.

Like Ibn 'Arabi, Ibn Taymiyya too authored a large number of books, encompassing most of the fields studied in his time. He has

¹ The most detailed biography of Ibn Taymiyya is still Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taki-d-Din Ahmad b. Taymiyya* (Cairo, 1939), pp. 7-150. See also Donald Little, "The Historical and Historiographic Significance of the Detention of Ibn Taymiyya," *JMES*, 4 (1973), pp. 311-327; *idem*, "Did Ibn Taymiyya have a Screw Loose?" *SI*, 41 (1975), pp. 93-111; Victor E. Makari, *Ibn Taymiyyah's Ethics: The Social Factor* (Chico, Cal., 1983), pp. 21-29; Sherman Jackson, "Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial in Damascus," *JSS*, 29 (1994), pp. 41-85.

² George Makdisi, "Ibn Taymiyya: a Sufi of the Qadiriyya Order," *American Journal of Arabic Studies*, 1 (1973), pp. 118-130; Thomas Michel, "Ibn Taymiyya's *Shari'ah* on the *Futu'ah al-Ghayb* of 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani," *Harvard Islamicist*, 4/2 (1981), pp. 3-12.

aroused considerable interest among Western students of Islam since the 1920s, owing to the central place that his teachings hold in the thought of the Salafis and, following them, in that of contemporary radical Islamic trends. This extensive research allows us to form a rather detailed picture of Ibn Taymiyya's views, from which we can better understand in what lay his attraction for the reformist 'ulama of late Ottoman Damascus.

Ahmad ibn Taymiyya's religious fervor should be viewed against the background of the deep political crisis the Muslim umma was experiencing in the wake of the fall of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate and the unremitting Mongol threat on those lands that remained under Muslim control. He wholeheartedly supported the Mamluk rulers of Egypt, and in his political thought attempted to supply their state with the religious legitimization they needed. He thus remained loyal to the orthodox view which stressed the necessity of using coercion for the sake of both religion and social prosperity, as well as the duty to obey one's ruler, even if he is oppressive. Ibn Taymiyya deviated from the traditional doctrine only in those cases where it was necessary to adapt it to the new political circumstances created by the actual dissolution of the Caliphate. He argued that this institute's existence is not necessary, that it is permissible to have several imams at the same time, and that Islam does not require their designation by election. This reliance on power was contrasted in Ibn Taymiyya's teaching with the duty of the imams to rule in justice (*adl*) and, even more important, in cooperation with their subjects. He emphasized the importance of the oath of allegiance (*mubā'atā*) and of advice (*naṣiḥā*) as constituting reciprocal consent and contract between ruler and ruled, reflecting their shared desire to follow the path of God and His messenger, and designed to ensure the implementation of the shari'a. Ibn Taymiyya thus regarded the holding of power as an act of religious piety, and viewed rulers as deputies of God to his Creatures, as well as their representatives before Him. Consequently, he also attached great importance to the ruler's obligation of appointing the most suitable candidates for public positions and critically denounced office holders who disregarded religion and attempted to exploit it for their own ends.³

³ Laoust, *Ibn Taymiyya*, pp. 278-317; Erwin I. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 51-61; Ann L. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (New York, 1981), pp. 145-151; Makari, pp. 135-157.

The effort to legitimize Muslim government in the post-Caliphate era, however, was only one aspect in the comprehensive endeavor of Ahmad ibn Taymiyya to reformulate the fundamental tenets of the religion, in order to allow the umma to reunite and successfully cope with the new realities. His aim was to find the middle ground (*wasat*) between the various fields of study that had evolved within the framework of Islam, giving each one of them its proper place in the overall teaching. Ibn Taymiyya sought to restore the fundamental unity between theology, which relies on reason (*ʿaql*), the sciences of hadith and jurisprudence, which derive their authority from tradition (*naql*), and Sufism, which is based upon the quest for spiritual experience (*irādā*). In interweaving these elements into a coherent doctrine, Ibn Taymiyya displayed remarkable openness towards views developed within each of these sciences, as well as those of others rejected by Sunni Islam, such as the rationalist trends of the *Ḥanẓala* and the philosophers, being ready to adopt truth whatever its origin. His criterion for verifying the findings of each science was compatibility with the Qur'an and the sunna. Subject to this criterion, he relied heavily upon reason, which in his eyes would never contradict the shari'a, principally as a method of defending religious truth against its detractors.⁴ In Ibn Taymiyya's view this was the path of the forefathers of Islam (*al-salaf*), the Prophet's companions (*ṣaḥāba*) and their immediate heirs (*āḥlūʿā*), the model to be followed.

