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Sufism and *Shari'a*: Contextualizing Contemporary Sufi Expressions

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Abstract: In this article I propose that questions about the nature of contemporary Sufism, especially in Western contexts, can be addressed with further precision and nuance by shifting the focus from Sufism's relationship to Islam, to its relationship to *shari'a*, or Islamic law (*fiqh*). As very few questioned Sufism's Islamic nature prior to the modern period, this analytical shift offers the advantage of contextualizing contemporary debates about Sufism within the much richer history of intra-Islamic difference over Sufism and *shari'a*. I suggest that traditional Sufi-*shari'a* conceptions, though varied in nature, can be categorized for analytical purposes as (a) juristic, (b) supersessionist, and (c) formless Sufism. I propose these terms not as archetypal categories, but rather as a tentative template for mapping Sufi approaches to the *shari'a*, which can allow us to better appreciate how contemporary Western Sufi orientations towards the *shari'a* reflect premodern tendencies.

Keywords: Sufism; Islamic mysticism; *shari'a*; contemporary; intra-Islamic debates



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1. Introduction

The exact nature of Sufism's relationship to Islam has long been a subject of debate, both among Muslims and scholarly observers. Is Sufism the heart of Islam—its innermost teachings and highest expression? Or is Sufism fundamentally extra-Islamic, at times coinciding with Islam, but ultimately independent of, and even contrary to it? These questions come into particular focus in Europe and North America, where Sufism has taken root in the modern period. Francesco Piraino and Mark Sedgwick suggest that “the relationship between Sufism and Islam” is “one of the most important issues for the general public” when considering Sufism (Piraino and Sedgwick 2019, p. 1). To cite just one example, during the 2011 “Ground Zero Mosque” controversy in America, public officials sought to distinguish the “Sufi Muslims” behind the Park51 Center mosque from “mainland Muslim practice”, suggesting they may represent a more Westernized “hybrid” (Safi 2011).

Although such public perceptions clearly reflect a limited understanding of the complexities of Islamic identity and expression, the diversity of contemporary Sufi orientation towards Islam is notable, and can be a source of confusion. Some Sufi groups, such as the Shadhiliyya order in America, founded by Muhammad Sa'id al-Jamal (d. 2015) or the 'Alawiyya in France, led by Khaled Bentounes, explicitly identify as Islamic in nature, with Islamic practice (*salat* or daily prayer, fasting in Ramadan, pilgrimage to Mecca, etc.) forming key elements of their path. Other Sufi groups however, such as the Golden Sufi Center in America, led by Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee and now his son Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee, the London-based Ni'matullahi Order led by Alireza Nurbakhsh, or the Inayati Order in America, led by Zia Inayat-Khan, have far fewer explicit Islamic connections, and may teach that Sufism can be connected to Islam, but remains in essence independent of it. It is perhaps not surprising then that, as Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh notes (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2019), several scholars have categorized contemporary Sufi groups in terms of their relationship to Islam (Hermansen 2006; Geaves 2000; Godlas 2005).

In this article I propose that such questions about the nature of contemporary Sufism may be more fruitfully engaged by shifting the focus from Sufism's relationship to Islam, to considering Sufi approaches to *shari'a*, or Islamic law (*fiqh*).¹ Since very few would have questioned Sufism's Islamic nature prior to the modern period, this analytical shift has the advantage of contextualizing contemporary Sufism within the much more extensive history of intra-Islamic difference over Sufism and *shari'a*. Further, this shift avoids reducing the meaning of "Islamic" to *shari'a* compliance. Ron Geaves helpfully observes that, in considering Sufism in the West, the degree to which one follows the *shari'a* "is not a definitive test of allegiance to Islam" (Geaves 2015, p. 249). As I will discuss in this paper, historical Sufi forms have not always centered the *shari'a*, and are not thereby less Islamic. I suggest that traditional Sufi-*shari'a* conceptions, though deeply varied in nature, can be categorized for analytical purposes as (a) juristic, (b) supersessionist, and (c) formless Sufism. I propose these terms not as archetypal categories, but rather as a working template for mapping Sufi approaches to the *shari'a*. Those familiar with the history of Sufism know well that this subject is a large one, and hence I will approach it here in a necessarily cursory manner. In what follows I will (a) provide a brief overview of Sufism's integral place in classical Islamic traditions, before (b) outlining three traditional Sufi approaches to the *shari'a*, and then (c) exploring how these approaches can help us contextualize contemporary Sufi conceptions of Sufism and *shari'a*.

2. Sufism as Normative Islam

Although Sufism's precise origins in a historical sense likely go beyond what textual evidence can allow us to conclusively determine, it appears as though Sufism (*tasawwuf*) was a formalization of spiritual currents, concepts, and practices found in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632), his companions (*sahaba*), and the first generations of Muslims (*tabi'un* and *tabi' al-tabi'in*), collectively known as the *salaf al-salih* (pious first generations of Muslims). This is not to say that Sufism was somehow immune to influences external to Islam. Quite clearly, in its development as a tradition of ascetic, moral, and mystical practice, Sufis would have encountered analogous traditions in the region, whether Jewish, Christian, Neoplatonic, or Persian (Sedgwick 2017; Zarrabi-Zadeh 2021). However, similar to Muslim jurists, who drew upon Late Roman provincial law for example, Sufis integrated external sources, such as Neoplatonism, into a pre-existing Qur'anic paradigm and Prophetic model. As Nile Green notes, "to adapt discrete cultural elements is not to surrender the integrity of the final production" (Green 2012, p. 17). It is probably also worth pointing out that traditions do not emerge into the world whole, but form over time in conversation with pre-existing patterns, making elements of these patterns an integral part of themselves, and Islamic traditions are of course no exception here.

