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## An Arab “Machiavelli”? : Rhetoric, Philosophy and Politics in Ibn Khaldun’s Critique of “Sufism”

Thoughtful and informed students of Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima* are well aware that in many places his masterwork is anything but a straightforwardly “objective” or “encyclopedic” summary of the available histories and other Islamic sciences of his day. Instead, his writing throughout that work illustrates a highly complex, distinctive rhetoric which is constantly informed by the twofold focuses of his all-encompassing political philosophy. The first and most obvious interest is discovering the essential pre-conditions for lastingly effective political and social organization—a task which involves far more than the outward passing forms of “power”. And the second is his ultimate end: the effective reform of contemporary education, culture and religion in directions which would better encourage the ultimate human perfection of true scientific, philosophic “knowing”. In both of those areas, any understanding of Ibn Khaldun’s unique rhetoric—with its characteristic mix of multiple levels of meaning and intention expressed through irony, polemic satire, intentional misrepresentation and omissions; or equally unexpected inclusion and praise—necessarily presupposes an informed knowledge of the actual political, cultural and intellectual worlds and corresponding attitudes and assumptions of various readers of his own time. Hence it is not surprising that so many modern-day students have overlooked or even more gravely misinterpreted many of most powerful polemic elements and intentions in his writing—elements which originally were often as intentionally provocative and “politically incorrect” (indeed frequently for similar purposes!) as the notorious writings of Machiavelli were in his time.

One striking illustration of these two key dimensions of Ibn Khaldun’s writing, both throughout the *Muqaddima* and in his earlier *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*, is his profoundly critical approach to both the intellectual and the manifold wider “popular” (including central political and economic) influences and expressions associated with what modern writers often conveniently

term “Sufism”: i.e., a vast complex of far-reaching creative currents in Islamic cultures and religious life in Ibn Khaldun’s time which were often closely associated with or at least symbolized by the distinctive terminology and teachings of Ibn ‘Arabi and his popular interpreters. Recent historical research has highlighted and begun to illuminate the ways those same creative developments, so fundamentally and consistently criticized by Ibn Khaldun throughout his life, were to become central in the spread of Islamic culture into China, South Asia and Indonesia, while inspiring many of the most distinctive cultural contributions and religious forms of life in the great empires of the Ottomans, Moguls and Safavids. Unfortunately, the very different emphases and ideological presuppositions of twentieth-century Arab and other Muslim intellectuals have frequently tended to obscure the many ways Ibn Khaldun’s own Mamluk Cairo was itself participating centrally in those world-historical developments which are such a central and recurrent target of his critical endeavors.

This study is devoted to outlining and explaining both the intellectual and the diverse social and political dimensions of Ibn Khaldun’s criticisms of contemporary “Sufism”. The first focus of our discussion is his devastating criticism—closely following classical philosophic approaches in the writings of Ibn Sina, Ibn Tufayl and Nasīr al-Dīn Tūsī—of any and all *epistemological* pretensions and corresponding claims to true religious authority in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi and many other Sufi writers. The second, inherently more disparate, subject is his careful indications for the philosophical and learned elite among his readers of the potential *practical* “uses and abuses” of Sufi rhetoric and language in various religious and political contexts, often expressed in contrasting emphases in his discussion of symbolically central historical characters (the Prophet, Umayyads, etc.) and religio-political events. In particular, since much of Ibn Khaldun’s rhetoric in those more practical contexts ostensibly parallels the familiar “traditionalist” language of Ibn Taymiyya and his followers, we have highlighted the radically different political and social motives and ultimate intentions which actually guide Ibn Khaldun’s superficially similar criticisms and often damning “faint praise” in this domain.

#### **EPISTEMOLOGY AS POLITICAL THEOLOGY: KEY FEATURES OF LATER “SUFİ” THOUGHT**

We have placed the words “Sufi” in quotation marks in our title because for the vast majority of even scholarly readers who are not specialists in later Islamic thought, that term is in fact not likely to suggest anything remotely approaching that immense new *specific complex of*

*interrelated intellectual, cultural and socio-institutional forms* which, in the rapidly expanding post-Mongol “East” and “North” of the Islamic world, were typically associated with the extraordinary spread of Islam as a truly world religion. As we can now see in retrospect, those far-reaching historical developments definitively transcended in fundamental ways the earlier, much more exclusively “Arab” (linguistic, cultural and institutional) historical forms and assumptions which still largely determine the depiction of Islamic history and culture throughout Ibn Khaldun’s work. Over the past two decades, growing multi-national research by intellectual and religious historians from the many areas concerned has begun to reveal the central underlying role of the writings of the key figure of Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), as they were developed, systematized and popularized by a host of remarkably creative and lastingly influential theologians, poets, teachers and reformers, in continuing to provide the indispensable intellectual framework and religious justification for this much wider complex of new cultural and social forms.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, those ideas have both reflected and helped to shape the intellectually, culturally and politically dominant self-conceptions of “Islam” among most of the world’s Muslims from the 13<sup>th</sup> on down to at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed nothing could be more alien and fundamentally contrary to *this* history than the familiar symbolism of “decline”, “corruption”, and (negatively understood) “innovation” that has so often shaped the rhetorical presentation—and no doubt the underlying appeal—of Ibn Khaldun’s writings among so many Muslim thinkers from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward.

Since, as we now understand in considerable historical detail, the Mamluk Egypt of Ibn Khaldun’s own time was already profoundly marked by the spectrum of cultural, institutional and religious phenomena increasingly typical of the post-Mongol Islamic world, it is extremely

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<sup>1</sup>The relevant bibliography is so vast, only a few representative titles can be mentioned here. One of most striking and readily accessible illustrations of these phenomena, in the case of Islam in China, is S. Chittick’s *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light...* (Albany, SUNY, 2000), soon to be supplemented by the forthcoming Proceedings of the Kyoto conference (2001) on the *Influences of Ibn ‘Arabi in Asia*, which brings together contributions by most of the scholars actively publishing in this area. (Similar conferences on the ‘legacy of Ibn ‘Arabi’ have been held in recent years in Spain, Morocco, Syria and the UK, reflecting at the very least the growing awareness of the ongoing contemporary significance of the issues and opportunities raised by this debate. One of the broadest and most detailed recent volumes, albeit almost exclusively from the standpoint of other Muslim *critics* of these same developments (mostly in recent centuries, despite its title), is *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. F. de Jong and B. Radtke (Leiden, Brill, 1999). Finally, a readily accessible recent

important not to limit the referents of the word “Sufi” in our title simply to the phenomena of the increasingly powerful “orders” (*turuq*); to the transformations of the poetic, visual and architectural arts reflecting and inspiring the practices and norms of those “Sufis”; nor even to the more pervasive spread of the multiple forms of popular piety, devotion, festivities, endowments and monuments associated with the role of the saintly “friends of God” (the *awliyā*). In many places the educational and politically critical institutions of Islamic learning and law, and the corresponding norms of religious authority, were also being simultaneously transformed—or at the very least, were the scene of an ongoing series of polemics and struggles for domination—which we can now see reflected in the writings and effective political and institutional efforts of such historically influential later figures as Qaysarī, Jāmī, Mullā Sadrā or Shāh Walīullāh. Now if the eventually lasting influences and domination of these new intellectual and cultural interpretations of Islam, which found their primary inspiration for centuries in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi, were not yet clear in Ibn Khaldun’s time, they were certainly prominent enough in the Cairo of his day (and no doubt among the intellectual elite of the Maghreb, as with Ibn al-Khatīb) to form one central target for the ambitious project of intellectual and socio-political reform expressed in his *Muqaddima*.

Against that wider background, it is certainly no accident that so many of the key aims and assumptions of Ibn Khaldun’s project stand out as diametrically opposed to the corresponding positions that were typically closely associated with the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi and his subsequent Muslim interpreters. Now the usual intellectual forum for expressing such differences, within the Islamic tradition, was through learned discussions of epistemology, of how we human beings come to know, and what we can know. Formally speaking, of course, those philosophic discussions—on all sides—always managed to arrive at the mutually agreeable assertion of the reality and primacy of “divine prophecy” and its necessarily “revealed” forms of knowing. But that common formal assertion was simply a polite—and safe—way of underlining each party’s radically different and irreconcilable positions concerning the fundamental ***epistemological and political*** question of true religio-political ***authority***: i.e., of who it was *now*—with no divine prophet present—who could actually and reliably interpret that prophetic legacy in terms of *true* humanly accessible and reliable knowledge. Within that context, and

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study suggesting many of the dimensions of Mamluk popular and learned Sufism attacked by Ibn

against the conflicting claims first of kalām theologians and then of increasingly pressing representatives of spiritual forms of “knowing”, earlier rationalist Muslim philosophers and scientists—most influentially, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Tufayl and Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī—had already composed a well-known series of treatises, whose key ideas and well-worn rhetorical expressions are taken over almost verbatim by Ibn Khaldūn in both the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il* and the *Muqaddima*, designed to demonstrate (i.e., in terms of the norms and procedures of the philosophers) that *only* the intellectual procedures and norms of philosophy could arrive at genuine knowledge—and therefore authoritative interpretation and understanding—of the prophetic legacy. The ways of spiritual purification and asceticism might possibly, in rare cases, coincide with what was knowable philosophically, but again the only reliable and provable way of truly knowing and above all of interpreting and applying such claims was necessarily through the process of philosophical inquiry and reasoning.

In contrast with those familiar philosophic norms accepted and defended by Ibn Khaldun, the underlying models of knowledge, authority, human perfection and the ultimate aims of human endeavor are all radically different in the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī and his later interpreters. Since we cannot realistically assume an extensive knowledge of those positions which are the primary targets of Ibn Khaldun’s intellectual criticism of “Sufism”, it may be helpful to mention summarily a few of the most fundamental points of difference underlying Ibn Khaldun’s critique. Simply listing these points is enough to suggest the profound ways in which the philosophic and religious issues at stake go far beyond disputes about particular aspects of those limited social and institutional forms people today normally associate with “Sufism”. The following list, moreover, is simply for illustrative purposes, and should in no way be taken as an exhaustive description of the religious and philosophic matters involved in this dispute:

- A central emphasis in the thought of Ibn ‘Arabī and his interpreters is on the absolute universality of the processes of human spiritual life and growth rooted in each person’s necessary awareness of the divine “*Signs in the souls and on the horizons*”. While this process certainly involves relative “ranks” of spiritual realization, its universality is radically opposed to the fundamental distinction of demonstrative

knowledge and mere “opinion” which underlies both the epistemology and the political philosophy of Ibn Khaldun and his philosophical predecessors.

- The process of spiritual development, being universal, is also necessarily and unavoidably *individualistic* and hence radically “democratic”, in the modern sense of that term. In other words, that process of ethical and spiritual purification which is central to *Dīn* (this primordial and universal religious process) necessarily involves all people and proceeds by ascending stages whose forms are individualized and particular in each case. Unlike philosophy and science (as Ibn Khaldun understands them), this individualized “knowing” can neither be “taught” nor “transmitted” according to a scholastic model.
- This process is essentially expressed and grounded, like the divine “ever-renewed creation” that underlies it, in an open-ended diversity, multiplicity, and creativity of expressions.
- Within this process, there is a fundamental role—for all human beings—of aesthetic and spiritually ethical modes of perception, whose roots are necessarily within *each* individual, prior to the intellectual, cultural and logical interpretation and manipulation of those perceptions.
- One basic cultural expression of this epistemology is the central spiritual role, as vehicles for spiritual self-discovery and creative expression, of poetry, music, calligraphy and all the related visual arts.
- On a very practical level, the essential human models, exemplars and facilitators of this process of spiritual perfection are “living and accessible”, but most often *immaterial*, “mediator” figures who are either no longer bodily in this physical world (as with the vast majority of the prophets and saints), or who even in their brief bodily time here are often outwardly almost invisible and even ‘failures’ (as Ibn Khaldun frequently points out) by the usual worldly criteria of social, intellectual or political accomplishment, nobility and inheritance. Even more practically and socially, of course, this central understanding of spiritual mediation was reflected in the eventual

profusion of tomb-shrines, pilgrimages (*ziyāra*) and associated rituals and devotional practices throughout the later Islamic world.

- Intrinsic to this process is the necessary co-existence and intrinsic good of an ever-expanding *multitude* of paths, religious “vehicles”, *awliyā*’ and other spiritual guides, and all the consequent social and cultural expressions of the fundamentally creative spiritual virtue (alluding to the famous “hadith of Gabriel”) of *ihsān*: of first perceiving and then actively manifesting what is truly “good-and-beautiful”.
- Within the perspectives opened up by Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of Islam and its wider philosophic underpinnings developed in his later interpreters, it is clear that the role of *tarīqas* or any other particular set of social and cultural forms can only reflect a very limited expression of this wider divine imperative.
- Within the multiple revelations illuminating this universal process, the necessary role of particular historical and cultural forms such as the languages of revelation lies above all in their relatively limited role in allowing the “decipherment” of the divine “prescriptions” transmitted by the prophets. But that decipherment is itself only the beginning of the active, necessarily creative process—and irrevocably *individual* responsibility—of “translating” those prescriptions into their appropriate and spiritually effective expressions.

This brief catalogue may have one other use beyond helping us to grasp the very fundamental issues underlying Ibn Khaldun’s critique of the more philosophic claims of Ibn ‘Arabī and his fellows. For it also may help to explain just why his own extraordinarily creative and challenging writings—with their thoroughgoing articulation and vigorous polemic defense of the “*Arab*” roots and forms of the cultural and intellectual heritage he sought to renew—apparently failed to find even a minimal foothold in those flourishing, prolific “Eastern” centers of post-Mongol Islamic cultural life which were so profoundly shaped in response to the spread and popularization of those radically contrasting ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī we have just outlined here.