In this criterion of compatibility with the Qur'an and the sunna, and in its essentially rationalist application, ultimately lay the failure of the unity that Ahmad ibn Taymiyya sought to create, as well as the turning of the majority of contemporary 'ulama against him. For Ibn Taymiyya, the call to return to the sources was designed to purify Islam of the innovations that had accrued to it through the centuries and to reassert the essential profession of unity upon which the religion was based. His faithfulness to the path of the *salaf*, therefore, meant not only the integration of the religious sciences but also the critical examination of each of them in an effort to sift out those elements which had been added over successive generations. Advocating this in the most uncompromising manner, Ibn Taymiyya was driven by a sense of crisis and certainly also by the nature of his own personality. The hostile 'ulama obviously agreed to the supremacy

⁴ George Makdisi, "Hanbalite Islam," in M. Swartz (ed.), *Studies in Islam* (London, 1981), pp. 251-262; Bin-Yamin Abrahamov, "Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition," *MW*, 82 (1992), pp. 256-273.

of the Qur'an and the sunna, but nonetheless rejected the demand that these sources be approached directly and used critically to examine their traditional knowledge. They rather preferred to rely unreservedly upon the formulations arrived at by the founders of the various theological and legal schools to which they belonged, regarding their interpretations of the Qur'an and the sunna as those which best reflected the way of the *salaf*. In the eyes of most religious men of his time, Ibn Taymiyya's call to approach directly the sources thus was seen as a sharp assault on orthodoxy, as it had crystallized and sanctified during those late generations which they claimed to represent.

The internal contradiction inherent in the teaching of Ahmad ibn Taymiyya is clearly recognizable in his criticism of the jurisprudence of his time. Rejecting the practice of blind imitation (*taqlid*), he maintained that deriving legal rulings directly from the Qur'an and the sunna (*ijtihad*) is essential for the continuing vitality of the shari'a under changing circumstances. Alongside these two basic sources of Islamic Law, Ibn Taymiyya left wide room for the use of analogy (*qiyas*), which is based upon reason, and for consideration of the public good (*maslaha*), which addresses actual conditions of life. On the other hand, he significantly reduced the scope of the general consensus (*ijma'*), which sanctifies the tradition. Nevertheless, he did remain faithful to the Hanbali school and refrained from claiming that he himself had attained the rank of mujtahid. In his critique of the rationalist theology of his day (*kalām*), Ibn Taymiyya maintained, again in the spirit of Hanbalism, that God may be described only as He described himself in the Qur'an or as the Prophet described Him in the sunna. He therefore opposed the concern of this science with God's essence and attributes, stressing instead the obligation to obey Him and the Prophet. Ibn Taymiyya was particularly critical of the dominant Ash'ari school, which in his opinion tended to overemphasize the omnipotence of God at the expense of man's freedom of action and his responsibility for his deeds. He regarded the idea of predestination as a great injury to the moral fabric of Islam.⁵

The most pungent criticism of Ahmad ibn Taymiyya on the basis

⁵ Lounst, *Ibn Taymiyya*, pp. 153-178, 226-250; Rahman, pp. 111-115; Joseph Norman Bell, *Love Theory in Late Hanbalite Islam* (Albany, 1979), pp. 46-91; Makari, pp. 33-112. For his treatment of Philosophy see Wael B. Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians* (Oxford, 1993).