Whether described as ascetics (*zuhhad*) or devout worshippers (*'ubbad*), those Muslims of the eighth and ninth centuries who sought to maintain the intensive devotion of the Prophet and his companions are generally acknowledged as the precursors to Sufism, which would take shape first in Baghdad, with the circle of devotees surrounding Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910) (Melchert 2015, p. 3). As is well documented in classical Sufi and contemporary scholarship, some early Sufis gained both fame and infamy for statements that seemed to transgress the bounds of normative Islamic law and theology, with Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922) standing out as the most celebrated (or condemned) in this respect. Junayd became the early archetype of a more circumspect or "sober" Sufism, one that carefully remained within the borders of conventional orthodoxy, in contrast to al-Hallaj's "drunken", ecstatic utterances rending conventional belief (Ohlander 2021, p. 39). In the generations that followed, Sufis articulated their path more along Junaydi lines as the inward *sunna* (Sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad, as the highest of Islam's three dimensions (*ihsan*) or as Islam's inner science (*'ilm al-batin*), as opposed to the outer sciences of law (*fiqh*), Qur'anic commentary (*tafsir*), and Prophetic tradition (*hadith*).² This kind of Sufism bound by the *shari'a* and embodying the Prophetic *sunna* was given full articulation by Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (d. 988), Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. ca. 1021), Abu al-Qasim al-

Qushayri (d. 1072), ‘Ali al-Hujwiri (d. ca. 1072), and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), and would become normative for what seems to be the majority of Muslims until the modern period. Interestingly, despite al-Hallaj’s controversial reputation, we find many of these later “orthodox” Sufis continuing to revere him, though in a circumspect manner (Ernst 2018b).

By the thirteenth century there was something of a Sunni consensus on Sufism’s validity and even necessity; the curricula of most institutions of higher learning in Muslim lands included both *fiqh* and *tasawwuf*, and the two were frequently studied together (Cornell 1999; Safi 2006). This broad consensus largely held until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when anti-Sufi Muslim reformers, whom can be adequately described as Salafis (Meijer 2009), suggested that Sufism was not so much the crystallization of the Prophet Muhammad’s deeper teachings, but rather a corruption of those very teachings, essentially foreign to the “soil” of the Qur’an and *sunna*. The most trenchant and influential among Salafi critics of Sufism was Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), who launched a revivalist movement in Arabia in the mid-eighteenth century (Mandaville 2022). Building off of medieval Hanbali concerns about Sufism, articulated by ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201) and Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab then took their critiques further, not simply condemning various Sufi practices and beliefs, but considering the phenomenon itself as idolatry and unbelief.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also saw Orientalists reformulate “aspects of Islamic culture into a separate category called Sufism”, suggesting that this separate phenomenon known as Sufism was a foreign transplant, originating not in Arabia, but in India, Greece, or Persia (or perhaps some combination of the three) (Ernst 2018a, p. 4). Many European scholars at this time understood genuine mysticism and philosophy to be products of the “Aryan mind”, in contrast to Islam, which was understood to be a quintessential Semitic legalism. Hence Sufism could only be understood as a foreign mystical “flower” somehow transplanted in the legalistic Islamic “desert”. Linda Sijbrand summarizes this Orientalist perspective:

Sufism, however—being mainly expressed in the Aryan Persian language—did not fit the idea of a rigid, legalistic Islam . . . Sufism was seen as originally Indian (Hindu or Buddhist), Persian, Hellenistic, Christian or gnostic, but not Islamic. The one thing that all these origins had in common was the fact that they were Aryan. [Edward H.] Palmer saw Sufism as ‘a flower in the desert.’ Europeans who could not relate to Islam did appreciate Sufism, and their main concern was how this foreign element had entered Islam. (Sijbrand 2013, p. 101)

Where Salafi and Orientalist perspectives have intersected and taken root in contemporary Muslim communities, there can be genuine surprise and disbelief that Sufism was, for the majority of Islamic history, assumed by Muslims to be an organic aspect of Islam. For most premodern Muslims, conceptually separating Sufism and Islam would have seemed as strange as suggesting that *shari’a* and Islam were somehow distinct from one another. The conceptual split would have been almost completely incomprehensible. In contrast to Orientalist and Salafi theses, what we today call Sufism was assumed to be a natural aspect of the Islamic faith and way. Erik S. Ohlander summarizes the medieval picture well:

Over the course of this period, Sufi communities flourished as far afield as the Atlantic shores of North Africa in the west to the reaches of Chinese Turkestan in the east, and from central Anatolia in the north to the Malay Archipelago in the south. Wherever Islam went, so too did Sufis, taking with them certain elements associated, to one degree or another, with ideas, traditions, and ways of viewing Islam, the world, the self, and others which were self-referentially conceptualized and referred to as having to do with *tasawwuf*. (Ohlander 2015, p. 55)

Although the examples that one can draw upon to illustrate this are overwhelming in number, ranging across the entirety of historical Muslim societies, here I will offer a brief overview of the place of Sufism in Egyptian and Malaysian Islam during the medieval

period to suggest the larger, shared pattern of a Sufi-oriented Islam functioning normatively in disparate Muslim societies, and to point to the various Sufi approaches to the *shari'a*.