## BURNING IBN ‘ARABI’S BOOKS: IBN KHALDUN’S TWOFOLD VIEW OF CONTEMPORARY SUFISM

Ibn Khaldun's profoundly critical attitude toward contemporary Sufi movements, on both the practical, socio-political and theoretical, intellectual planes, is carefully—if somewhat cryptically—summarized in the following *fatwā*:<sup>2</sup>

The path of the so-called Sufis (*mutasawwifa*) comprises two paths. The first is the path of the Sunna, the path of their forefathers (*salaf*), according to the Book and Sunna, imitating their righteous forefathers among the Companions (of the Prophet) and the Followers.<sup>3</sup>

The second path, which is contaminated by (heretical) innovations, is the way of a group among the recent thinkers (*muta’akhhirūn*) who make the first path a means to the removal (*kashf*) of the veil of sensation, because that is one of its results. Now among these self-styled Sufis are Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Sab‘īn, Ibn Barraĵān and their followers among those who traveled their way and worshipped according to their (heretical) sect (*nihla*). They have many works filled with pure unbelief and vile innovations, as well as corresponding interpretations of the outward forms (of scripture and practice) in the most bizarre, unfounded and reprehensible ways—such that one who examines them will be astounded at their being related to religion (*al-milla*) or being considered part of the Sharia.

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<sup>2</sup>Reprinted at the end of M. al-Tanjī's edition of the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il fi Tahdhīb al-Masā’il*, (Istanbul, 1958), pp. 110-11; translated here in its entirety. (Many students of Ibn Khaldun, including al-Tanjī, have placed the composition of this otherwise undated text in the years immediately preceding the first stages of writing the *Muqaddima* and the *K. al-Ibar*.)

<sup>3</sup>Readers who may be struck by the verbal similarity of this passage to Ibn Taymiyya's famous "*salafī*" outlook and criticism of popular Sufism in his time (and to the various permutations of his views in a wide range of modern "reformist" movements) should be cautioned that the resemblance here is simply at a rhetorical level, and that, as we shall see, both the principles and the intentions underlying Ibn Khaldun's criticisms are fundamentally different.

Now the praise of these people by someone is certainly not a proof (of the validity of their views), even if the person praising them has attained whatever excellence he may have attained. For the Book and Sunna are more excellent and a better testimony than anyone.

So as for the legal judgment (*hukm*) concerning these books containing those beliefs which lead (people) astray, and their manuscripts which are found in the hands of the people, such as the *Fusūs al-Hikam* and *al-Futūhāt al-Makkīya* of Ibn ‘Arabī, the *Budd* [*al-‘Arif*] by Ibn Sab‘īn, and Ibn Qasī’s *Khal‘ al-Na‘layn*: the judgment concerning these books and their like is that they should all be eliminated wherever they are found, either through burning them in fire or by washing them with water until all trace of the writing is effaced, because of the general positive benefit (*maslaha*) for Religion through effacing unsound beliefs. Therefore it is incumbent on the public authority (*walī al-amr*) to burn these books in order to eliminate the general cause of corruption (which they constitute), and it is incumbent on whoever is able to do so to burn them.

Now this straightforward legal statement of Ibn Khaldun's position as a Maliki *faqīh*, which also summarizes much of his more popular and practically oriented critique of contemporary Maghrebi Sufism in his relatively early *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*, is not that different from the views later expressed, from a more openly philosophic perspective, throughout his more famous *Muqaddima*. In particular, one can already see here (1) his recurrent basic distinction between the wider *practical* political, social and ethical consequences of various forms of Sufism, and their more *theoretical* literary expressions and justifications; and (2) his acknowledgment of the widespread popular appeal and the powerful or learned contemporary defenders of the different forms of Sufism on both those levels. In fact, it is precisely the interplay of these two basic concerns and considerations that explains both the centrality of his critique of Sufism in the *Muqaddima* and the rhetorical ambiguities and subtleties of expression,

regarding particular Sufis and different dimensions of Sufism, that have often puzzled more recent interpreters of that work.

However, since those modern commentators—usually relying on a superficial reading of a few key passages in the *Muqaddima* concerning prophetic epistemology and angelic or mystical inspiration<sup>4</sup>—have often persisted in considering Ibn Khaldun a Sufi or at least a "sympathizer" with some forms of Sufism, the following passage from that work may be helpful in suggesting its fundamental continuity with the attitude and understanding already evident in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*. This passage is particularly important because it occurs in the middle of the section on kinds of "supernatural" knowledge supposedly outlining his "mystical" epistemology, and thereby beautifully illustrates the biting irony and often sardonic humor with which he so often touches on the characteristic practices and claims of Islamic mysticism:<sup>5</sup>

Among the followers of the Sufis are a group of simple fellows (*bahālīl*) and idiots who resemble the insane more than they do rational people, although despite that they do possess the stages of sainthood (*walāya*) and the states of the righteous saints (*siddīqūn*).... These people do not lack rational souls, nor have they been ruined, as with the insane....

Now you should know that the state of these people is sometimes confused with that of the insane.... But there are distinctive signs by which you can distinguish them: One of them is that these simpletons never stop their *dhikr* and acts of worship (*'ibāda*) at all, although they don't do them according to the legally prescribed conditions. Another distinguishing sign is that they were created idiots from the very first, while insanity befalls (previously healthy people) after part of their life....

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<sup>4</sup>In the sixth prefatory discussion to chapter I and the prefatory sections of chapter VI on human and prophetic knowledge, as well as the corresponding sections of the chapter on Sufism in chapter VI.

<sup>5</sup>Q I 201-202, in the middle of the sixth "prefatory discussion" in the opening chapter. Textual references to the *Muqaddima*, throughout this paper, are to the old edition of E. M. Quatremère (*Prolégomènes d'Ebn Khaldun*, Paris, 1858), followed by volume (I-III) and page numbers; translations are our own.

Ibn Khaldun stresses that "the course of our discussion caused us to insert the preceding section" (i.e., immediately after his discussion of claims to mystical knowledge). The length of this essay does not

Another distinguishing sign is the extensiveness of their activity and influence among men, for both good and bad, because they do not have to depend on (legal) permission, because (legal) responsibility (*taklīf*) does not exist for them; but the insane have no (such) influence."

In light of this revealing passage, Ibn Khaldun's manifold criticisms of Sufism, both in its more popular and learned expressions, can all be understood as efforts to limit what he saw as the damage and negative results of this inevitable "foolish" activity, and to channel its unavoidable popular expressions into what he considered to be a more positive and constructive direction.<sup>6</sup> The following section is therefore devoted to a brief survey of his direct and implicit criticisms of beliefs, practices and religious ideals associated with contemporary Sufi movements. Against that background, we can then go on to explore the apparent contradiction between this typically wide-ranging critical outlook and the supposedly "mystical" elements in his prophetic epistemology, while also considering a few of the earlier attempts at resolving this puzzle. In fact, that contradiction can easily be resolved on the basis of both the clues provided in the *Muqaddima* itself and their historical antecedents in earlier Islamic philosophers. From that philosophic perspective, we can then understand more accurately the actual aims of Ibn Khaldun's critique and the complex interplay between the practical and intellectual facets of his argument and the audiences he was addressing in each case, including the way those aims were also illustrated in what we know of his own life and self-conception. Finally, we have concluded with a few observations concerning the much wider relevance, for all students of the *Muqaddima*, of the rhetorical devices and philosophical intentions illustrated in Ibn Khaldun's multi-faceted criticisms of contemporary Sufism.

### **IBN KHALDUN'S CRITICISMS OF CONTEMPORARY SUFISM:**

The central concern in Ibn Khaldun's critique of contemporary Sufism—just as with his wider critique of other Islamic sciences (e.g., *‘ilm al-kalām*) and educational practices—is in fact

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permit us to quote the passage in full, or to point out the recurrent irony and ambiguities in all of his expressions here.

<sup>6</sup>The forms of public and religious "folly" criticized in the *Muqaddima* are certainly not limited to Sufism (compare, for example, Ibn Khaldun's equally critical portrayal of *‘ilm al-kalām*, or of various educational practices of his day), but it is certainly far more frequently the object of Ibn Khaldun's criticisms than any other Islamic science, sect or interpretive tendency.

nothing less than identifying the truly qualified "authorities" for interpreting and applying the Prophetic legacy: i.e., for interpreting it both with regard to popular religious beliefs and practices, and with regard to its potential implications for human beings' ultimate, intellectual perfection and the repertoire of philosophic sciences and associated methods which Ibn Khaldun took to be necessary for achieving that perfection. Thus Ibn Khaldun's constant focus (explicitly in the *Muqaddima*, and less openly in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*) is on the interplay, in both directions, between what he views as certain dangerous intellectual tendencies in Islamic thought and related wider socio-political developments which can be seen as both "consequences" of and contributing conditions to those unfortunate intellectual movements. That twofold focus is likewise reflected in the central notion of historical "lessons" (*ibar*) in the overall title of his work: those "lessons" are both a form of knowledge *and* knowledge with compelling implications for right action.

Now there can be no doubt that in Ibn Khaldun's time by far the most influential and flourishing competitors with philosophy (as he conceived of it) for this central role as the arbiters and authoritative interpreters of religious revelation, in all the relevant domains, were constituted by Sufi institutions and practices, and by their intellectual expressions and justifications claiming their own philosophic universality and comprehensiveness.<sup>7</sup> It is no accident, then, if so many of Ibn Khaldun's arguments against contemporary Sufism, in all its manifestations, echo Averroes' earlier vigorous philosophic critiques of Ghazālī and kalām.<sup>8</sup> And just as with Averroes'

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<sup>7</sup>Both the passion and the rhetorical centrality of Ibn Khaldun's criticisms of Sufism (whether in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* or the *Muqaddima*) can only be understood against the background of the pervasiveness of "Sufi" themes in both religious literature and practice in his historical milieu. Therefore, as can be seen in many of the illustrations below, the distortions, inaccuracies and omissions in his treatment of Sufism are normally not signs of ignorance of the authors and practices in question, but of certain self-conscious rhetorical (and often polemical) intentions whose critical dimension would be most evident precisely to his contemporary readers well acquainted with the targets of that criticism.

<sup>8</sup>The rhetorical structures of both Averroes' *Decisive Treatise* (with its legalistic presuppositions resembling the procedure of the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*) and his *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* are especially interesting in this regard. (It is important to keep in mind that the science of kalām in Averroes' own intellectual and political situation, given the recent history of Ibn Tūmart—whose ideology was putatively inspired by Ghazālī—and the Almohads, had something of the wider public significance and impact of Sufi writings in Ibn Khaldun's time.)

An even closer analogy can be seen in Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, which revolves around precisely the contrast between the ostensibly "mystical" and rational philosophic understandings of Avicenna's "Oriental Wisdom" and the same intentionally ambiguous treatments of prophetic and

critiques, the fact that Ibn Khaldun often phrases his criticisms in a legalistic form and context should certainly not lead us to view him simply as a "conservative," rigorist defender of the prerogatives and presuppositions of Maliki fiqh, much less of some more radical "traditionalist" (*salafi*) ideal.<sup>9</sup>

The other side of the pervasive spread and influence of Sufi institutions and ideas and their increasing support by political authorities—at least in Ibn Khaldun's Mamluk Egypt<sup>10</sup>—was the considerable sensitivity of direct public attacks on those activities, a point which is already suggested implicitly in the defensive tone of parts of the *fatwā* translated above. Not surprisingly, then, Ibn Khaldun in the *Muqaddima* only rarely alludes openly (as in the long passage quoted above) to what he clearly saw as the tragic waste of scarce public and human resources in the Mamluk support of so many "simpletons" and their dangerously misguided activities. But instead of attempting to convert or suppress such individuals and institutions directly, his critical intentions in the *Muqaddima* are usually conveyed on a more learned, literary level either by allusions to reprehensible "excesses" or "heresies"—especially *Shiite* ones<sup>11</sup>—which the attentive reader could easily apply to contemporary Sufi movements and writings, or by the *pointed omission* or *ironic inversion* of standard Sufi interpretations and citations (especially of hadith or Qur'anic passages favored by Sufi authors) which he could

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mystical epistemology in Avicenna's works which have led to such recurrent misunderstandings of Ibn Khaldun's intentions.

<sup>9</sup>In fact, one could argue that the primary *practical* aim of the *Muqaddima* is not simply a reform of the science of "history", but rather a more fundamental rethinking of the presuppositions and aims of Islamic Law.

<sup>10</sup>Since Ibn Khaldun was apparently writing before the widespread institutionalization of popular "maraboutism" in the Maghreb, the relative openness of his criticisms of Sufism in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* and the *fatwā* cited above may not be unrelated to the relative lack in the Islamic West of a socio-political "establishment" of Sufi institutions and ideas comparable to the situation in Mamluk Egypt. The widespread public support and institutionalization of Sufi thought and practice in Egypt, frequently alluded to in Ibn Khaldun's autobiography and in the *Muqaddima*, is of course substantiated by a wide range of historical sources already for several preceding centuries.

<sup>11</sup>Ghazali's Seljuq-sponsored anti-Fatimid polemic writings and Ibn Taymiyya's anti-Imami/"Mongol" polemics provide two other dramatic and accessible illustrations of this longstanding rhetorical pattern of using ostensibly anti-"Shiite" criticisms—in writings intended for an almost universally Sunni class of learned scholars—as a powerful indirect means of sharply criticizing more familiar and powerful developments in their own respective socio-political milieus. Modern interpreters of Ibn Khaldun have rarely even suggested the pervasiveness of this familiar rhetorical procedure in his *Muqaddima*.

assume to be familiar to most of his educated readers. Those religious and legal scholars who could grasp those allusions and their deeper motivations, Ibn Khaldun seems to have assumed, could also eventually be counted on to help channel the inevitable activity of the mass of "simpletons" in a more positive direction.

Once one becomes aware of this recurrent rhetorical procedure and its underlying principles and presuppositions—all of which are unfortunately almost invisible to modern readers unfamiliar with the work's wider literary and cultural background—it turns out that the *Muqaddima* is permeated by a fascinating play of sardonic humor and irony, of constantly ambiguous, potentially critical expressions in which there are few "chance" or simply "objective" phrases.<sup>12</sup> Thus, as in the representative case of his treatment of Ibn 'Arabi, what may appear to us to be merely innocent "summaries" or uncontroversial historical observations frequently turn out to be intentional misrepresentations or pointedly self-conscious suggestions of "guilt by association" whose rhetorical character—and more immediate practical intentions and motivations—were no doubt readily apparent to most of Ibn Khaldun's educated readers. This is especially evident in his recurrent polemic accusations of "Shiite" influences or tendencies, a handy scapegoat which—quite apart from any question of its historical validity in each case—frequently allows him to criticize indirectly central features or intellectual underpinnings of Sufi movements and activities in his own immediate environment.<sup>13</sup>

#### **IBN KHALDUN'S *DIRECT* CRITICISMS OF SUFISM:**

The relatively open and explicit objects of Ibn Khaldun's critique of contemporary Sufism (or of its ostensibly "Shiite" counterparts) can be summarized under the following five points. In each of these cases (with the partial exception of the third category), it is worth noting that the target of his criticism appears to be much less the "truth" and theoretical validity of the belief or activity in question—whether by traditional religious criteria, or with regard to

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<sup>12</sup>Again, this approach is by no means limited to Ibn Khaldun's treatment of Sufism, and is equally evident in his treatment of subjects relevant to our understanding and application of *fiqh* or *kalām*, for example.