of the way of the *salaf*, however, was reserved for Sufism, both as a science that by his time relied heavily on Ibn 'Arabi's teaching and as a practical path becoming increasingly organized through the orders and tainted by popular practices. Ibn Taymiyya accepted mystical revelation (*kaashf*) as a valid source of religious knowledge, but in accordance with his general view, he subjected it to the criterion of compatibility with the Qur'an and the sunna. He even admitted that sufs may discern new meanings in the scriptures, and consequently in the precepts of the shari'a, though they could not abrogate them. Nonetheless, despite this implicit validation of Ibn 'Arabi's method, Ibn Taymiyya waged an unrelenting war against his teaching, primarily because of its practical implications. He vehemently rejected the doctrine of *waladat al-walidayn*, comparing it with Ash'ari theology and the damage it had caused to the moral order of Islam. Ibn Taymiyya offered a tripartite critique of what he regarded as being the Akbari deviation from an authentic profession of God's unity. First, he maintained that by endorsing the possibility of identification with God (*ittihad*) or annihilation in Him (*fanā'*), this teaching blurred the distinction between Lord and creature. Second, in the teaching about the immutable essences (*ayn thabita*) the Akbariyya lent its support, according to Ibn Taymiyya, to a belief in predestination, since it implies that the course of every creature is determined by the predisposition of its potential essence. Finally, he blamed Ibn 'Arabi's teaching on sainthood (*walaya*) for giving strong encouragement to the incorporation of saint worship in Islam, based on the belief in their infallible knowledge and in their ability to perform miracles. Ibn Taymiyya was especially hostile toward the widespread Rifā'iyya order, which used such practices as eating glass, walking on fire, and handling snakes to demonstrate one's sanctity. This doctrine of sainthood, in his view, also led to the incorporation into Islam of originally foreign popular practices, above all the visiting of saints' tombs and the seeking of help from their deceased residents.⁶

Despite the acute animosity showed by most 'ulama of the Mam-luk domains toward Ahmad ibn Taymiyya, his influence upon con-

⁶ Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya's Struggle against Popular Religion* (The Hague, 1976), pp. 24-87; Rahnman, p. 147; Th. Emil Homerin, *Ibn Taymiyyah's al-Siyāgha wa-al-Fuqarā'*, *Arabica*, 32 (1985), pp. 219-244; Knish, *Ibn 'Arabi*, pp. 87-111. For his denouncement of the Rifā'iyya see Donald Little, "Religion Under the Mamluks," *MW*, 73 (1983), pp. 177-178.

temporaries was nonetheless considerable and he acquired numerous disciples, Hanbali and non-Hanbali alike. Most prominent among them was Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, a great 'alim in his own right, who faithfully spread his teachings.⁷ In the course of time this influence seems to have diminished, especially in the face of the expanding activity of the sufi orders and the increasingly wide acceptance of Ibn 'Arabi's thought. Nonetheless, followers of Ibn Taymiyya continued to transmit his legacy through the centuries, both because of its remarkable reformist thrust and as part of late Hanbali jurisprudence, thriving mainly in Damascus and Baghdad.⁸ In the eighteenth century this tendency gained a new importance in the well-known movement encountered more than once in this study, the Wahhābiyya. Its founder, Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1703-1792), was the scion of a family of Hanbali 'ulama from the 'Uyayna oasis of the central Najd. His principal inspiration came from reading the books of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, before travelling to the neighboring centers of learning, mainly in Medina and Basra.⁹ On the basis of Ibn Taymiyya's concept of *tauhīd*, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb condemned the practices of most inhabitants of the Arab Peninsula as a pre-Islamic legacy (*jāhiliyya*). Applying it more broadly, he attacked almost the entire Muslim society of his time. By adopting Ibn Taymiyya's concept of adherence to the path of the *salaf*, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb was able to reject the innovations that were attached to Islam during the succeeding generations, as seen from his point of view. These included a jurisprudence that increasingly neglected the exertion of *ijtihad* in favor of *taqlīd*, a theosophy that revolved around the doctrine of *uzhdat al-wajūd*, sufi orders that were organized on the basis of the absolute authority of the shaykh, and the all gamut of popular practices centered on saint worship, visiting their tombs and seeking their intercession with God. All these necessarily implied a challenge to the Ottoman State, whom he regarded as the embodiment and mainstay of the deviations of late orthodox Islam.

Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb departed from Ibn Taymiyya's

⁷ On Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and his work see Laoust, *Ibn Taymiyya*, pp. 489-492; Bell, pp. 92-181.

⁸ Laoust, *Ibn Taymiyya*, pp. 477-505.

⁹ Michael Cook, "On the Origins of Wahhabism," *JRAS*, 3rd series, 2 (1992), pp. 191-202; John Voll, "Muhammad Hayyā al-Sindī and Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb: an Analysis of an Intellectual Group in Eighteenth-Century Madina," *BSOAS*, 38 (1975), pp. 32-39.

teachings in some highly significant aspects. He restricted the definition of the *salaf* to the first generation of Islam, thus discrediting the reliance on the heads of the legal schools and even on the compilers of the canonical hadith collections. In his exertion of *ijtihad* he acknowledged solely the Qur'an and the sunna as sources for deriving rulings, adding at times the precedents of the Companions. Thus Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb rejected the application not only of the *ijmā'*, which Ibn Taymiyya would approve, but also of *qiyās*, which he actually encouraged. The sharpest deviation of the Wahhābīs from Ibn Taymiyya's teaching pertained, however, to their readiness to impose their views by force. Charging their adversaries of unbelief (*akf*) they implied letting the blood and property of most Muslims. In the face of such principles, and the general challenge inherent in them to the Muslim state, the Wahhābī teaching could encounter only opposition on the part of the 'ulama in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰ In Damascus we met such criticism in the writings of Muhammad Amin 'Abidin of the official Hanafī school, as well as by Hasan al-Shaytī the Hanbali. The alliance with Ibn Sa'ūd in 1744 supplied the Wahhābīs with the basis to the establishment of the "theocratic state" that could realize their aims. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb himself propagated his message mainly by the letters he dispatched to various 'ulama and Muslim rulers, dedicating himself mostly to instruction in Najd, which was unified under the Sa'ūdī emirate. It was only after his death that the movement began to spread beyond its core area, to the Hijaz, south Iraq and Syria where, posing a tangible menace to the urban centers, it was destroyed by the armies of Muhammad 'Ali.

Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb was not the only one to espouse the teachings of Ahmad ibn Taymiyya in the eighteenth century. Indeed, in several of the more established centers of learning in the Muslim world other reformist thinkers emerged whose views were more in line with the original teaching, drawing their inspiration from the similar circumstances of the time, rather than from the Wahhābīs. Most outstanding among them were Shāh Walallāh of Delhi (1702-1763), a Naqshbandī sufi and adherent of Ibn 'Arabi who strove to

¹⁰ The analysis of the Wahhābiyya and its teachings is based on Laoust, *Ibn Taymiyya*, pp. 506-540; H. St. John Philby, *Sa'udī Arabia* (Beirut, 1968), pp. 33-146; Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, pp. 37-38; Rahman, pp. 196-201; Esther Peskes, *Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhāb (1703-92) in Wāḍi'at al-Ḥaram: Untersuchungen zur Rekonstruktion der Frühgeschichte Wahhābiyya* (Beirut, 1993).

check the disintegration of the Mughal Empire in India,¹¹ and Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Shawkānī of Yemen (1760-1834), the culmination of a series of indigenous Zaydī reformist scholars who as chief gadi sought to fortify the declining Qāsimī Imamate.¹² Both Shah Walīallāh and Shawkānī stressed the central importance of the science of hadīth, regarding it as a means to reunite the Muslim umma and as the criterion to integrate the various religious sciences into a coherent whole. From this outlook also derived their active involvement in political affairs, their urging of qualified jurists to exert *jihad* in accordance with the principles of reason and the public interest, as well as their acceptance of orthodox Sufism. Both objected to *taḥqīq* against those professing Islam.