In Egypt, as Nathan Hofer notes, between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, “Ayyubid and Mamluk *amirs* and their households competed with each other to patronise, subsidise, and curry favour with Sufis” (Hofer 2015, p. 2). This trend can be traced back to Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (or Saladin) (d. 1193), the founder of the Ayyubid Dynasty (1171–1250) and famed opponent of the Crusaders. Saladin ended Shi'a Fatimid rule in Egypt and proceeded with a “Sunnification” agenda, with Sufism integral to this project. He was the first sultan to appoint a “Chief Sufi” (*shaykh al-shuyukh*) under his command, the Sufi counterpart to the head Islamic judge (*qadi al-qudat*). This Chief Sufi was then put in charge of the *Salahiyya*, an extensive Sufi lodge Saladin constructed in Cairo. For Saladin, similar to other sultans of the period, Sunni authority had two pillars: the jurist and the Sufi, representing the outward and inward aspects of Islam, and so it logically followed that a good Muslim leader offered patronage to both. Indeed, it was far from uncommon for a leading jurist and Sufi to be one and the same person; in fact it was something of a medieval ideal of knowledge, that one have mastered both Islam's exoteric and esoteric sciences, that one be both a *faqih* (jurist) and *faqir* (Sufi).

Rachida Chih notes the prevalence of this jurist-Sufi ideal among Egyptian religious authorities, observing that, though there were some jurists who focused more on textual matters, and some more on spiritual ones, “with the influence of the great figures among fifteenth-century Egyptian Sufi jurists”, the contrast between outward and inward focusing authorities was largely attenuated among Egypt's *'ulama* (Chih 2019, p. 10). We see this trend illustrated well in the life of Shaykh Muhammad bin Salim al-Hifni (d. 1767),³ perhaps Egypt's most popular and renowned religious authority in the eighteenth century; al-Hifni was a Shafi'i jurist, and starting in 1757, the rector of al-Azhar. He was also a Sufi master in the Khalwatiyya order, and renowned as a saint (*wali*) and even the *qutb* or spiritual “pole” of his time (Chih 2019, pp. 1–2).⁴ The Khalwatiyya were well ensconced in Sunni Islam's premiere institution of learning, as Chih accounts: “The Khalwatiyya was the path of the *azhari* elite; after al-Hifni and until the end of the nineteenth century nine Khalwatis would occupy the position of Shaykh of al-Azhar” (Chih 2019, p. 34). For Egyptian Muslims from the Ayyubid to the modern period, jurist-Sufis, such as al-Hifni, were the norm rather than the exception: Islamic leaders were expected to be masters of Islam's disciplines of scripture and law, as well as its spiritual path, and to suggest that the two could be separated would have been alien to Muslim conceptual grammar.

In Southeast Asia, we find that the spread of Islam in the region took place largely under Sufi auspices, such that Malaysian Islam was, for centuries, deeply Sufi in nature. Khairudin Aljunied observes that by the sixteenth century, the region was “drenched” in Sufism: “Sufi traces were found in court texts, fables, songs, and poetry. Sufistic practices were present in Malay cultural and religious activities, in the conduct of feasts and festivities. Sufi motifs also shaped Malay arts and architecture. To be a Malay-Muslim was to be Sufi, by default” (Aljunied 2019, p. 41). However, as we will see, Malay Islam contained within it several at times contrasting expressions of Sufism.

Relevant to my discussion of Sufism-*shari'a* typologies later in this paper, Aljunied describes three kinds of Sufism that shaped Malay Islam: populist, philosophical, and scholastic. Populist Sufis were “master synthesizers”, comfortably integrating indigenous Southeast Asian spiritualities with Islamic practice and symbol, practicing various forms of healing, creating amulets of protection, and acting as intermediaries with the spirit world, all through a Qur'anic frame of reference. This was a kind of Islam synthesizing with local spiritualities, based upon a shared understanding of the importance of mediating between unseen and seen realities. Philosophical Sufis, largely following Muhyi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi's (d. 1240) school, focused more on developing an Islamic metaphysics, most prominent in the region being Hamza Fansuri (d. ca. 1590), one of the founders of Malay poetic traditions, and himself an exquisite metaphysical poet. However, those whom Aljunied labels “scholastic Sufis” tended to criticize both popularizers and philosophical

Sufis as compromising *shari'a* norms and transgressing the bounds of exoteric Islamic theology. These Sufis would have been more grounded in the scholastic traditions of the madrasa, trained in *fiqh* and *kalam* (Islamic theology; primarily the Shafi'i and Ash'ari schools), and wary of the threat of heresy. Nuruddin al-Raniri (d. 1658) for example, who was not only a scholastic Sufi, but also the leading Muslim juristic authority (*shaykh al-Islam*) under Sultana Safiatuddin Tajul Alam (d. 1675), issued a *fatwa* against Fansuri's works, which were subsequently banned and even burned (Aljunied 2019, p. 45).

As is clear from the two (representative) examples of Egypt and Malaysia above, *tasawwuf* was integrally Islamic, or we can say Islam was integrally Sufi in orientation. However, this is not to say that *tasawwuf* was without controversy or critique in the premodern period: as we saw in the case of Southeast Asia, juristically-oriented Sufis at times condemned their less orthodox spiritual colleagues. In all cases however, we do not find the entirety of Sufism itself being condemned, but rather various kinds of contestation over which *kind* of Sufism was Islamically legitimate. The novelty of the thesis of Sufism's entirely extra-Islamic nature can be demonstrated by simply noting that perhaps the classical tradition's most trenchant critic of Sufism, Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyya, by no means suggested that Sufism as such was completely foreign to Islam, but rather, similar to Ibn al-Jawzi and other Hanbalis, only critiqued various expressions of Sufism that he deemed foreign to the Salafi spirit, while acknowledging the Islamic nature of the phenomenon more broadly. Ibn Taymiyya even wrote a book on the virtues of Sufism and a commentary on famous Hanbali Sufi 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani's (d. 1166) text, the *Futuh al-Ghayb* (Bazzano 2015, p. 118), illustrating his Sufi sympathies in spite of his critiques.