<sup>13</sup>In addition to the earlier Sunni precedents mentioned above, we may note in passing the very similar way later leading Iranian philosophers under the Shiite Safavid dynasty and its successors down to the present day have typically used vehement attacks on the notoriously "Sunni" *mutakallim* Fakhr al-Dīn

demonstrative philosophic norms—than what he implies are the *dangerous practical social and political effects* of such beliefs in the society around him.

(1) One of the most common targets of Ibn Khaldun's criticism is the belief in a “Mahdi” (or other related forms of messianism), typified in his long section (Q II 142-201) debunking both the hadith foundations of that belief and its further development in Shiite and Sufi contexts.<sup>14</sup> The main aim of his criticisms there is not so much the intellectual pretensions underlying that belief, as it is the recurrent political delusions flowing from the popular spread of such ideas among the "common people, the stupid mass", which have led so many Mahdist pretenders—both sincere and fraudulent—into fruitless uprisings and revolts without any hope of successful and lasting political consequences.<sup>15</sup> Typically enough, Ibn Khaldun elsewhere stresses the critical importance of closely related messianic beliefs in the successful political efforts of both Muhammad and the later Fatimid Shiites, and even acknowledges the sincerity and sound ethical intentions of certain Mahdist figures closer to his own time. Clearly his primary intention in such passages—in light of those earlier "successes" and notorious "failures" (as well as his own repeatedly unsuccessful youthful political undertakings)—is to draw the attention of the thoughtful and attentive reader to the indispensable practical, political and intellectual preconditions of any effective and lasting political activity and reforms.

(2) A second basic feature of Ibn Khaldun's critique is his denial, which is more often implicit than explicit (except with regard to Shiism), of the existence of the “Pole” (*qutb*) and

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al-Rāzī as a thinly veiled criticism of comparable outlooks and ideas among the increasingly powerful and intolerant Shiite clergy in their own milieu.

<sup>14</sup>*Muqaddima*, Q II 142-201, summarized at II 171: Such beliefs and deluded actions are all based on "juggling of words, imagined things (*ashyā' takhyīliyya*) and astrological judgments", so that "the lives of the first and the last of them are all wasted in this (nonsense)." Here, even before the separate chapter on Sufism, Ibn Khaldun already attempts to derive all the typical notions of "modern" (contemporary) Sufism from earlier "extremist" Shiism (Q II 164-172), focusing in each case on the common *ideological* function of each religious idea in terms of its popular political implications and effects. Thus, for example, the metaphysics of "union" (*wahda*) is treated here solely as a theological justification for the idea of divine "incarnation" (*hulūl*) ostensibly claimed by the Imams (and presumably by later Sufi saints); the belief in the spiritual hierarchy of the saints (*qutb*, *abdāl* and other *awliyā'*) is related back to Alid claims for the *nuqabā'*; Ali's spiritual superiority to the other Companions is reduced to simply another *political* claim; and the science of letters (*jafr*) and astrology are treated only in light of the usefulness of their "predictions" (whether sincere or simply as propaganda) for political purposes.

<sup>15</sup>See the representative cases cited at Q II 172-176, which so strikingly resemble many more familiar recent "Mahdist" movements throughout the Islamic world.

other members of the spiritual hierarchy,<sup>16</sup> and—what is again more practically important—his constant care to avoid any allusion to the relevance or necessity of living saints or spiritual intermediaries as guides to the awareness and understanding of the ultimate ends of religion and revelation.<sup>17</sup> The absence of any allusion to such widespread claims and associated religious practices is all the more striking in that some such belief seems to have been almost universal in Ibn Khaldun's own society—underlying the public respect, at least in Egypt, for the saints and popularly esteemed "holy men" manifested by most political authorities of the day—, without any necessary contradiction of the authority and competence of the learned scholars of the religious law within their own limited domain. In Ibn Khaldun, this silence cannot be explained by some *salafī*-type abhorrence of "innovation" and fantasized notion of the perfection and eternal adequacy of the outward expressions of the original revelation, since he goes to great pains, in both the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* and the *Muqaddima*, to stress the necessity of a rightly guided historical evolution and adaptation of the revelation in order to realize the concrete, this-worldly "benefits" (*masālih*) intended by the prophetic Lawgiver. The corresponding claims of many charismatic Sufis—or the popularly assumed powers of so many deceased prophets and saints—to provide such guidance and insight in the spiritual realm are not really criticized so much as they are totally, and quite intentionally, *passed over in silence*.

(3) The third recurrent object of Ibn Khaldun's criticism—although here that term is perhaps too mild, in light of the book-burning unambiguously prescribed in his *fatwā* quoted above—are all the philosophizing and intellectual tendencies in later Sufi thought.<sup>18</sup> Not only

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<sup>16</sup>See note 13 above for his repeated references to the supposed "Shiite" and "extremist" (*ghulāt*) origins of such beliefs.

<sup>17</sup>In his discussion of the role of the Sufi shaykh in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*, Ibn Khaldun carefully sticks to the question of the practical need for such an individual guide in maintaining the disciple's psychic equilibrium, and makes no mention at all of any wider social, political or religious functions or authoritative claims of saints or spiritually perfected individuals (apart from the Prophet and Companions).

<sup>18</sup>Q III 65-79, where Ibn Khaldun briefly discusses the—in his view, both philosophically and religiously unsound—intellectual views on ontology and cosmology of "modern" Sufi thinkers and poets (including notably the famous Egyptian mystical poet Ibn al-Fārid), in light of both scientific knowledge and "sound" religious belief. His summary division here into Sufi schools of divine "Self-manifestation" (*tajalli*) and "Union" (*wahda*) may also allude to Ibn Taymiyya's earlier critiques of many of the same "modern" Sufis. As in the *fatwā* quoted at the beginning of this essay, he carefully distinguishes in this passage the irreparable *intellectual* and theological errors of these writers from the politically more useful, or at least tolerable, *practical* and pietistic aspects of Sufi "folly."

does he carefully avoid quoting any of those influential works directly, although their more poetic and popular religious expressions were almost certainly familiar to all his educated readers, but the terms in which he does allude to them (and to their authors, such as Ibn ‘Arabi) are carefully designed to dissuade any reader who might otherwise be tempted to find them intellectually and philosophically interesting. In this particular case, at least, Ibn Khaldun's hostility and thoroughgoing misrepresentation can hardly be explained simply by the supposed practical dangers and implications of such recondite texts. Rather, he goes out of his way to avoid the suggestion of any intellectual, philosophic alternative to his own Peripatetic ontological and epistemological premises which are repeatedly presented throughout the *Muqaddima*, and in summary form at the beginning of the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*.

(4) A fourth basic feature of Ibn Khaldun's treatment of Sufism involves his repeated emphatic discussion of it (and especially of later, relatively contemporary Sufī writers) in the context of magic, astrology and sorcery—i.e., either of deluded prediction of future events or of external, this-worldly wonders or miracles worked by saints and holy men. Again, what is practically most important here is not whether Ibn Khaldun really thinks that all such "supernatural" phenomena are in fact frauds, products of chance, or the result of sound practical wisdom and insight.<sup>19</sup> What is really crucial, as with the preceding point, is what is left out: i.e., the unsuspecting reader is intentionally left with the highly misleading impression that such activities are in fact central aims and practices of Sufism or at least somehow encouraged and justified by later Sufī writings, while the author could easily have cited hundreds of Sufī works

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It is worth noting that his intellectual criticism of these "moderns" and their dangerous confounding of religious beliefs and philosophy is paralleled by his equally vociferous, if perhaps slightly more subtle, attacks (following Averroes) on any intellectual pretensions of post-Ghazalian *kalām* in the immediately preceding section of chapter VI. The order of presentation and the historical analysis offered here strongly suggest that he—like Ibn Tufayl and Averroes before him—considered Ghazālī (through his monumental *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*) largely responsible for the subsequent spread and eventual respectability of these later Sufī mixtures of philosophy and theology in Sunni Islam.

<sup>19</sup>In fact, Ibn Khaldun, following Avicenna's classical philosophic treatment of such questions in the closing chapters of his *Ishārāt*, does go out of his way to eliminate both the necessity and even the possibility of any "supernatural" explanations of such activities, while stressing the great *political* importance of popular *belief* in them. Note the typical illustration of his biting ironic discussion of the "mystical unveiling" (*kashf*) of Ja‘far al-Sādiq in accurately foreseeing the failure of Alid uprisings against the Umayyads (at Q II 184); or his sarcastic remark at Q II 246 that astrologers "only give us the celestial cause for that, but they have yet to give us the *earthly* reason—which is what we've just mentioned concerning...."

(including especially the particular "heretical" books explicitly condemned in his own *fatwā*) criticizing such pretensions and bringing out the true aims and presuppositions of the spiritual life as developed at length in the Qur'an and hadith. Again, there is no sign that Ibn Khaldun's stress on this aspect of Sufism and popular religious belief is motivated by any salafi-like desire to "reform" Islamic spirituality by eliminating such popular and magical innovations. Instead, what is eliminated here—no doubt quite successfully—is any suspicion of an intellectually and philosophically serious alternative to Ibn Khaldun's own understanding of Islamic philosophy and religion.

(5) A final recurrent theme in Ibn Khaldun's criticism of contemporary Sufism (and in fact the central theme in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*) is its supposed development of ways of life and practices involving a dangerous departure from what he portrays as the unreflective, active piety of the original Muslim community and—most importantly for his own time—its alleged separation of conscientious religious and ethical life from active participation in the wider socio-economic and political life of society. This dangerous separation is typified, for him, by such typical later Sufi practices as *dhikr* and *samā'* (as opposed to supererogatory prayer and Qur'an recitation), initiation (the *khirqā*) and the initiatic role of the Sufi shaykhs (again accused of Shiite origins), and the institutionalization of Sufi centers and foundations (*khānegahs*, *zāwiyas*, tomb-shrines of and pilgrimage centers for saintly figures, etc.). Once again, a closer look at Ibn Khaldun's discussions of such "innovations" reveals that it is not really the religious departure from the unreflective, active piety of the Companions that he is criticizing—since he gives cogent natural and historical reasons why such social and ethical differentiation had to take place in any case—but rather the much more practical and down-to-earth consequences of diverting substantial societal and human resources to the pointless, imaginary distractions and pastimes of such large groups of "simpletons," and the perhaps even more debilitating long-range consequences of their attempting to lead a moral and religious life somehow separate from what they allegedly viewed as the "corrupting" sphere of political and military power and authority.

#### **IBN KHALDUN'S INDIRECT CRITICISMS OF SUFISM:**

With regard to each of these criticisms, however, what is even more striking in Ibn Khaldun's treatment of Sufism (whether "early" or "later") and its underpinnings in the Qur'an and hadith is precisely what he does *not* mention: i.e., his careful, often pointedly ironical

omission of the fundamental scriptural themes and passages which were popularly understood to support the typically Sufi (and often more generally Islamic) forms of contemporary spiritual practice and interpretation, and his equally specific focus on the things Muhammad and his Companions said and did which can instead be explained entirely in terms of political leadership and insight, practical wisdom and exclusively *this-worldly* ends. The following is only a representative selection of a few such important passages from the *Muqaddima*, concentrating on examples clearly involving implicit criticism of key contemporary Sufi tenets or practices.

The first, and perhaps the most ironic illustration of this typical rhetorical device occurs at the very beginning of the book, in Ibn Khaldun's invocation of the Prophet as "...him for whose birth *the existing world* was in labor before...."<sup>20</sup> In this single brief phrase—which the unsuspecting reader might initially tend to take as a stock allusion to the common Sufi belief in the pre-eternity of the "Muhammadan Reality"<sup>21</sup> or Perfect Human Being (*al-insān al-kāmil*)—Ibn Khaldun actually manages to insist on both the normal humanity of Muhammad and, more importantly, on what he understands to be the fundamental philosophic thesis of the eternity and stable, causally determined structure of the present world-order, which is the essential basis of the rest of his new science and of the philosophic sciences in general. For the philosopher, what he says here is of course *equally* true of each and every natural being in that world order, by no means just Muhammad!

A similarly trenchant irony is evident in Ibn Khaldun's striking claim near the beginning of his book (Q I 66) that "God inspired us with this (new science) through divine inspiration (*ilhāman*), and He led us (in discovering and presenting it)," an assertion no doubt ironically echoing the widespread claim of many Sufis—perhaps most influentially in the key writings of Ibn 'Arabi—to special divine inspiration and validation for their works and spiritual insights. However, Ibn Khaldun's own philosophic understanding of the very different (i.e., true and false!) forms of "inspiration" in question, following Avicenna, is gradually made clearer in his

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<sup>20</sup>Q I 2; emphasis ours.

<sup>21</sup>As expressed in such widely circulated hadith—both in Sufi circles and in popular Islamic literature more generally—as "Were it not for you (Muhammad), I [God] would not have created the spheres" (*lawlāka...*) and "I [Muhammad] was a prophet while Adam was between water and clay". The most extensive Sufi development of this idea is of course to be found throughout the works of Ibn 'Arabi,

*Muqaddima* (see our discussion of his epistemology below), until he himself stresses the universality and practical necessity of this sort of extremely *non*-mystical "inspiration" (i.e., as the source of middle terms in *all* human reasoning) for all scientific inquiry, at III 256-257.