The views of the Salafī circles in Damascus at the end of the nineteenth century were closer to the moderate and peaceful reformist attitudes of Shah Walīallāh and Muḥammad al-Shawkānī than to Ibn 'Abd al-Wahlāb's belligerence. The Salafīs were exposed to the teachings of Walīallāh through the Naqshbandī tradition Shaykh Khālīd brought with him from India at the beginning of the century. Shawkānī's teaching reached Syria at that time directly from the Yemen, which had again been placed under direct Ottoman rule in 1872. We know that it was being taught in Tripoli in the early 1880s by 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Rāfi'ī, a reformist sufi who had been attached in his youth to 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā'iri's circle, and who had become familiar with Shawkānī's ideas during his service as gadi in Sanaa.¹³ The principal channel through which the ideas of Walīallāh and Shawkānī reached Damascus, however, was in India and Iraq.¹⁴ In India, their teachings were incorporated into the Ahl-i-Hadīth movement, which emerged out of the crisis of the disastrous Muriny of 1857 and was led by Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (d. 1889), the Naw-

¹¹ On the life and thought of Shah Walīallāh see J.M.S. Bailion, *Religion and Thought of Shah Walī Allāh Dihlawi, 1703-1776* (Leiden, 1986); G.N. Jalbani, *Teachings of Shah Walīullāh of Delhi* (3rd ed. Lahore, 1979). On his Naqshbandī affiliation see also Algar, "A Short History," pp. 25-26; on his affinity to Ibn Taymiyya see Bailion, pp. 200-201.

¹² On the life and thought of Shawkānī see Husayn b. 'Abdulla al-'Amrī, *The Imam in the 18th and 19th Centuries: a Political and Intellectual History* (London, 1985), pp. 103-192; Bernard Haykel, "Al-Shawkānī and the Jurisprudential Unity of Yemen," *REVIAM*, 67 (1993), pp. 53-66.

¹³ Muḥammad Rashīd Ridā, "'Alī-Id al-Dhahabī li-Shaykh al-Shawkānī... 'Abd al-Ḥamid Bek al-Rāfi'ī," *al-Manār*, 30 (1929), pp. 66-68; Jazā'iri, *Tuḥfat al-Qā'iri*, p. 623.

¹⁴ Commius, pp. 24-26.

wab of Bhopal in central India, whom we encountered above in his denunciation of the Khālīdī practice of *rābiḥa*.¹⁵ The Ahl-i-Hadīth movement became acquainted with the works of Ahmad ibn Taymiyya through Shawkānī, and began to publish them in Urdu.¹⁶ Nu'mān Khayr al-Dīn al-Alūsī from Baghdad, who raised the question of the *rābiḥa* in the first place, contacted the Khān in 1878, after he learned of his activities. Nu'mān's father, Mahmūd Abū al-Thīnā' Shihāb al-Dīn al-Alūsī, who was a disciple of Shaykh Khālīd, studied also with the Wahlābī-influenced 'Alī al-Suwaydī.¹⁷ Khayr al-Dīn himself became a key figure in the revival of Ibn Taymiyya's legacy in the Arab lands, publishing in 1881 a defense against his detractors. Two years later, Alūsī visited Damascus on his way to Istanbul, where he could meet like-minded 'ulama and discuss with them his new views.¹⁸

¹⁵ See pp. 113-114.

¹⁶ On the Ahl-i-Hadīth movement and its teachings see Barbara Dali Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860-1900* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 268-285.

¹⁷ On Abū al-Thīnā' Shihāb al-Dīn al-Alūsī see Muḥammad Bahār al-Atharī, *Alam al-'Iraq* (Cairo, 1345 A.H.), pp. 21-43. On his affiliation to Khālīd see his own testimony in his, *Gharā'ib al-Ighrāb wa-Mizān al-Allāh* (Baghdad, 1327 A.H.), pp. 17-19. On his and Suwaydī's attitude toward Ibn Taymiyya see Nu'mān Khayr al-Dīn al-Ahsī, *Jalāl al-'Aynayn fī Muḥakamat al-Aḥmadayn* (Cairo, 1300 A.H.), pp. 29-30.

¹⁸ Atharī, pp. 57-68, esp. 60-61.