It is really only in the late eighteenth century, with Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, that we find Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Jawzi's critique of Sufism amplified to such a degree that Sufism itself is seen as an idolatrous innovation, ultimately Islam's opposite, rather than its deeper self. The dissemination of "Wahhabi" anti-Sufism has occurred through the auspices of global Salafi networks in the twentieth century, which have proven remarkably effective in marginalizing Sufism in contemporary Muslim discourse, or at least rendering it suspect (Mandaville 2022). In turn some Muslims and scholars have attempted to counter Salafi narratives by highlighting Sufism's historical orthodoxy and organic relationship to the *shari'a*, centering juristic versions of Sufism as normative. In what follows however, we can see that Sufis have had varied approaches to the law, which prefigure the diversity of Sufism we find in the global West.

3. A Sufi-Shari'a Typology

As described above, few prior to the modern period would have seriously questioned Sufism's Islamic provenance. However, when we consider Sufism's relationship to *shari'a* or *fiqh* we find a much richer tradition of debate. The various classical perspectives on Sufism and the law prove useful in making sense of contemporary Sufi expressions, and can be summarized as juristic, supersessionist, and formless Sufi approaches to the *shari'a*.

Juristic Sufism was first outlined by figures, such as al-Sarraj, al-Qushayri, and al-Ghazali, and then embodied in the majority of Sufi orders, and perhaps best represented in the later period by prominent jurist Sufis, such as al-Hifni and al-Raniri. In short, juristic Sufism appears to have been the norm for many if not most Sufis historically. They would have largely understood the science of *tasawwuf* as being organically related to the *shari'a*, functioning within its moral and ritual boundaries. Within this conception, the law demarcated the boundaries of the spiritual life, and spirituality ensured that the embodied practice of the law included corresponding inward states, virtues, and understanding. The goal of the Sufi path was the realization of truth or *haqiqah* (what Shahab Ahmed translates as the "Real-Truth") (Ahmed 2016, p. 11). Within the juristic Sufi paradigm *haqiqah* is realized *within* and *through* the careful practice of the *shari'a*, both in terms of the prescribed ritual life (*'ibadat*) and proper actions (*mu'amalat*). The Indian Naqshbandi master popularly known as Islam's reviver in its second millennium (*mujaddid al-f thani*), Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624), expressed this understanding of Sufism as follows:

The true realized one (muntahi-yi haqiqi) finds that inner experience corresponds to the outer shariat. The difference between the [superficial] jurists and the noble Sufis is that jurists know [topics of shariat] by rational proof and the Sufis know by their inner disclosures and by tasting. (Ahmad Sirhindi, *Maktubat Imam Rabbani*, as translated by Arthur Buehler, and quoted in [Faruque 2016](#), p. 41)

Here we find that the deeper reality or Real-Truth (*haqiqqa*) is not somehow above or separate from the *shari'a*, but is simply knowing the *shari'a*'s deeper aspect, or realizing its truth existentially as opposed to conceptually. Sufism then is the fullest living of and understanding of *shari'a*. This longstanding and at times near ubiquitous conception of Sunni Islam, one in which Sufism is *shari'a*'s completion, has been revived in recent decades by what Jonathan A. C. Brown calls "late Sunni traditionalists", who invoke this vision of Islam to counter Salafi suggestions of Sufism's extra-Islamic origin and nature ([Brown 2014](#)).

However, while acknowledging this conception of Sufism and *shari'a*—what I am calling juristic Sufism—as normative for many Sufis historically, it is important to not then marginalize conceptions of Sufism and *shari'a* that tended to situate the law as significant, but not ultimate in its significance. Some of Sufism's most renowned luminaries and some of its most pervasive expressions understood *haqiqqa* to, in a sense, supersede the law, rendering it redundant. This is not to say that within this conception the law is seen to be *comprehensively* superseded. Generally speaking, the law is understood to be necessary both for the generality of Muslims, and as a prerequisite for the spiritual path (*tariqa*). However, the law becomes radically decentered and even transcended by the Sufi's realization of *haqiqqa*. It is important to highlight that this does not make this sort of Sufism somehow *less Islamic*: supersessionist Sufis would have conceived of their understanding as representing a higher or deeper Islam than that of the jurists, who remain trapped in the outward forms of things, too often missing their deeper meaning.