Even more evident—and likewise emphasized already in the opening invocation of the book (Q I 2)—is Ibn Khaldun's single-minded focus on the factors of political success and group solidarity in Muhammad's prophecy. Among other things, that focus leads him to pass over in absolute silence the extensive body of Qur'anic verses and hadith stressing Muhammad's (and other prophets' and saints') special "closeness" (*qurba*) to God and all the related spiritual virtues and realization which, in the prevailing Sufi conception, formed the common bond between the prophets and the *awliyā'* (the "saints" or "Friends of God"), and which constituted the spiritual hierarchy of the *awliyā'* as the authoritative spiritual interpreters of the Prophetic legacy in the Muslim community.<sup>22</sup>

Not only does Ibn Khaldun studiously ignore the comprehensive presence of such themes throughout the Qur'an and hadith, but he even repeatedly goes out of his way to explain away apparent criticisms of this world and the quest for political authority by Muhammad and the early Imams (Q I 364-367; Q II 107), focusing instead on a solitary and unusual hadith insisting that "God sent no prophet who did not enjoy the protection of [or: wealth among] his people."<sup>23</sup> Passing over in silence the host of extremely well-known hadith suggesting the contrary and the multitude of Qur'anic (not to mention other scriptural and historical) references to prophets and saints—Muhammad included—who were rejected and despised precisely *by* their own people,

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whose writings—condemned to public burning in Ibn Khaldun's *fatwā* quoted at the beginning of this essay—served as the basis for most subsequent elaborations of this theme.

<sup>22</sup>Ibn Khaldun takes up the connection of *qurba* and *walāya* only once and very briefly in his section on Sufism—without any reference to the Prophet at all—and there carefully avoids mentioning any metaphysical or spiritual significance of such notions.

<sup>23</sup>The same rare hadith is repeated *three more times* at I, 168, 268, 364! The powerful and indeed often intentionally shocking effect of Ibn Khaldun's use and personal selection of hadith throughout his *Muqaddima* can only be appreciated in light of what is in fact the overwhelming denigration of attachment to this world and to the pursuit of power and wealth in it throughout the Qur'an and the canonical hadith collections, not to mention the central elaboration of those same spiritual themes in later Sufi tradition.

Ibn Khaldun repeatedly reminds his readers of those recurrent factors which visibly do account for the worldly *political* success or failure of *any* "prophet" or would-be leader and reformer.<sup>24</sup>

Another particularly significant case of this typical ironic approach to the widespread Sufi understanding of key hadith and Qur'anic passages—both in what Ibn Khaldun openly emphasizes and in what he fails to mention—is his peculiar use of the famous hadith that begins: "I was given six things (not given to any prophet before me)...."<sup>25</sup> What is important in its wider polemic context is not simply that Ibn Khaldun mentions *only one* of those six things, the *jawāmi' al-kalim* (which he pointedly takes to refer only to Muhammad's effectively unmatched Arabic rhetorical gifts and influence), but that his interpretation is again an unmistakable and absolute rejection of Ibn 'Arabi's theory of the "Muhammadan Reality" as the eternal spiritual totality of the noetic divine "Words" manifested in the various prophets (and saints), both in its intellectual expressions and in its far-reaching practical spiritual consequences.

The purpose of religious Law, Ibn Khaldun insists (at Q I 352) is "not to provide blessings," but rather to promote specific (this-worldly) public interests (*masālih*), which, as a jurist, he takes pain to identify concretely in this and many other instances of Prophetic prescriptions. His major argument for the superiority of religious laws over "governmental, restraining laws" (at Q II 126-128) has to do purely and simply with their practical efficacy, without any mention of their spiritual or other-worldly ends: they are more effective because of the popular belief in posthumous rewards and punishments, and because of their "more

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<sup>24</sup>In fact, the same criteria of political, worldly success are explicitly applied to saints and religious figures as to would-be political reformers in general: e.g., at Q I 286-290, with regard to Ibn Qasī and other religious reformers, as well as "deluded" Berbers claiming to be the Mahdi; at Q I 390-391, Ibn Khaldun stresses that the same (politico-religious) "delusions" were shared by Husayn, in his attitude toward Yazīd. In contrast, Ibn Khaldun never even mentions the fundamental religious conception (shared by Sufis and many other Muslim groups) that the properly religious function of saints and other spiritual guides—quite apart from their visible reforms and political aims—lies in their witnessing, often precisely through their "lost causes", to the reality of the immortality of the soul and the afterlife, thereby pointing to the eternal importance of caring properly for the soul despite all worldly temptations and obstacles.

<sup>25</sup>This hadith is quoted and commented repeatedly by Sufis such as Ibn 'Arabi, and was no doubt at least vaguely familiar (in that context) to most of Ibn Khaldun's educated readers. The same sort of heavy irony is of course constantly present in Ibn Khaldun's characteristic exclusively this-worldly use, throughout the *Muqaddima*, of Qur'anic verses usually understood in a spiritual and other-worldly manner, even without reference to any explicitly "Sufi" framework of interpretation.

comprehensive" popular inculcation as an unconscious moral habitus, rather than through each individual's rational calculation or fear.

A particularly important and revealing passage (at Q I 403-404) is Ibn Khaldun's admission that some "men mentioned in Qushayrī's *Risāla*" may be considered among the true "heirs" of the Prophet alluded to in the famous hadith that "the learned (‘*ulamā*’) are the heirs of the prophets." Now later Sufī writers and apologists, including Ibn ‘Arabi, had gone to great lengths to show that the genuine Sufī saints (*awliyā*’), and not the knowledgeable legal scholars, were the "learned" heirs in question. So the inattentive reader could easily take Ibn Khaldun's reference to Qushayrī here (and in a similar passage earlier in the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*) as a defense of that central Sufī claim.<sup>26</sup> But in fact, a moment's attention to the larger context of this statement in the *Muqaddima* makes it clear that (a) he is actually praising only the Companions' and early Muslims' restricting their "religion" simply to unreflective practice, a pure moral *habitus* (without any deeper claim to universal spiritual or theoretical knowledge); and (b) the *habitus* he describes has little or nothing to do with particularly "spiritual" virtues or corresponding practices, but a great deal to do with the communal qualities and powerful “group feeling” (‘*asabīya*’: definitely not in *any* Qur’anic or other traditional list of spiritual virtues!) that help explain the worldly political success of the early Arab-Islamic community.

In order to drive this point home and dispel any possible pietistic and spiritual misconceptions of the explicitly non-spiritual "virtues" he has in mind, Ibn Khaldun repeatedly chooses to cite the father of al-Hajjāj Ibn Yūsuf (at Q I 46-48 and 231-232) as a model of this peculiar sort of internalized religious "knowledge." Once again, the ironic significance of this particular illustration can only be grasped against the background of the widespread popular (and by no means exclusively Sufī) conception of al-Hajjāj—whose life and successful political activity does exemplify many of the practical political insights at the heart of Ibn Khaldun's concern—as something of an exemplar of the unbridled injustice and arbitrary cruelty that had come to be popularly associated in Islamic learned traditions (not without some reason!) with

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<sup>26</sup>Likewise, three further references to "men mentioned by Qushayrī", in the chapter on Sufism (at Q III 64, 67, and 79), all turn out to be thinly veiled criticisms of fundamental concerns and presuppositions of contemporary Sufism—as indeed of many of the later renowned Sufi saints mentioned by Qushayrī as well!

almost all ruling political authorities. This is indeed one of the more recognizably ‘Machiavellian’ passages in the entire *Muqaddima*.

Another especially revealing passage is Ibn Khaldun's treatment (at Q II 96ff.) of the central Islamic theme of injustice (*zulm*), which he carefully and pointedly restricts to the political actions and consequences of rulers, going out of his way to deny the legal applicability of this concept to other individuals. Not only does he pass over the repeated Qur’anic discussions of "injustice" precisely with regard to each human *soul's relation to itself*, which is one of the fundamental bases of spiritual practice, whether Sufi or otherwise. But his discussion of the supposed lack of religious "detering punishments" for that sort of unseen, inner psychic injustice in Islamic law even more revealingly leaves out of account the whole central Qur’anic question of our rewards and punishments—precisely for such inner, socially invisible "actions"—in the next world. Indeed Ibn Khaldun's continuous studied *silence* on the eschatological, post-mortem dimensions of the soul and human being<sup>27</sup> certainly goes to the heart of his repeated criticisms of later Sufism and the broadly Neoplatonic philosophic currents with which Sufi philosophizing (like much Shiite spiritual thought) was often associated.

Ibn Khaldun's discussion of singing and music (Q II 352-361) as the “*last*” craft to develop in civilization—rather than as one of the primordial expressions and realizations of humanity’s spiritual nature and origin—is again a most revealing sign not so much of any religio-legalistic opposition to music or its "innovative" uses in Sufi practice,<sup>28</sup> as of a more essential philosophic deafness to realms of meaning and *cognitive* dimensions of beauty or harmony (whether musical or otherwise) which did not easily fit into his own conception of philosophy, but which—as was highlighted in our initial summary of key points in the thought of

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<sup>27</sup>I.e., as actual realities, and not simply (as at Q II 126-128, and more generally, wherever he discusses this subject) as *popular beliefs*, on the level of imagination (not of genuine knowledge), reinforcing the deterrent functions of this-worldly rewards and punishments and encouraging the popular practice of and obedience to established religious precepts.

<sup>28</sup>While Ibn Khaldun has failed to include a separate chapter on music in his discussion of the quadrivium (among the philosophic sciences), there is no indication that his omission in this case flows from any particular religio-legal position against music as such. Of course, as illustrated by Ibn Taymiyya's attacks on the Sufi practice of *samā'*, among others, there were plenty of deeply rooted traditional legal precedents for such criticisms of music (as for similar religio-ethical criticisms of Arabic poetry, which he also carefully avoids mentioning), if he had wished to emphasize that particular point.

Ibn 'Arabī and his interpreters—constituted one of the central appeals of Sufi thought and metaphysics in both its speculative and more poetical, popular expressions.

Finally, Ibn Khaldun's pervasive hostility to Sufism extends even to his ostensibly "aesthetic" judgments on Arabic mystical poetry, as in his remark (at Q III 339) that "to the degree that a poem gets closer to nonsense, it is further from the level of eloquence, since they are two extremes. Because of this [i.e., *because it is nonsense*] poetry on divine and prophetic matters (*rabbāniyyāt wa nubuwwāt*) is generally not very accomplished." This is also, he goes on to add, because it deals with commonplaces "spread among the masses (*al-jumhūr*)." Here it is interesting that his criticisms about the "triteness" of such poems and their "lack of sense" really translate his own attitude toward their *contents*, rather than their aesthetic qualities, since such criteria would in fact apply much more strongly to most of the Arabic poetical genres he goes on to discuss at such length and often with informed passion. Again, we may note his careful avoidance of even citing such Arabic mystical poetry in this literary section, although it was probably far more influential in popular religious devotional practice than the learned Sufi treatises he wanted to have burned.<sup>29</sup>

#### THE APPARENT "CONTRADICTION": IBN KHALDUN'S PROPHETIC EPISTEMOLOGY

In light of the pervasive presence of this critical reaction to contemporary Sufism throughout the *Muqaddima*, what is no doubt most surprising is not that a few modern writers have persisted in presenting Ibn Khaldun as a "Sufi" or mystical sympathizer—a view which at least does have a certain textual basis in his work—but rather that so many modern commentators have treated the entire subject of Sufism as at best only a marginal detail, limited

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<sup>29</sup>The only mention of particular Arabic mystical poets at all is the brief, disdainful allusion to Ibn al-Fārid and two other more minor figures (including Ibn 'Arabi's student al-Tilimsānī) at Q III 69 and 72, in the context of Ibn Khaldun's general dismissal—closely echoing Ibn Taymiyya—of the heretical, "crypto-Shiite" notions of pantheistic "union" and "incarnation" supposedly permeating their works. (It is difficult to know whether or not this relative silence is a concession to—or at least an indirect acknowledgement of—the widespread popularity in Cairo of a poet like Ibn al-Fārid.)

Apart from this one exception, it is remarkable that Ibn Khaldun, in his long discussion of Arabic poetry, does seem largely to abandon the characteristic combination of religious and philosophic categories applied to all the other preceding Islamic and Arabic arts and sciences in favor of more autonomous (and adequate) aesthetic and descriptive criteria. This is worth noting, also, because the philosophic commentaries of Averroes, for example, did offer him a model of a more vigorously ethical,

to the handful of sections explicitly devoted to that subject. Of course, just as with the similarly widespread neglect of the fundamental place of classical Islamic philosophy in all of Ibn Khaldun's work (despite the comprehensive study of that dimension by Muhsin Mahdi), this oversight can be only explained by a more general historical ignorance, in this case, of the central socio-political role of "Sufi" conceptions and practices in the understanding of Islam throughout all levels of Islamic society, from the Maghreb to southeast and central Asia, during Ibn Khaldun's time—an ignorance largely due to the radically different social and intellectual problematic assumed by most modern Muslim thinkers encountering Ibn Khaldun. But if, as we are suggesting, the *Muqaddima* must largely be understood as a complex, ongoing debate between the very different opposing conceptions of Islam—on all the relevant levels of theory and practice—implied by Ibn Khaldun's own Aristotelian philosophy and by the more influential Sufi thinkers (such as Ibn 'Arabī) whose works he wished to eliminate, then one can only wonder what is left when *neither* side of that primary discussion is adequately taken into account.

In any event, some more attentive readers have at least remarked on the apparent contradiction between the recurrent criticisms of contemporary Sufism which we have noted in Ibn Khaldun's *fatwā*, parts of the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* and most of the *Muqaddima*—a thoroughly critical attitude which is fully corroborated by what we know of his life and autobiography—and what would initially seem to be a quite positive appreciation and acceptance of mystical and prophetic spiritual knowledge, apparently going “beyond” what can be known by purely rational and demonstrative means, in the two complementary discussions of prophetic epistemology and its ontological underpinnings at the beginning of Chapters I and VI of the *Muqaddima*. Now it is important to stress that the contradiction here, if one reads these epistemological sections in a naive and uninformed way, is really quite glaring and unavoidable. It is not just a sort of personal moral or practical inconsistency, as though Ibn Khaldun (like so many other religious and philosophic thinkers) had himself simply failed to carry out in his own life something which he had allowed in theory. In fact, on the one hand he does clearly seem to suggest the wider possibility of some kind of supra-rational inspired knowledge and spiritual "unveiling" (*kashf*), while on the other hand he misses no occasion to combat any and every theoretical claim and

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political and rhetorical approach to Arabic poetry, which Ibn Khaldun had in fact applied to other

practical attempt to realize and act on claims to such privileged spiritual knowledge. Before going on to outline a more adequate interpretation of these passages and their intentions, it may be helpful to examine briefly two earlier detailed attempts at actually resolving this seeming contradiction.<sup>30</sup>

Miya Syrier, in a long article on "Ibn Khaldun and Islamic Mysticism,"<sup>31</sup> attempted a chronological explanation of the problem, based in part on a study of the different recensions of the *Muqaddima*. Ibn Khaldun's intellectual interest in Sufi thought and his "undeniable leanings toward Absolute Monism," according to this theory, came mainly later in his life, during his stay in Egypt, and therefore remained largely on the theoretical plane. Apparently he did not have the time or sufficient motivation to carry out that interest in practice or in an appropriate revision of the earlier, more rationalistic and Aristotelian views which (the author admits) are also so evident in other parts of his work. There is no sign that this commentator was even aware of the complex and intentionally ambiguous traditional treatment of these questions by Avicenna and Tūsī (and among earlier Islamic philosophers more generally) which provided the immediate background for Ibn Khaldun's discussions of prophetic and mystical epistemology.<sup>32</sup>

Eric Chaumont's subsequent thesis on the *Shifā' al-Sā'il* and Ibn Khaldun's "critique of philosophy"<sup>33</sup> developed an even more radical position. Systematically taking issue with the

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(especially religious) forms of Arabic literature in a number of earlier passages.

<sup>30</sup>Alexander Knysh, in chapter 7 ("Ibn 'Arabī in the Muslim West") of his *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1999) deals in greater detail with the case of Ibn Khaldun's famous friend and mentor, the Granadan vizier Ibn al-Khatīb, stressing the concrete political dangers associated with contemporary Sufi movements and writing in the Maghreb. While that political context does vividly illustrate Ibn Khaldun's criticisms of the popular effects of Sufi ideas (already discussed above), we find little evidence that those particular events somehow led Ibn Khaldun to adopt an attitude of prudential concealing of his real positive interest in Sufi thought, as Prof. Knysh sometimes seems to suggest.

<sup>31</sup>*Islamic Culture* 21 (1947), pp. 264-302. (The essay does not deal directly with the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*.)

<sup>32</sup>See the epistemological discussions below.

<sup>33</sup>Summarized in "La voie du soufisme selon Ibn Khaldūn: présentation et traduction du prologue et du premier chapitre du *Shifā' al-Sā'il*," *Révue philosophique du Louvain* 87 (1989), pp. 264-296. Some of the author's main ideas were more briefly developed in an earlier "Note" on "Ibn Khaldūn et al-Ghazālī: *Fiqh* et *Tasawwuf*" published in *Studia Islamica* LXIV (1986), pp. 151-157. This work is cited here only as perhaps the most extreme and elaborate version of what remains still probably the most common description of Ibn Khaldun's approach to both Sufism and Islamic philosophy in most popular

arguments and broader interpretations of Muhsin Mahdi,<sup>34</sup> he maintained that Ibn Khaldun, like Ghazali, was in fact a Sufi and devout Muslim believer who totally rejected all the claims and approaches of the Islamic philosophers; hence his "refutation of the philosophers" in chapter VI of the *Muqaddima* is to be taken in a literal and absolute sense. In this view, any apparent traces of a philosophic outlook in the *Muqaddima* have to do only with the narrower heuristic assumptions of historical science, but Ibn Khaldun personally believed in the superiority of Islamic revelation and spiritual inspiration on all planes, going beyond what could ever be given by philosophy in every respect. Needless to say, the thoughtful reader is left wondering why this Ibn Khaldun apparently failed to act on his own supposedly positive view of Sufism, why he devoted so much energy to actually criticizing Sufism in virtually all its contemporary manifestations, and why he demonstrated such a great interest in the repeated, and usually quite positive, restatement of the far-reaching claims, premises and methods of the Islamic philosophers throughout the *Muqaddima* (and indeed already in summary form in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*).

Our own hypothesis is that these apparent contradictions can be readily resolved in light of what Ibn Khaldun himself assumes—and carefully explains in many other places in his *Muqaddima*—concerning (1) the basic distinction between the distinctively human *theoretical*, speculative understanding (with its corresponding sciences and intellectual methods) and the manifold *practical* and deliberative functions of reason; and (2) the necessarily complex relations between the latter and the universal political and ethical functions of "revelation" with regard to grounding belief and practice of the religious Law.<sup>35</sup> In fact, as illustrated in the following section, the resolution of this contradiction also clearly reveals the essential interconnection between the explicit "theoretical" contributions and clarifications provided by Ibn Khaldun's new

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and historical discussions of the *Muqaddima*, including those in most historical surveys of Islamic philosophy.

<sup>34</sup>Most elaborately developed in his *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*, (Chicago, 1957), still the most thorough and profound study of Ibn Khaldun's thought and intentions in the *Muqaddima*.

<sup>35</sup>The best summary account of these fundamental issues is to be found in the two related articles by M. Mahdi in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif, (Wiesbaden, 1963), pp. 888-904 and 961-984; detailed documentation of those perspectives in the *Muqaddima* itself is to be found throughout the same author's book-length study cited in the preceding note.

science of society in the *Muqaddima* and the more problematic question of the practical aims and motivations of those reforms.

However, the possibility of resolving those apparent contradictions, as Ibn Khaldun himself points out, also depends on two or three basic abilities or predispositions which were certainly not shared by all of his potential readers. The first of these is close attention to the seven valid reasons which he carefully outlines for why someone would ever bother to write a *scientific* book in the first place.<sup>36</sup> The second key ability, and certainly the most important, is what he describes as the distinctively human ability to think "several steps ahead",<sup>37</sup> an ability which is certainly required if one is to grasp the reasons underlying the many apparent contradictions or non-sequiturs which are intentionally spread throughout the *Muqaddima*, on virtually every page. And the indispensable third factor, at least for readers who would want to pursue the multiple suggestions in the *Muqaddima* concerning the true intellectual perfection of human beings, would be some acquaintance with the writings of earlier Islamic philosophers,<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Q III 242-248 (ch. VI, section 32). This section opens with a critically important reiteration of the Aristotelian epistemology underlying Ibn Khaldun's understanding of the universality and uniformity of the philosophic sciences and the reasons for the contrasting diversity of the religious and historical sciences. (The clearest earlier exposition of these principles is at Q II 385-386.) While Ibn Khaldun's illustrations of these sound reasons for writing a scientific work are taken from non-philosophic, religious literatures, all of his first six reasons are directly applicable to his own justifications and motivations for composing the *Muqaddima* and, more revealingly, to his understanding of this "new science" in its relation to the pre-existing philosophic sciences and Arabic historiography.

However, perhaps the most important point in this section, with regard to Ibn Khaldun's critique of Sufism (and more particularly of Sufi literature, both doctrinal and poetic) is his concluding forceful insistence (at Q III, 247-248, *repeated three times* in a few lines, and attributed to the ultimate scientific authority of Aristotle) that "everything else...is ignorance and impudence" involving either "exchanging what is untrue for what is true, or bringing in what is useless"—clearly "going astray from the path set out by the inquiry (*nazar*) of the truly intelligent (*al-'uqalā*)."

<sup>37</sup>Q II 367 (ch. VI, sections 1-2). This short discussion of the distinctively "human power to think"—even more concisely summarized at the beginning of the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*—is in fact the key to Ibn Khaldun's treatment of all the different "sciences" (including speculative, dogmatic Sufism), and ultimately to the structure and intentions of the entire *Muqaddima*.

<sup>38</sup>The critical link for Ibn Khaldun's knowledge of Avicenna and the rationalistic (and often political) conceptions of Tūsī was almost certainly his own master in philosophy, al-Ābilī. See the brief discussion by N. Nassar, "Le Maître d'Ibn Khaldūn: al-Ābilī," in *Studia Islamica* XX (1964), pp. 103-114. That article contains some suggestive ideas on Ābilī's possible influence on Ibn Khaldun's radical pedagogical reforms and criticisms developed in ch. VI of the *Muqaddima*, and points to the importance of Ibn Khaldun's youthful *Lubāb al-Muhassal*—since Rāzī's *K. al-Muhassal* was a central target of Tūsī's philosophical polemics—but without analyzing the latter work. What is decisive here (apart from the other references to Ābilī's mastery of the philosophic sciences) is Ibn Khaldun's own indication (in his

and especially Avicenna, Averroes and Naṣīr al-Dīn Tūsī.<sup>39</sup> Readers who approached the *Muqaddima* without all three of these essential prerequisites—a group probably including the

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description of that teacher in his autobiography) that Ābilī actually spent years in the company of masters of the Avicenna-Tūsī tradition in Kerbala. (This can be contrasted further with Ibn Khaldun's account in the *Muqaddima*, Q II 378, of the way Rāzī's works reached the Maghreb, through the Tunisian religious scholar Ibn Zaytūn (d. 691/1292) and his students.)

With regard to the subject of this essay, Ibn Khaldun's most important indication of the decisive importance of Tūsī and Avicenna—and of the critical, political focus of the *Ishārāt* as read and understood within this Eastern philosophic tradition—is in an "aside" in his description of one of his childhood teachers in his autobiography [*al-Ta'rif bi-Ibn Khaldūn wa Rihlatihi Gharban wa Sharqan*, ed. M. al-Tanjī, (Cairo, 1370/1951), pp. 62-63]. This section—which also stresses the important role of both Avicenna's *Shifā'* and the Aristotelian commentaries of Averroes in the general philosophic teaching of al-Ābilī—mentions how one of his most accomplished students, who already "had a perfect knowledge of the *Ishārāt*" and the other works of Avicenna and Averroes once studied "the section on Sufism [= the final chapters of that work]" from that work with the famous chief Qadi of Tunis, but only "*alone with him in his house.*" Ibn Khaldun's stress on the extraordinary secrecy surrounding this study—which would have been pointless if those two famous concluding chapters were understood as simply another apologetic for by then widespread Sufi claims and practices—becomes much more understandable when one is aware of the actual focus of Tūsī's commentary on these sections of the *Ishārāt*, which takes up extremely delicate questions of the political nature, aims and methods of "prophecy" (understood in an explicitly universal manner) and the "imaginary" nature (and political functions) of religious beliefs in the afterlife, and which also understands the apparently "Sufi" language of those concluding chapters in the strictly rationalistic, ethico-political context provided by the earlier chapters and the rest of Avicenna's technical works.

<sup>39</sup>Tūsī's philosophical writings are almost certainly the major immediate philosophic "source" or predecessor for Ibn Khaldun's understanding of Islamic philosophy and its relation with the religious sciences (including Sufism). The key work in this domain (see the preceding note) was Tūsī's highly influential, lengthy commentary on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*, which is in fact constructed as a careful, point-by-point refutation of what he considers the repeated theological abuses of Avicennan thought by the *mutakallim* Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. (Tūsī himself, writing at the end of his tumultuous life, refers to this as his major life's work, and one he had continued to perfect for more than 40 years.) There one finds clearly and explicitly stated virtually all the major themes in Ibn Khaldun's rationalistic, distinctively *political* understanding of prophecy (and of the supposedly "mystical" passages in Avicenna), usually developed through his polemic against Rāzī. While there was also an ongoing later Eastern Islamic literature of "adjudications" (*muhākamāt*) of this fundamental quarrel between philosophy and theology, Ibn Khaldun's own personal opinion is no doubt expressed in his pointed remark (at Q III 274) that Tūsī was *better than any other* later Iranian scholar.

Ibn Khaldun's great philosophic esteem for Tūsī (despite his lifelong Shiite affiliations and key political role under the Mongol invaders, which is sufficient to explain the lack of other open references in the *Muqaddima*)—along with his fierce disdain for Rāzī's attempted "replacement" of Islamic philosophy by *kalām*, which comes out most openly in the section of chapter VI on theology—is most clearly stated (with a typically "Khaldunian" ironic use of the Qur'an) at Q III 117: "Tūsī...disputed many topics with the Imam (Rāzī, and he more perfectly resolved his inquiries and disputes, for '*above everyone with knowledge there is a true knower*' (12:76)!"

This same passage of the *Muqaddima* (at III 117, in the brief section on the Aristotelian "physical sciences") also has a crucially revealing statement of Ibn Khaldun's understanding of the relations of Avicenna, Averroes and Aristotle:

vast majority of Ibn Khaldun's potential audience—might be momentarily bothered by some of the apparent contradictions or unexplained assertions in the book, but, like many uninformed modern commentators, they would most likely come away relatively secure in the same set of beliefs and attitudes which they had brought to their reading in the first place.<sup>40</sup>

#### THE DISTINCTION OF BELIEFS AND DEMONSTRATIVE KNOWLEDGE:

However, even for readers without any prior knowledge of philosophy, Ibn Khaldun gives a more than adequate explanation of the basic grounds for his critique of contemporary Sufism in his repeated explanations of the fundamental distinction between beliefs or *opinions* ("religious" and otherwise), on the one hand, and demonstrative *knowledge*, on the other.<sup>41</sup>

Beliefs, opinions and social norms serve above all to orient action and volition, both individually and collectively, and most of the discussions of Islamic subjects (including Sufism) throughout this book are clearly meant to be understood from this very practical perspective. As Ibn Khaldun illustrates at great length throughout the *K. al-'Ibar* (and not simply in the

"It was *as though* (Avicenna) differed with Aristotle in many of his topics and stated his own opinions (*arā'*) concerning them, whereas Averroes summarized the books of Aristotle in his commentaries, following him (exactly) without differing with him. And although the (common) people (*al-nās*) composed much about that since him (= Averroes?), nevertheless these ones (i.e., Aristotle's and/or Averroes' books) are renowned to this day and the ones truly esteemed in this craft (of philosophy)."

This important passage clearly reveals Ibn Khaldun's own suspicion, discussed below (and following the famous Maghrebi examples of Ibn Tufayl and Averroes), that many of Avicenna's Neoplatonic "departures" from Aristotelian (and Farabian) principles should be properly understood in terms of prudential adaptations to his specific Islamic religio-political context and intentions—especially in relation to the competing intellectual and practical claims of *'ilm al-kalām* and speculative Sufism.