Recent works in the field of Islamic studies, most prominently Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam?* ([Ahmed 2016](#)) and Thomas Bauer's *A Culture of Ambiguity* ([Bauer \[2011\] 2021](#)), have engendered significant scholarly conversation on the diverse, ambiguous, and even contradictory nature of premodern Islam, particularly in terms of Muslim understandings of *shari'a*. As previously mentioned, in reaction to Orientalist and Salafi depictions of Sufism as totally separate from the Islamic *shari'a*, some late Sunni traditionalists and other scholars have portrayed Sufism as intrinsically aligned with or within *shari'a*. Ahmed's work in particular illustrates well how much Sufi discourse of the medieval period situated *tasawwuf* as distinctly *above* the *shari'a*, suggesting that a "real"/"genuine"/"deep" understanding of Islam largely transcended the law. He calls this "religion above religion", the "Sufi-philosophical amalgam", and highlights its dominant cultural influence in the "Balkan-to-Bengal" region in the medieval and early modern periods ([Ahmed 2016](#)). An excellent example of this supersessionist understanding of Sufism and *shari'a* is found in the discourse of Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), who writes on this subject as follows:

The Law [*sharī'at*] is like a candle that shows the way: Without the candle in hand, there is no setting forth on the road. And when you are on the road: that journey is the Way [*ṭarīqat*]; and when you have reached the destination, that is the Real-Truth [*ḥaqīqat*]. It is in this regard that they say 'If the Real-Truths are manifest, the laws are nullified [*law zaharat al-ḥaqā'iq baṭalat al-sharā'ī'*]', as when copper becomes gold, or was gold originally, it does not need the alchemy that is the Law. ([Ahmed 2016](#), p. 21; based on R. A. Nicholson's translation of Rumi's *Mathnawi*)

Quite unlike Sirhindi's explanation, here we find Rumi articulating the *shari'a* as initially essential, but ultimately expendable, once *haqiqqa* has been realized. It is not so much that the law as such is rejected, but rather that it is decentered such that it becomes a *stage* or *step* that is ultimately transcended via spiritual realization of truth. It follows then that, "the highest and deepest truths are those which Sufis access from the Unseen by direct experience . . . while the lower truths are the truths of the law:" the law is not

nullified *tout court*, but is relegated to a lower level in the hierarchy of truth (Ahmed 2016, p. 24). This is illustrated clearly in what some of Rumi's hagiographers mention about his answer to those accusing his master Shams Tabrizi (d. ca. 1248) for wine-drinking. It is said that, when jurists approached Rumi about Shams's violation of the law in drinking wine, Rumi used an Islamic legal argument to counter. He noted that, with the *shar'i* laws regulating the purity of water, a drop of wine renders a basin of water impure, but an entire "wine-skin" can be poured into a river, not affecting its purity. He suggests to the questioning jurists that even barley bread is *haram* (forbidden) for them (as their selves are as small as a basin), whereas the "rule of the river" applies to Shams (in his spiritual vastness), and hence "everything is permitted" for him (Ahmed 2016, p. 100; from Shams al-Din Ahmad Aflaki's hagiography of Rumi). As Ahmed argues throughout his book, this approach too is "Islamic", as it takes its ultimate reference point to be the Qur'an, though understood in a manner that differs from that of exoteric authorities.

Finally, between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, there emerged various networks of Sufis in the Mediterranean and Central Asian regions that almost completely rejected the norms of Islamic respectability, practicing a spirituality that was more formless in nature, at least in respect to Islamic rituals and rules. Ahmet T. Karamustafa calls these Sufis "antinomian", for their, in some cases, outright rejection of the law. This sort of Sufism was recorded by Muslim observers relatively early in Islamic history, with Abu 'Asim al-Nasa'i (d. 867) describing the *fikriyya*—"meditationists" or "contemplatives"—those who believed they could reach God directly through meditation, and others for whom the love of God has consumed them entirely such that they held the law no longer applies to them (Karamustafa 2015, p. 102). In short, these Sufis radically prioritized the inward experience of God over outward acts of obedience. Later, the terms *darvish* (beggar) and *qalandar* (uncultured or wild) would be applied to mendicant non-conformist Sufis, who would flourish as a larger movement in the medieval period.

Some of these individuals and groups were merely unconcerned with following *shari'a* guidelines, whereas others sought to actively flout *shar'i* norms: going naked, wearing chains, or consuming intoxicants and hallucinogens. As Karamustafa notes, these iconoclastic Sufis were still very much within the Islamic paradigm, believing that they embodied the highest understanding of Islamic spiritual ideals, such as poverty (*faqr*), the annihilation of the self in God (*fana'*), and sainthood (*walaya*) (Karamustafa 2015, p. 118). For these Sufis, a full recognition of *haqiqah* meant that one had followed the Prophetic imperative of "dying before death". As those who had died to this world, their realization of *haqiqah* not only decentered the *shari'a*, but made it entirely redundant, which they celebrated through a life of Islamic unconventionality. Although formless Sufis saw themselves as followers of the Prophet, and perhaps the very best of followers embodying the deep reality of the *sunna*, other Sufis condemned them as nonbelievers. Early on, al-Sarraj, for example, compiled a list of such antinomian groups, most of whom he considered to be nonbelievers for leaving aspects of Islamic law or contravening Islamic theological precepts, and later al-Ghazali would similarly condemn antinomians as obviously misguided (Karamustafa 2015, pp. 103–4, 113). However, the antinomian Qalandariyya would themselves become a positive trope in Persian Sufi poetry. Traced back to the uncompromising ecstasy and metaphysical nakedness of expression represented most iconically by al-Hallaj, the Qalandariyya became poetically celebrated as "the epitome of true piety cleansed of all dissimulation and hypocrisy", standing in contrast to the compromised, conventional Sufis of the convent (*khanaqah*) (Karamustafa 2015, p. 109). Some elements of the formless Sufi approach would crystalize in the Bektashiyya, a Sufi order traced to Hajji Bektash Veli (d. 1271) that flourished for centuries in the Ottoman empire, and was associated quite closely with the Janissary corps. Though not juristic in approach, integrating elements of Christian religious practice, including celibacy and celebrating iconoclasts, such as al-Hallaj, the Bektashiyya were (and are) a deeply Islamic order, playing a historic role in spreading Islam among Christians within the Ottoman realm, for example (Trix 2009).