<sup>40</sup>Although there are many more explicit and detailed allusions to the premises, aims and divisions of Aristotelian philosophy throughout the *Muqaddima* (amply discussed in the classical study by M. Mahdi already cited) than in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*, still those extensive allusions are almost certainly not enough to give an idea of the pervasive influence and indispensable presuppositions of Islamic philosophy for readers without at least some prior knowledge of the philosophic sciences. However, they are certainly more than sufficient to suggest necessary further directions of thought and inquiry for any curious and properly prepared reader.

<sup>41</sup>This fundamental distinction is brought out most openly, in its application to the religious and philosophic sciences of Ibn Khaldun's time, at Q II 385-386 (ch. VI, section 9), and is again summarized—but in a more inconspicuous manner—after his survey of both groups of sciences (and their spurious imitators) at Q III 274 (ch. VI, 43), where he straightforwardly insists that the philosophic, rational sciences are all "matters of the intellect", while the Islamic so-called "sciences" (*'ulūm*) and laws "derived from the Qur'an and Sunna" are "*all matters of the imagination*!"

*Muqaddima*), such opinions vary greatly through history and various communities, and what is essential about them is not whether they are "true" or "false"—categories which are properly applicable only to matters subject to demonstration—but rather whether they are widely believed and followed and are therefore *practically effective* in assuring the common social ends of laws.<sup>42</sup> One of the most significant remarks in this connection is his insistence (at Q I 72-73) that prophecy does not exist by natural necessity, but rather *through religious laws*, whose efficacy and very existence depend above all on the persuasive powers of imagination in creating the indispensable ground of popular belief and consensus.<sup>43</sup>

Since so much of the *Muqaddima* is devoted to a careful analysis of the political effects of various Islamic beliefs and the corresponding forms and presuppositions of effective rhetorical persuasion, with the evident aim of distinguishing the positive or useful from the dangerous and destructive,<sup>44</sup> this same perspective can readily account for the two recurrent points of intentional ambiguity in Ibn Khaldun's discussion of Sufism. First, the widespread popular belief in the direct spiritual inspiration and mediation of the Sufi saints can be conceived as "good" insofar as it had come to be perhaps the primary underpinning of popular belief in the validity of Muhammad's mission and revelation in Ibn Khaldun's own society. This readily explains why

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<sup>42</sup>See Ibn Khaldun's explanation (at Q II 126-128) of the greater effectiveness of religious laws, vis-à-vis governmental, outwardly restraining laws, due to the additional factor of popular Islamic beliefs in posthumous rewards and punishments. The opening chapters of the *Muqaddima* are replete with references to the "anarchy" and natural "evil tendencies" (e.g., Q I 233) of people whenever they are not restrained by their belief in religious or governmental laws, and Ibn Khaldun consistently presents Muhammad's "transformation" of the "savage" Arabs (see especially I 270-275) as an archetypal illustration of the effectiveness of that religio-political influence on the popular imagination.

<sup>43</sup>To take only a few examples, see Q I 235-236 on the importance of the "imaginary" (in the use of tribal and genealogical "pedigrees") in moving the passions and imagination to create group feeling, and the ways Muhammad and 'Umar both encouraged this; or Ibn Khaldun's strong insistence at Q I 244-245 (in an explicit criticism of Averroes' commentary on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*) that the importance of rhetoric consists in swaying the beliefs and passions of (only) "those whose opinions count." (This last point may help explain why Ibn Khaldun is so explicit in his criticisms of Sufi "theorists" writing for the '*ulamā*', while remaining more reticent in his critique of Sufi poetry directed toward the masses, which does at least reinforce their politically useful naïve religious faith and sentiments.)

This particular question of the "natural" grounds and political conditions of (religious) "prophecy," following Avicenna, was already developed in considerable detail in the above-mentioned polemics of Tūsī and Rāzī (see notes 38-39 above on their commentaries on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*), as well as in the long series of later philosophical "adjudications" (*muhākamāt*) of their disputes.

Ibn Khaldun discusses the epistemological foundations of prophecy and Sufism in similar (and outwardly positive) terms, while at the same time he does everything possible to undermine and debunk—for more perspicacious readers, at least—what were popularly taken to be the corresponding claims of the saints and certain living Sufi shaykhs to be the authoritative guides and interpreters of the Prophet's message. The same motivations even more clearly underlie his lengthy attempts, especially in the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*, to differentiate between what he sees as the "positive" ethical and political consequences of some forms of Sufi rhetoric—namely, those popularly inculcating strong inner habits of unconscious obedience and faithfulness to the general ethical precepts of the religious Law—and what he presents as the historically "later" and politically dangerous framework of individualistic practices and spiritual, other-worldly metaphysical interpretations which had become associated with that supposedly "primitive," unquestioning moral state ostensibly shared by all the Companions and earliest Muslims.

Ibn Khaldun's treatment of the *theoretical*, epistemological pretensions of contemporary Sufism is—as his unambiguously hostile *fatwā* would already suggest—far more radical and uncompromising. His entire survey of the intellectual scene of his time in Chapter VI is built on the fundamental distinction (at VI,9; Q II 385-386) between the *rational*, philosophic sciences, which are common to all civilizations (where they are found), since they are based on human beings' intrinsic "ability to think" and the corresponding regularities of the natural order; and the variety of *conventional*, traditional religious "sciences" (or more properly, "crafts"),<sup>45</sup> which are based on principles established by the "authority" of a particular religious law. All of Chapter VI, when it is read carefully, can be understood as a detailed attempt to carefully distinguish the proper forms of both kinds of "science" from the wide range of misleading or degenerate pretenders and imitations which have grown up in both areas: in each category, Ibn Khaldun generally begins with the relatively sound and valid sciences and moves through increasingly distorted and dangerous pseudo-sciences—culminating in both cases with writings or practices

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<sup>44</sup>Note Ibn Khaldun's problematic depiction of his own situation in the long quotation (from Q I 201-202) earlier (at n. 5 above) concerning the many "simpletons and idiots" who devote themselves to Sufism, with its crucial emphasis on their widespread "activity and influence" for both good and bad.

<sup>45</sup>The recurrent ambiguities in Ibn Khaldun's discussions throughout Chapter VI of the *Muqaddima* often turn on the convenient popular Arabic designation of all the Islamic religious crafts (and other hybrid imitations or pseudo-sciences, including later Sufi writings) as *'ulūm*.

he explicitly ties to contemporary Sufism.<sup>46</sup> The obvious conclusion—which he brings out explicitly in his summary at Q III 258 (ch. VI, 37)—is that Sufism in fact should not be included among either the religious crafts or speculative/philosophic sciences, since it is in fact a spurious, dangerously misleading attempted hybrid of both. However, by the end of this survey, Ibn Khaldun has made it quite clear to his more thoughtful readers that both of the relatively "positive" potential effects of contemporary Sufism (i.e., those discussed in the preceding paragraph) have to do *only* with its indirect political and ethical impact on popular religious beliefs and practice, and have nothing at all to do with any philosophic or scientific validity of its more recent "theoretical" proponents.<sup>47</sup>

### PHILOSOPHIC PROPHETOLOGY AND SPECULATIVE SUFISM:

The intentionally ambiguous language utilized throughout Ibn Khaldun's discussions of prophetic epistemology and its relations to Sufism (at the beginnings of both chapter I and chapter VI of the *Muqaddima*) had its classical Islamic expression throughout the works of Avicenna,<sup>48</sup> and had found its most elaborate earlier development—in the sense in which it is

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<sup>46</sup>His intention and procedure here, although much more complex, often closely resembles that followed in Averroes' famous *Fasl al-Maqāl*—with the obvious change that the major object of criticism in this case is no longer *kalām* (although Ibn Khaldun is even more devastating in his analysis of its intellectual pretensions), but contemporary Sufism.

<sup>47</sup>Ibn Khaldun's refusal in ch. VI to give any more than the vaguest second- or third-hand account of the metaphysical teachings of Sufi writers like Ibn 'Arabi or Ibn Sab'īn, and his corresponding highly misleading attempts to associate those authors with things like magic, astrological predictions, antinomian practices and the like clearly flow directly (and quite intentionally) from his own philosophical judgement concerning the scientific invalidity and practical dangers of those texts. Neither position can be adequately explained either by simple ignorance of the authentic writings of the authors in question, or by the supposition that they were considered "suspect" or "heretical," given what we know of their widespread diffusion (both directly and in more popular forms) for more than a century in North Africa and Mamluk Egypt. (See also the recent broad historical study of that wider influence in the Arab world in this period—and the reactions against it—in the recent work of Alexander Knysh cited above.) Indeed, as we have noted at the beginning of this paper, it is undoubtedly the wide-ranging popular influence of such writings that largely helps to explain the depth of Ibn Khaldun's opposition and concern throughout the *Muqaddima*.

<sup>48</sup>For a detailed study of the Avicennan ideas discussed here—and their philosophic roots in Avicenna's creative adaptation of Farabi's political philosophy—, see our article on "The Philosopher-Prophet in Avicenna's Political Philosophy," chapter 4 in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. C. Butterworth, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 142-188. It should be stressed that although the rhetorical adaptation of Avicenna's theories to the Islamic context of Sufism is most fully developed in the final two chapters of the *Ishārāt* (as well as in his less well-known rationalizing

used here—in Tūsī's elaborate, highly defenses of Avicenna's rationalistic political outlook against Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī's theological criticisms and abuses of those same arguments.<sup>49</sup> Since a detailed reading and analysis of these key sections would require at least a short book, here we can only give a very brief summary of the basic features of Avicenna's philosophic interpretation of prophecy and the ways it is understood and applied by Ibn Khaldun, especially with regard to Sufism.

Avicenna's treatment of the specific qualities of prophecy (*khasā'is al-nubuwwa*), in each of his systematic works (including the *Ishārāt*), is divided into three areas, corresponding to three distinct powers or activities of the human rational soul. It is especially important to emphasize that for Avicenna—just as for Ibn Khaldun—these "prophetic" attributes and activities are in fact always explicitly grounded in an analysis of real, *universal* aspects of the human souls as such,<sup>50</sup> so that the fundamental ambiguity of interpretation has to do with showing how anyone can actually know and demonstrate that any particular epistemic *claim* or activity is in reality "prophetic" in a *true* sense. Most readers have naturally read—and still continue to read—these sections simply as an apologetic philosophic justification or "explanation" of their own pre-existing beliefs in the prophecy and claims to mystical inspiration and powers of particular holy individuals, without stopping to ask the more awkward, but practically and politically inescapable, question of what that explanation might imply about the possible *verification* or true interpretation of any particular prophetic or mystical belief and truth-claim.

(1) The highest form of prophecy, for Avicenna, is the "intellectual" level which he defines in terms of his theory of the "sacred intellect" (*'aql qudsī*), a hypothetically extreme form of the process of "intuitional inspiration" (*hads*) by which the theoretical intellect in fact always

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commentary on famously 'mystical' sections of the *Theology of 'Aristotle'*, the wider philosophic explanation and understanding of those phenomena (and their relation to prophecy), as summarized here, is largely consistent throughout Avicenna's various systematic works composed at different periods of his life.

<sup>49</sup>See notes 38-39 above.

<sup>50</sup>Apart from the discussions in the "psychological" sections (*K. al-Nafs*) of his longer works, Avicenna's supplementary treatment of "prophetic" questions and qualities in his sections on metaphysics has to do either with (1) establishing the existence and nature of the separate Intellects (as the source of intellectual "inspiration" assumed in his epistemology) or (2) his brief discussion of the activity of the prophets—at the very end of the metaphysical section in each of his longer systematic works—which

arrives at the awareness of the missing middle terms in its process of intellectual investigation. The critical implication of this theory, and ultimately its far-reaching motivating intention, is that it in fact positions the accomplished *philosopher*—i.e., that person who is in reality consciously able to elaborate the chains of rational conception and demonstrative reasoning appropriate to any given field of knowledge—as *the only truly qualified interpreter* of any claims to a "prophecy" having any rationally knowable and demonstrable contents, whether that content is presented in explicitly demonstrative form or (as is almost always the case) in the form of imaginary, symbolic representations.

Hence the archetypal representative—or at least the only truly qualified interpreter—of *this* specific cognitive, intellectual aspect or form of "prophecy" is none other than the accomplished philosopher, and more particularly *Avicenna himself*.<sup>51</sup> With regard to those ordinarily and popularly regarded as "prophets" (including Muhammad), the upshot of this theory is not to label as "untrue" the vast majority of their revelations which apparently do *not* qualify as rationally demonstrative "knowledge," but rather to focus the thoughtful interpreter's attention on the practical functions and aims of those popularly accepted historical "revelations" in providing precisely the sort of *politically and ethically necessary beliefs* and conventional premises whose understanding is the major focus of Ibn Khaldun's work. In fact Ibn Khaldun—like Averroes before him—in fact goes to some lengths to eliminate any possibility or suggestion of a deeper ontological grounding of those particular revealed principles which do *not* conform to the contents of rational demonstrative sciences, but which often do constitute guiding normative beliefs on the level of popular religious "imagination."

Already Avicenna, in the last chapters of the *Ishārāt* and his commentary on sections of the *Theology of "Aristotle"* (a version of Plotinus' *Enneads*) favored by some Islamic mystics, had gone on to apply this epistemological schema to the claims of some mystics to a direct "witnessing" (*mushāhada*) of the Truth. Such "witnessing," he concedes, might coincidentally happen to be true (*mushāhada haqqa*), but *only* when its contents in fact coincide with what can

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presupposes all three of the "prophetic" aspects of the soul, just as in the concluding chapters of the *Ishārāt*.