4. Contemporary Sufi Expressions

With an appreciation of the range of possible Sufism-*shari'a* conceptions, we can better contextualize contemporary Sufi movements in the West in terms of older tendencies within the Sufi tradition, whether juristic, supersessionist, or formless. This approach further avoids centering the law as the barometer of what counts as legitimately Islamic, as less-*shari'a* oriented groups are not then deemed to be outside of the boundaries of Islamic tradition. It is probably helpful to point out that I am not referring here to what we might call the Sufism of the spiritual marketplace which can be more directly traced to the post-1960s intersection of alternative spiritualities and modern commerce, having little connection with historic Islamic traditions. If we are considering a “Rumi moon yoga mat” for instance, we are not so much dealing with a formless expression of Sufism, but rather a contemporary spiritual commodity that may draw upon Sufi resources, but is not itself an expression of the historical Sufi tradition (Arjana 2020). I am hence limiting “Sufism” to the sustained engagement with Sufi practice based on relationship with a lineage-authorized *shaykh/shaykha*, however formal (or not) in nature.

In terms of contemporary expressions of juristic Sufism, we can point to Shadhili Sufi groups as representative. The Shadhiliyya itself has a long history of transmitting *tasawwuf* within a *fiqh*-oriented practice. Bazzano notes that the order is one of “the most influential Sufi orders in Islamic history”, producing several leading Muslim authorities over the centuries (Bazzano 2020, pp. 86–87). Whether we think of the spiritual forerunner of Shadhili Sufism, Abu Madyan (d. 1198), or the luminaries of the Shadhiliyya including the founder Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (d. 1258), Ibn ‘Ata Allah (d. 1310) and later Muhammad al-Darqawi (d. 1823), we find a consistently juristic form of Sufism.⁵ Reflecting this historical juristic orientation, contemporary Palestinian Shadhili leader Muhammad Sa’id al-Jamal, who began teaching in America in the 1990s, wrote in 2002, “There is no Sufism without jurisprudence. Both are inseparable and must be combined together” (Bazzano 2020, p. 92). Similarly, if we look to the Darqawi-Hashimi branch of the Shadhiliyya led by American convert Nuh Ha Mim Keller (based in Amman, Jordan), we find a deeply juristic approach to Sufism, with Keller publishing one of the first English translations of a classical manual Shafi’i *fiqh*, Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri’s (d. 1368) *The Reliance of the Traveller* (Al-Misri 1994), and emphasizing the centrality of legal conformity to Islamic spirituality, such that other Western Sufis have categorized his approach as “ultraorthodox” (Hermansen 2005, p. 494). Khaled Bentounes leads the ‘Alawiyya-Shadhiliyya, based in France, but with branches throughout Europe, and in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Similar to other Shadhili branches, Bentounes understands his order to represent “traditional Sunni-Sufi orthodoxy”, and yet Piraino notes that this juristic form of Sufism takes a flexible approach to Islamic law and theology, with an “inclusive universalism” that suggests that the “nonbeliever” is not simply the non-Muslim, but rather a state of mind reflecting ingratitude and arrogance, for example (Piraino 2019, pp. 77–79). In all of the above cases however, we find contemporary Shadhili teachers perpetuating the *shari'a*-based Sufism of traditional Shadhili forerunners and luminaries, though with varying levels of adaptation to contemporary contexts.

The Maryamiyya are an American-based branch of the ‘Alawiyya-Shadhiliyya, founded by Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998), and currently led by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The order is intellectually associated with a school of thought known as Traditionalism, founded by René Guénon (d. 1951), with Schuon something of a successor to Guénon (Dickson 2020a). Alongside a trenchant critique of modernity, the works of Guénon and Schuon suggest that authentic esoteric paths are always contained within an “orthodox” or “traditional” religious form. Each traditional path and form reflect an authentic expression of a singular perennial truth, and hence Traditionalists are sometimes referred to as Perennialists. As Nasr is Schuon’s foremost successor, both intellectually in terms of Traditionalism and practically in terms of leading the Maryamiyya, it is not surprising that he articulates a Traditionalist understanding of Sufism (one that we may characterize as juristic). In an interview with the author, he describes genuine Sufi orders as those in which their members “pray, they fast when they are not ill, they perform the Islamic rites, they do not drink, they

do not fornicate”, avoiding “all that is forbidden in Islamic law” (Dickson 2015, p. 189). Interestingly however, Guénon and other Traditionalists criticized Schuon’s Maryamiyya precisely for moving outside of the confines of the Islamic *shari’a*: Schuon undertook what may be called supercessionist adaptations of his branch of the Shadhiliyya, incorporating the veneration of the Virgin Mary (Maryam), Indigenous North American traditions, and sacred nudity. Schuon further allowed for *shar’i* norms to be compromised for the purpose of facilitating Sufism’s practice in Western contexts (Sedgwick 2004). This was all done as a result of Schuon’s more supercessionist approach to Sufism, which prioritized esoteric realization over outward form, and hence allowed for modifications to traditional Islamic *shari’a* norms, in regards to non-Islamic traditions and daily practice. Schuon held that Sufism, as an esoteric wisdom, was “not in any sense even a part, even an inner part” of Islam, but was rather a “quasi-independent phenomenon” (Schuon [1953] 1993, pp. 9–10). Nasr has notably downplayed the supercessionist elements of the Maryamiyya, reaffirming a more juristic understanding of Sufism (Dickson and Xavier 2019).

A more explicitly supercessionist approach to the *shari’a* can be found in the England-based Ni’matullahi order, which was established outside Iran by Javad Nurbakhsh (d. 2008) and is currently led by his son Alireza Nurbakhsh. Similar to the Shadhiliyya described above, contemporary Ni’matullahi orientations towards the *shari’a* reflect the order’s pre-modern trajectory. The order’s founder Shah Ni’matullah Wali (d. 1431) faced persecution in Samarqand initiated by a more juristic Sufi *shaykh* Amir Kulal (d. 1371), eventually settling in Kerman (Lewisohn 2006, pp. 49–50). Despite persecution, the Ni’matullahi order would become “by far the most widespread and significant Sufi Order in Iran” (Milani 2021, p. 544). Twentieth-century Ni’matullahi leader Javad Nurbakhsh became the leading master (*pir*) of the Ni’matullahi in 1956. He first visited the United States in 1974, establishing several Sufi centers thereafter, before setting in America in 1979. He then moved to England in 1983, where he would remain until his death in 2008 (Lewisohn 2006, p. 51). During his life he established Ni’matullahi centers globally (Africa, North America, Europe, Russia, and the Middle East), with thousands of current members. Although initiated members formally convert to Islam and learn the basics of daily prayer, “not much else in the way of external observance of the *shari’a* is required”, with the term “*shari’a*” simply not found in Nurbakhsh’s many published works, while the “significance of the inward requirements” of Islamic practice is emphasized in his books (Lewisohn 2006, p. 53). In this respect he tended to associate himself with the Malamatiyya, a historical Sufi movement that critiqued outward displays of piety (Green 2012, p. 46), and one that would, in various times and places, be associated with supercessionist and formless Sufi expressions.

With the contemporary Ni’matullahiyya we find a Sufi group that cannot be considered to be non-Islamic, and yet we see clearly that the realization of *haqiqah* through the Sufi path (*tariqa*) is pursued with very little reference to or practice of the *shari’a*. It is not as though *shari’a*-based practices, such as *salat*, are totally rejected, but in general are subsumed by other emphases, reflecting what Ahmed calls the classical Islamic “religion above religion” of the “Sufi-philosophical amalgam” (Ahmed 2016). We also see in this group what Leonard Lewisohn calls the “Persianization of Sufism”, foregrounding Persian cultural elements, and even tracing Sufism’s origin to Persian culture, as a sort of Persian infiltration of an Arabic religious scaffolding (Lewisohn 2006, pp. 57–61). For Milad Milani, this decoupling of Sufism from Arabic Islam amounts to a new sect, what he labels “Nurbakhshian Sufism” (Milani 2018, p. 124). However, I would suggest here that Nurbakhsh’s “Irano-Islamic Sufism” (Milani 2021, p. 550) can also be situated in terms of historical supercessionist tendencies.

As I have written about previously (Dickson 2020b), too often scholars place formless Sufi groups—ones that engage seriously with Sufi practice and lineage—into the same amorphous category of “New Age” or commercial spirituality, simply because they are not oriented towards the *shari’a*. For example, both the Inayatiyya and Golden Sufi Center, which I referred to in this paper’s introduction, have been situated in this manner (Weismann 2015, pp. 277–79), and yet both, I would argue, can be contextualized within his-

torical patterns of Islamic spirituality. Interestingly, the Golden Sufi Center is self-described by Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee as “non-Islamic”, with an explicit integration of Hindu and Jungian terminology. However, the Center in fact has its roots in Sirhindi’s Islamic-revivalist order, the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya in India. Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi *shaykh* Fadl Ahmad Khan (d. 1907) did not require one of his successors, Radha Mohan Lal (d. 1966) to convert to Islam from Hinduism, and hence the order began to be taught outside of a strictly Islamic framework (Dickson 2020b, p. 31). Following his *shaykh* Irina Tweedie (d. 1999), who was a successor of Mohan Lal’s, Vaughan-Lee has maintained several aspects of traditional Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi Sufism, including the emphasis on the aspirant’s surrender to and ultimate annihilation in the master (*fana’ fi al-shaykh*), the particular form of *uwaysi* training (gaining spirituality from Sufi masters without physically meeting them) associated with this lineage, and the pedagogical use of early Sufi texts by figures, such as Junayd and al-Sarraj (Dickson 2020b). The Golden Sufi Center can be contextualized as a kind of formless Sufism, that, similar to premodern predecessors, does not engage with the *shari’a*, but maintains a focus on classical Islamic notions and practices, including “dying before death”, surrender to the *shaykh*, and the intensive practice of *dhikr* (Sufi recollection of God), among others.

The Inayatiyya are rooted in Hazrat Inayat Khan’s (d. 1927) early attempt to transmit his (primarily) Chishti Sufi lineage to the West, which began when he arrived in the United States in 1910. Although Khan “initially attempted to shape his teaching of Sufism to Westerners around basic Islamic practices like the daily prayer (*salat*)”, he soon found that Westerners were largely averse to Islam, and reformulated Sufism in a more universal manner” (Dickson and Xavier 2019, pp. 140–41). In adapting Sufi teachings to suit the inclinations of his many Theosophically-inclined students, Inayat Khan certainly downplayed *shari’a* elements, and created a more universal container for Chishtiyya Sufism, known as the “Church of the All”, which integrated a Theosophy-influenced notion of universal religion going beyond particular forms (Inayat-Khan 2006). However, akin to the Shadhiliyya and Ni’matullahiyya described above, Inayat Khan’s form of Western Sufism reflected earlier Chishti orientations, as the order was known for its openness to non-Muslims, and in many cases supercessionist understandings of the *shari’a* (Genn 2007, p. 259). It is interesting to note that in recent years, the current leader of the Inayatiyya (and Inayat Khan’s grandson) Zia Inayat-Khan has worked to re-orient the order away from Hazrat Inayat Khan’s early twentieth century “universal Sufism” and more towards classical Islamic Sufi forms, though retaining a universalist orientation, perhaps better described as Islamic universalism (Mercier-Dalphonde 2020). This too of course reflects a modern phenomenon, namely the post-1960s “rehabilitation of the significance of ‘traditions’”, what has been referred to as “reorthodoxized” Sufism (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2019, p. 199), or “reordered” Sufism (Dickson and Xavier 2019).