<sup>51</sup>As Avicenna boldly claims in his description of this theory in the *Dānish-Nāmeḥ*, a claim explicitly corroborated by his disciple Bahmanyar in the corresponding section of his influential *K. al-Tahsīl* (see details in our study of Avicenna's political philosophy cited above).

be rationally *demonstrated* by reasoning (*qiyās*)—although that rational criterion of truth, he stresses, certainly does not always coincide with the various complex emotions and sensations or imaginations popularly associated with such Sufi terms as *mushāhada* and the ecstatic visions and claims of mystics more generally. While Avicenna did not explicitly stress the negative and critical implications of his account—since he may well have wished to attract toward philosophy some of the support and interest of those initially drawn to speculative mysticism—, Ibn Khaldun is typically somewhat more forthcoming in underlining those negative epistemological consequences for his more thoughtful and attentive readers.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, in his version of Avicenna's understanding, the claims of the mystics and other famous religious figures to "unveiling" (*kashf*) of the future turn out to be, where valid, entirely explicable in terms of *rational* foresight and accurate analysis of earthly conditions,<sup>53</sup> and he repeatedly ridicules any claims to inner knowledge of spiritual reality—beyond the philosophically intelligible regularities underlying all visible earthly phenomena—as clearly the product of vain imaginings.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, his frequent description of Sufi experiences as forms of

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<sup>52</sup>This subject is an excellent illustration of Ibn Khaldun's insistence, already noted above (from ch. VI of the *Muqaddima*), on the very different aspect which his book is intended to present for readers able to think several steps ahead. While readers of the sections on mystical epistemology might understand his remarks on *kashf* and *wijdān*—if taken in isolation—in a positive, almost apologetic sense supporting Sufi claims, those same sections take on a radically different tone when viewed in light of the philosophic and ontological explanations provided elsewhere in his book. One scathingly ironical (although still outwardly ambiguous) illustration of this rhetorical approach is his pointed comparison (at Q I 192) of claimed "Sufi" perceptions with those of diviners, the sick, dying and insane.

<sup>53</sup>It is especially important to note the way in which all of Ibn Khaldun's illustrations of successful or meaningful "unveiled" perception of the "unseen" (*ghayb*) turn out to refer to future *this-worldly events*, and not to the symbolic and spiritual realities, on higher planes of being, which are the actual object of almost all Sufi writing and practice (and the very specific object of Ibn Khaldun's own epistemological criticisms). The particularly significant illustration of Ja'far al-Sādiq's mystical "unveiling" concerning the eventual failure of so many anti-Umayyad Alid rebellions has already been mentioned. The full irony of that illustration of course depends on its coming in the *Muqaddima* after a detailed historical analysis of the relative political and material strengths and weaknesses of the opposing parties.

<sup>54</sup>Two typical (and equally ironic) illustrations of this not too subtle debunking of mystical claims are Ibn Khaldun's ridicule (at Q I 18) of the "crazy talk" of those who claim to have had a mystical unveiling of the city of 'Ād "beyond sensual perception," or of "historical reports" (at Q I 57-60) concerning the existence of jinn, monsters, and the like. As usual, Ibn Khaldun's failure to extend these ironic and critical remarks explicitly to such fundamental religious and Qur'anic topics as the existence and description of Heaven and Hell (and to the mystics' claims of perceptions relevant to their

*wijdān* (“ecstasy”) must be understood in light of his application of the same term in describing the emotional effects of drinking wine (at Q II 300), and in portraying the “*wijdānī*” effects of military music (at Q II 42-43) as “a kind of drunkenness”—i.e., as combining what he clearly sees as typical of Sufism in general: a dangerously deluded combination of personal irresponsibility and mistaking one's shifting inner emotions and arbitrary imagination for “divine knowledge.”<sup>55</sup> As usual, what is fundamentally important in Ibn Khaldun's treatment of this question, within its wider polemic framework, is precisely everything that he does *not* deal with explicitly: i.e., the Islamic mystics' actual preoccupation with levels and manifestations of a spiritual reality transcending the Aristotelian ontological schema he assumes; the elaborate philosophic schemas by which they sought to ground and explain those supra-sensory fields of spiritual reality; and the centrality of those spiritual questions—such as the immortality and post-mortem survival of each individual soul—in fundamental teachings of Islam in areas where the great Sufis claimed to offer indispensable and authoritative guidance to the *trans*-historical intentions of the prophets. However, Ibn Khaldun's insistence—in the *fatwā* with which we began—on burning and destroying some of the most intellectually sophisticated and influential Islamic treatments of these spiritual subjects should provide more than sufficient commentary on his systematic silence here in the *Muqaddima* concerning those fundamental Sufi epistemological and metaphysical claims.

(2) The second key aspect of Avicenna's treatment of prophecy—and of the corresponding associated claims and activities of Islamic mystics—has to do with his discussions of the activities and influences of the *imagination*. In this respect, much more than in first case of rational, philosophic knowledge, Avicenna explicitly emphasizes the universality of the phenomena in question. Thus, to the extent that our “imaginal” perceptions, whether in ordinary dreams or prophetic visions, claim some rational knowledge content, he stresses the absolute necessity of a demonstrably reasoned interpretation (whether we call it *ta’wīl* or *ta’bīr*) grounded in what can be independently known by the rational sciences and their logical methods. However, once again what Avicenna does not so openly stress is the way this essential

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understanding) would inevitably be interpreted in ways mirroring each reader's own level of understanding.

philosophic qualification or "description" of inspiration and revelation is not really a 'justification' of popular beliefs, but rather an extraordinarily severe *limitation* of prophetic claims. For in fact it does quite intentionally tend to eliminate the pursuit of all "imaginary", symbolic and aesthetic means—clearly including most of the arts, as well as religion—as a viable and reliable way to true knowledge and to any authority based on claims to an objective knowledge of reality.

Practically speaking, what is far more important already in Avicenna's discussion of the religious dimensions of imagination—for example, in his many short epistles interpreting and justifying prayer and other basic religious practices—is his suggestion of its pervasive and far-reaching *ethical and political effects*, and especially of each prophet's remarkably lasting influence on the imagination of others: i.e., the ongoing mass of "believers" in a particular religious lawgiver. This lasting political effect, he repeatedly suggests, is the *true*, historically tangible and self-evident "miracle" of each prophecy. It should not be necessary to underline the manifold ways in which virtually all the *Muqaddima* (and Ibn Khaldun's *History* more generally) can be conceived as an extended commentary on Avicenna's allusive suggestions concerning these more practical, political and ethical prophetic functions of imagination. What is perhaps most striking in this regard is his systematic avoidance, in this domain at least, of any of the publicly contending distinguishing criteria between the "revelations" of prophets and saints<sup>56</sup> (or

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<sup>55</sup>Readers of traditional Sufi poetry, in Arabic or other Islamic languages, could also not help but be struck by Ibn Khaldun's pointedly ironic *reversal* here of the central symbolic, metaphorical/spiritual role of wine-imagery throughout those traditions.

<sup>56</sup>The key passage here is at the very beginning of the *Muqaddima* (Q I 165-173), where he passes in review the various theories (including the philosophic ones, at I 170-172) about the "signs" effectively distinguishing true from false prophets—one of the major topics in the influential philosophical disputes between Tūsī and Rāzī (above all in Tūsī's seminal commentary on Avicenna's *Ishārāt*). Not surprisingly, the treatment of Muhammad and the early caliphs throughout the rest of the *Muqaddima* elaborates only the (essentially *political*) criteria of the *rationalist* philosophers.

Once again, Ibn Khaldun's single-minded focus on these practical political and social criteria is certainly not unrelated to his silence concerning—and vehemently attempted suppression of—some of the most influential Islamic religious books claiming to provide some insight into a more comprehensive spiritual hierarchy of values and intentions, or his repeated criticisms of the contending prototypical representatives (within his own community)—figures such as al-Hallāj, 'Alī or al-Husayn—of values calling into question the primacy of those political criteria. As with Avicenna, it is no accident that the one potential criterion of value explicitly mentioned and left intact is that provided by the pursuit of those rational (true) sciences which Ibn Khaldun repeatedly mentions as providing human beings' ultimate perfection.

between either group and true or false pretenders, social reformers, magicians and so forth), apart from the following two *politically* decisive points: (a) their ability to assure and maintain the lasting belief of their followers; and (b) their ability to direct and mobilize effectively the actions of the masses following from those beliefs.

(3) As for the third property of prophecy discussed by Avicenna, that of its “physical” effects and influences in this world, that philosopher and his successors (especially Tūsī) had already stressed that (a) such activities are grounded in the natural order and corresponding powers of the soul, and (b) that those powers (even in their more extraordinary forms) are widely shared by a multitude of human beings with *no* religious or mystical pretensions (e.g., magicians, sorcerers and diviners), who can use them for all sorts of good and bad ends. Once again, Ibn Khaldun likewise focuses in detail on the *this-worldly* effects and uses of those natural powers, while effectively and systematically eliminating any possible “supra-natural” explanations or uses which might otherwise be taken to support the wider claims of contemporary Sufis. Perhaps even more significant is his intentional attempt to portray the activities and claims of the most influential and prestigious Islamic mystics of his time (such as Ibn ‘Arabi) as in fact falling primarily into this very suspect territory of pseudo-astrologers, magicians and charlatans.<sup>57</sup>

A further indication that these core relations between Avicenna's and Ibn Khaldun's accounts of prophecy and mysticism—and Ibn Khaldun's detailed development of the thoroughly “rationalistic” implications of Avicenna's thought in this area—are not purely accidental is

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<sup>57</sup>As discussed above, Ibn Khaldun's repeated attempts to portray contemporary Sufism in this pejorative light cannot be explained by any ignorance (or popular suspicion) of the more intellectual and spiritual aspects of Sufism discussed in precisely the sort of works he wished to burn. Nor can they be explained by a pious religious desire for “reform” and “purification” of popular religious practices such as that which motivated Ibn Taymiyya, even when (as in the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il*) Ibn Khaldun uses a superficially similar rhetoric.

The corresponding gross misrepresentation throughout the *Muqaddima* of the works of Ibn ‘Arabi, which had come to constitute the leading ideological justification (in Islamic terms) of virtually all forms of Sufism by Ibn Khaldun's time, is one of the more striking illustrations of the latter's rhetorical techniques. See, for example, the attribution to Ibn ‘Arabi at Q II 196 of two obviously apocryphal prediction works (*malāhim*) and Ibn ‘Arabi's implicit association, in the same context (II 197-201) with clearly fraudulent predictions by a later scandalously “fallen,” swindling and antinomian Qalandar dervish (the ‘hippies’ of Ibn Khaldun’s day). Even more important, given the political centrality (and notoriety) of the claims flowing from Ibn ‘Arabi's assertion of his own status as “seal of the Muhammadan saints”—and his corresponding theories and claims concerning the socio-religious roles of Sufi saints and masters more generally—is Ibn Khaldun's facetious presentation of that doctrine and his citation of a supposed “forecast” of the Mahdi's coming at Q II 165-167.

provided by Ibn Khaldun's careful silence concerning three more typically Neoplatonic features of Avicenna's thought which al-Ghazālī and later Sufi thinkers had repeatedly used in order to construct a pseudo-philosophic justification for the superiority of Sufism as a path to the Truth. (Not coincidentally, at least two of these novel theories are important features of Ibn 'Arabi's and other later Sufi adaptations of Avicennan philosophic themes, and all three were vehemently and repeatedly criticized by Averroes throughout his commentaries on Aristotle.)<sup>58</sup> The first of these was Avicenna's assertion of his own metaphysics or divine science as a distinct field of knowledge *independent* of the conclusions of physics, and also necessary as a preliminary foundation to assure the truth of the other philosophic sciences. In contrast to this novel assertion—which could easily be taken to justify claims for the extra-philosophical forms of metaphysical knowledge and investigation favored by the Sufis—Ibn Khaldun's accounts of the rational sciences always follow Averroes in stressing the key foundational role of physics and the *autonomy* of its investigation of all the natural orders of being.

Even more conspicuous by its absence in Ibn Khaldun's account is any reference to Avicenna's apparent support of the immortality and substantiality of each individual soul *per se* (i.e., quite apart from its intellectual perfection and gradual acquisition of the secondary intelligibles)—a theory which again would tend to provide a foundation in demonstrative "knowledge" for central religious and Sufi conceptions which Ibn Khaldun clearly prefers to deal with in their function simply as ethically and politically important *beliefs*. Closely related to this

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<sup>58</sup>These were undoubtedly the central points of difference involving Aristotelian "physics" (the *tabī'īyyāt*) between Avicenna, on the one hand, and Aristotle and Averroes on the other, alluded to in the key passage (partially translated in n. 39 above) in which Ibn Khaldun questions Avicenna's (political/rhetorical) motivations for his departures from Aristotle's positions and pointedly insists on the greater philosophic reliability of Averroes and Aristotle. In fact all three of these fundamental metaphysical differences are taken up in the "physical" books of Avicenna, and all three are pointedly *left out* in Ibn Khaldun's own accounts of that discipline and its results.

For the ways in which these three innovative aspects of Avicenna's philosophy were elaborated by later Islamic thinkers in order to provide a much more Neoplatonic and spiritualist account of being and a metaphysical foundation for wider religious and Sufi beliefs, see the discussions and detailed illustrations in J. Michot's *La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (ma'ād) et l'imagination*, (Louvain, 1987). While this sort of thoroughly mystical interpretation of Avicenna's ideas cannot be easily reconciled with what we know of Avicenna's own life, works, disciples and philosophic antecedents—as argued in detail in our study of his political philosophy cited above—, it does represent a highly influential current of *later* Eastern Islamic thought, and indeed precisely the sort of "Avicennism" (subsequently influential in the Latin West, and historically connected with al-Ghazālī) which was already being vigorously criticized by Ibn Tufayl and Averroes long before Ibn Khaldun.

is Ibn Khaldun's emphatic insistence in the *Muqaddima*, at each ontological discussion of the "angels" whose existence is revealed by physical science, that these are *only* the pure intellects moving the heavenly spheres. This is a pointed and intentional denial of the controversial Avicennan theory of the existence of a separate order of corporeal (or "imaginal") angels associated with the bodies of each planet or sphere—a theory (again assumed by Ibn ‘Arabi and his interpreters) which became frequently used in later Islamic thought to explain separate, higher realms of imaginal being and of spiritual influence and revelation *distinct* from ordinary human acts of intellection.