The founders and leaders of both the Golden Sufi Center and the Inayatiyya have clearly engaged in a process of vernacularization, whereby local spiritual/philosophical traditions in Europe or North America (Theosophy, Jungian psychology) have been synthesized with classical Sufi lineage and practice, leading ultimately to expressions of what we can call formless Sufism. However, rather than simply label such groups as “New Age” (Weismann 2015; Smith 1999), we can point out that this vernacularization of Sufism has long precedent in Islamic history, as we saw in the Southeast Asian case, with what AlJunied calls “populist” Sufis, who engaged in a concerted program of synthesis of Sufism with local Malay traditions. Hence, more recent processes of Sufi adaptation and synthesis need not be framed as something entirely novel, or as a radical deviation from the historical Islamic norm. For example, Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell note that the Inayatiyya have “gone so far as to decouple Sufism from Islamic law”, suggesting that the law was traditionally understood to be Sufism’s “necessary grounding” (van Bruinessen and Howell 2007, p. 17). Yet, as we have seen, such a decoupling is not something found exclusively in Western contexts, but in fact can be encountered extensively in premodern Muslim ones, and hence this decoupling of Sufism and *shari’a* too reflects a traditional Islamic approach to

Sufism, just one not as universally recognized in contemporary Islamic/academic discourse as juristic forms have been.

5. Conclusions

Whereas earlier analyses of contemporary Sufism have tended to depict less-*shari'a* oriented or non-*shari'a* oriented kinds of Sufism as a distinctly modern phenomenon, contrasted with an almost completely *shari'a*-based Sufism of the past⁶, in this article I suggest that a deeper appreciation of the range of approaches to the *shari'a* found among premodern Sufis allows us to better contextualize contemporary Sufism within the long history of plural Sufism-*shari'a* orientations. The classical models we have of the Sufism-*shari'a* relationship, including juristic, supersessionist, and formless, offer a rich precedent for the diversity of Sufism we find in the contemporary West. This is not to say that the variations of Sufi practice in Europe and North America can, in all cases, be *directly* traced back to these earlier Islamic precedents, or that they have not been adapted to modern conceptions and trajectories, but rather we can situate many of them within a broader historical pattern of diverse Sufi conceptions of “spirit” and “law” on the path of human transformation. In addition, contextualizing contemporary Sufism in this manner avoids the analytical pitfall of reducing the “Islamic” to *shari'a* adherence, allowing the category of Islam to include more of its historical and contemporary manifestations, many of which do not center the law, but rather focus more exclusively on the philosophical systems and spiritual techniques associated with the Sufi path.

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Notes

- ¹ Brinkley Messick helpfully outlines the complexity of the relationship between the terms *shari'a* and *fiqh*: whereas we might conceptually distinguish the *shari'a*, as divine guidance, from *fiqh*, as human interpretation of said guidance, colloquially *shari'a* is used for both the divine guidance found in the Qur'an and *sunna* and its human interpretation in terms of jurisprudence. Hence the *shari'a* comprises “a character both transcendent and immanent, a reality at once timeless and historical” (Messick 2018, p. 6).
- ² See, for example, Abu Nasr al-Sarraj's articulation of Sufis as one of three categories of those who inherit the Prophetic *sunna*, the others being the jurists and scholars of hadith (Renard 2004, pp. 27–37; section “Tenth Century: Niffari, Sarraj, Kalabadhi, Makki”).
- ³ Al-Hifni, also known as al-Hifnawi, was born in Hifna but moved to Cairo early in his life for religious study. He received *ijazas* (certifications) in *fiqh*, *kalam*, *tafsir*, *hadith*, and logic, and received the Naqshbandi *silsila* from Muhammad al-Budayri al-Dimyati (d. 1728). He later became a disciple of the Khalwati *shaykh* Mustafa al-Bakri (d. 1748) and succeeded him as his primary *khalifa* (successor). Al-Hifni is credited with reviving the Khalwatiyya in Egypt, with several important *khulafa* spreading the order widely. For more on his life, see Al-Jabarti (2013, pp. 334–52).
- ⁴ For an in-depth account of *walaya* (sainthood) in Islam, see Chodkiewicz (1993).
- ⁵ Abu Madyan says, in one of his aphorisms, that the most direct path to Truth (*al-Haqq*) is “following the rules established by the Messenger”, or the *shari'a* (Cornell 1996, p. 146).
- ⁶ As just one example of this, Itzhak Weismann suggests that Western Sufis, such as the Inayatiyya, who do not “convert to orthodox Islam”, but focus only on its esoteric tradition, reproduce “the early Orientalist divide between Sufism and Islam”, clearly suggesting here that a lack of *shari'a*-adherence signifies a lack of Islam (Weismann 2015, p. 266).

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