### **THE CONSTRUCTIVE AIMS OF IBN KHALDUN'S CRITICISMS:**

Hopefully the preceding discussion has brought out the ways in which *both* the intellectual and the more practical facets of Ibn Khaldun's criticisms of Sufism (as well as other Islamic religious sciences, such as *kalâm*) have their deeper roots in his own understanding of Islamic philosophy. From that comprehensive perspective, the whole purpose of the *Muqaddima*, as of his new science more generally, can only be fully understood in the larger context of the hierarchy of the philosophic sciences (both practical and theoretical) and the corresponding awareness of their practical and historical interaction with the new religious “crafts” and public beliefs in the Islamic context. We can envision that wider process more clearly by looking at (a) the aims and consequences Ibn Khaldun could expect his critique to have on various classes of readers; and (b) the ways that his far-reaching criticisms of contemporary Sufi claims, particularly to intellectual and religious authority, also seem to have been grounded and reflected in his own life and activity.

To begin with, for readers without the necessary rare intellectual qualifications and philosophic orientation described above, neither the *Muqaddima* nor the *Shifā’ al-Sā’il* would be likely to lead to any radical change in their beliefs, although it might point them toward a renewed devotion and attention to their own practice of their particular form of Islam, and perhaps even to a renewed awareness of the this-worldly consequences of that practice. And if such readers happened to be among the group of jurists already deeply suspicious of Sufi claims and writings, they would find in Ibn Khaldun's works—including his unambiguous *fatwā* cited at

the beginning of this exposition—ample further justification for their hostile opinions.<sup>59</sup> However, such limited aims would scarcely justify or explain the extraordinarily complex intellectual and rhetorical effort and intention so evident throughout his criticisms of Sufism in this work. As such, they serve to remind us of the extreme seriousness with which Ibn Khaldun himself conceived of the intellectual dimensions of his work, and of the irreducible differences between his distinctively philosophical outlook and the modern Islamic "reformist" movements with which it has often been rather misleadingly compared.

For more qualified readers, Ibn Khaldun's critique of Sufism could be expected to lead first of all to an intellectual clarification of the separate, legitimate and harmonious aims and domains of philosophy and religion—and to a corresponding re-situating of the various claims and activities associated with Sufism (along with other religious "pseudo-sciences" and dangerous hybrids of religion and philosophy), in both the theoretical and practical domains. Intellectually, that would certainly mean focusing their attention, in the most efficient possible manner, on those particular philosophic activities and sciences which Ibn Khaldun consistently describes as leading to human beings' ultimate perfection—and eventually on discovering and implementing the appropriate means for assuring the preservation and continuation of those essential philosophical sciences within an Islamic society.

The further *practical* consequences of that philosophic awareness (as with Ibn Khaldun's own very practical *fatwā* cited above) would of course depend greatly on each reader's own degree of authority and ability to influence others.<sup>60</sup> We may mention at least three such aims to which Ibn Khaldun himself devotes considerable effort and intention in the *Muqaddima*:

(1) The first such consequence is evident in his repeated efforts at the elimination of all "competitors" (including above all speculative or theoretical Sufism) for the philosophic sciences, in relation to the rare elite properly qualified to pursue them. This aim is evident both in his clarification of the true principles and relations of each of the various pseudo-sciences

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<sup>59</sup>One could of course add to these more immediate effects the eventual longer-term, indirect consequences of the creative actions of the rarer individuals in the second group (of qualified potential philosophers) discussed in the next paragraph.

<sup>60</sup>This can be seen, for example, in Ibn Khaldun's own legal and other activities mentioned below, or in the contrasting public writings and practical political activities of such philosophers as Tūsī, Averroes, or Avicenna (or the teaching efforts of Ibn Khaldun's own master al-‘Ābilī, cited above).

(both religious and philosophic), and in his repeated allusions to their delusive effects on the mass of "simpletons and idiots" among the wider population. Thus in his own late autobiography, as throughout the *Muqaddima* itself, he continually points to the supposed results of such deluded pursuits in helping to eliminate both serious religious and scientific scholarship in Maghrebi society, while alluding more delicately to their pernicious effects in Egypt and the Islamic East where, as we pointed out at the beginning, these Sufi understandings of Islam and human perfection were of course more thoroughly established.

(2) A second further consequence would be the appropriate rational ordering of education, time, manpower and material resources, not simply in one's own life, but also in the wider society, in order to encourage others to reach human beings' ultimate (purely intellectual) perfection, and to enable others to follow their properly founded guidance.<sup>61</sup> This process—at least on the level of the properly qualified and trained individual and that person's sphere of activity—need not be perceived as "utopian." And in fact the concluding sections of chapter VI of the *Muqaddima* (immediately before Ibn Khaldun's final long treatment of Arabic poetry) contain essential discussions of the hierarchy and order of the sciences, and of the best pedagogical methods and assumptions needed to fulfill the highest human ends.

(3) Finally, in order to assure the necessary *practical preconditions* for pursuing what Ibn Khaldun understands to be the highest human ends, the removal of the "illusions" which he sees as typifying contemporary Sufism (and its ontological claims and presuppositions) would clear the way for a more flexible and effective interpretation and application of the accepted religious norms in light of what he presents as their *true* socio-political ends and with a fuller appreciation of their actual limiting conditions and possibilities. Ibn Khaldun's own repeated emphasis on effective, non-reflective internalized popular allegiance to "the law" is clearly not viewed here simply as a religious or ethical end in itself, but as one of a number of necessary socio-political

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<sup>61</sup>It is important to note the full significance of Ibn Khaldun's brief reference (Q II 126-128) to the central philosophic theme (for both Averroes and Farabi) of the "*virtuous city*" (*al-madīnat al-fādila*) and the scale of real human finalities it suggests—a far-reaching significance (for readers acquainted with Farabi's works and their profound impact on Islamic philosophy) that is not adequately reflected by the use of the term "utopian" in the existing English translation.

conditions for intellectual reform and renewal, including eventually more appropriate interpretations of the religious laws themselves.<sup>62</sup>

An essential test of our interpretation of the relations of religion and philosophy in Ibn Khaldun's written critique of Sufism—just as in the related cases of Avicenna or Tūsī—is its congruity with what we know of the rest of his life and activity. And in fact, not only is there no sign of Sufi practice, study or support in his known career as a politician, court official, teacher and Maliki judge (exemplified most notably in the outspokenly anti-Sufi *fatwā* with which we began!), but the same sort of pointed, thinly veiled critique even marks the very beginning of his own autobiography, where the political failures and retreat of his own father and grandfather, after centuries of familial prestige and renown, is suggestively traced to the influence of a leading Sufi preacher of Tunis.<sup>63</sup>

Whatever the relevance of the personal connection he seems to make in that case, there can be little doubt that at least some of the recurrent passion in his denunciations of contemporary Sufism flows from his perception of an inner connection between its growing intellectual and socio-political influence in Islamic culture and the recent political and material decline of that culture (at least in the Maghreb and Andalusia), which is such a central theme in his new study of history. Such recurrent items as his criticism of the various mahdist and messianic rebellions as obstacles to real lasting political reforms; the squandering of scarce societal resources on the "simpletons" populating the Sufi *zāwiyas* and *khānegahs* often lavishly

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<sup>62</sup>Hence, as already noted, his criticisms of Sufism turn out to have an entirely different motivation than in the case, for example, of a more public religious "reformer" like Ibn Taymiyya, who was totally motivated by the religious "purity" of his ideal, rather than its likely worldly consequences. Ibn Khaldun's depiction of religious laws, Islamic or otherwise (and both in the *Muqaddima* and the *Shifā' al-Sā'il*), is not at all "literalist" and frozen, but instead focuses on understanding the process of their historical evolution and development in light of changing political and social "benefits" (*masālih*). There is no sign (except in the occasional rhetorical appeal to certain popular beliefs) of any illusion of a "purification" or "return" to an ideal source as a magical formula for all circumstances, and everything in his hundreds of pages of historical and sociological analysis would argue against the dangers and pitfalls of such an illusion (at least when held by those with real political authority and responsibility).

<sup>63</sup>*Al-Ta'rif*, page 14; the full weight of this turning "from the path of the military prowess and service (of the rulers) to the path of (religious) learning and spiritual retreat" comes from its following many pages (most of pp. 1-14) detailing centuries of martial and political exploits by Ibn Khaldun's earlier ancestors—a forceful recapitulation, in his own family history, of the key themes of "decline" pervading the *Muqaddima* and his wider *History*. (See also the excellent discussion of Ibn Khaldun's

patronized by the Mamluks and other Muslim rulers of his time; and the more profound misdirection of indispensable human and intellectual capacities into futile activities and pointless speculations which is elaborated with such ironic and telling detail in his survey of the contemporary sciences: all of these concerns clearly have their own immediate, poignant roots in his own experience and actively involved political situation. A significant sign that Ibn Khaldun proudly practiced what he preached, even in the later Egyptian phase of his career, is the incident recounted near the end of his autobiography in which he exposed the misalliance between those he considered fraudulent Maghrebi muftis and "those of their race retired in zawiyas" for "so-called reforms," and eventually succeeded in getting such people "to leave their zawiyas and dry up their source of profits...."<sup>64</sup>

#### **READING THE *MUQADDIMA*: RELATED APPLICATIONS OF IBN KHALDUN'S RHETORIC**

The distinctive rhetorical methods and devices we have illustrated in this paper with regard to Ibn Khaldun's criticisms of contemporary Sufism are by no means limited to that complex subject. Once the careful reader has learned to recognize the underlying motives and practical and intellectual concerns which guide his rhetoric, it soon becomes evident that those features apply equally to many other related areas of potential ethical, intellectual and religious concern. And just as in the case of "Sufism", each reader's ability to discern this extraordinary literary craft almost always depends on having prior knowledge and awareness of the "conventional" wisdom and related competing conceptions of knowledge and proper practice that would be taken for granted by the learned Arabic readership of Ibn Khaldun's own time. In this regard, it may be helpful to conclude by mentioning specifically some further telling illustrations of four of the most important rhetorical devices which are to be found throughout the *Muqaddima*, devices whose prominence has become evident over the years in our seminars devoted to that work.

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autobiography, focusing on its relation to the themes of this study, in the authoritative work of M. Mahdi cited above.)

<sup>64</sup>*Al-Ta'rif*, p. . The same later sections also allude to some of the hostility, whether popular or learned, that such reforming actions and intentions seem to have aroused, and which may help account for the relative brevity of Ibn Khaldun's appointments as a Maliki judge, despite his friendship with powerful Mamluk figures.

- **Telling Silence:** One of the most powerful—but also potentially most hidden—rhetorical methods in Ibn Khaldun’s arsenal, which we have seen him use constantly in regard to contemporary Sufi writers, is his ability to pass over in complete silence key historical events, issues, actors, etc. which were surely known to his readers, and which they would normally *expect* to be mentioned in a particular context. Among the most striking illustrations of that revealing approach is his apparent silence<sup>65</sup> regarding the major historical role of the Kharijite ‘Ibādīs (of the kingdom of Tahert and elsewhere) and their Berber followers in the earliest process of “islamicisation” of the indigenous, *non-Arab* populations of North Africa. It is doubtful that this particular omission can simply be explained either by theological prejudices, since one key feature of the *Muqaddima* is Ibn Khaldun’s wide-ranging fascination with the historical success of the Fatimids (despite the obvious “sensitivity” of Shiite theology and proclivities among his own primary audience); or by the accidents of surviving historical documentation, since the existence of the North African ‘Ibadis and their rule was well known, and is at least mentioned by a considerable range of Arabic historical sources. On the other hand, Ibn Khaldun’s learned readers could be assumed to be well aware of the recurrently destructive political and historical consequences of what the Sunni (and also Shiite) ulama’ normally viewed as the relatively “anarchical” and troublingly “democratic” theological approaches and presuppositions of the full range of popular Kharijite movements, tendencies which—like some of the later Sufis discussed in this paper—so radically challenged those learned scholars’ most basic norms of religious knowledge, authority and right order.

- **Moral “Shocks”:** As we have pointed out in a number of cases above, one of Ibn Khaldun’s most obvious rhetorical methods—and probably the one which has particularly led certain modern Muslim interpreters to note remarkable resemblances to Machiavelli—is his pointedly “realistic” (in the sense of *Realpolitik*) stress, in many different historical contexts, on the powerful contrast between what have been popularly judged to be the ethically or religiously “right” and “just” attitudes and behavior, on the one hand, and those more pragmatically amoral attitudes and behavior which in fact proved to be politically effective and successful. That unrealistic, popular moral “idealism”—or at least, a morally *critical* standpoint toward the

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<sup>65</sup> Always subject to new manuscript discoveries, of course. For this illustration, we are grateful to our student Mr. Taliesin Davies, who carefully investigated the historical sources on the Ibadis of

questionable actions and public policies of many earlier Muslim rulers and their policies—which he so explicitly and mordantly criticizes, is by no means limited to the ethical teachings associated with later “Sufi” writers.

In fact, students of a great many classical Islamic historians—including central figures like al-Tabarī, who were certainly familiar to most of Ibn Khaldun’s learned audience—are of course quite familiar with the major, self-consciously ethical and religious role of the historical events they were discussing, especially the constantly contested, religiously paradigmatic events and actors of the first two centuries of the Islamic era. The same ongoing tensions between political “realism” and “idealism” were also powerfully highlighted in the appropriate sections of the canonical hadith selections (e.g., the sections on the *fitan*, or civil wars) and—likewise often appealing to relevant hadith, among Sunni commentators—in the most influential works of Qur’an interpretation (*tafsīr*), for those verses where fundamental issues of political authority and responsibility are raised.<sup>66</sup> Thus *only* readers familiar with the consistently moral and often openly moralizing perspective largely shared by those classical Islamic texts and traditions, can really begin to recognize Ibn Khaldun’s thoroughgoing, consistently thought-provoking and often openly provocative undermining of what he so clearly views as their misleading confusion of unrealistic ethical ideals and practical political concerns. This intentionally highlighted contrast is most obvious in his treatment of the political and military successes and actual methods of the Umayyads and their agents (al-Hajjāj, in particular), whose unconcealed attempts to subordinate religion as an overt tool of politics—very much in line with their Byzantine and Sassanid predecessors, as with the philosopher-king ideal of Ibn Khaldun’s own Islamic philosophic tradition—were rarely presented in a positive light by any of the later traditions of Islamic religious learning.

- **Ironic “mimicking” of traditionalist arguments:** If we have highlighted in this paper the various ways Ibn Khaldun often subtly hints at his thoughtful *disagreements* with popularly received opinions, norms and conventions, this should certainly not be taken to imply that even his most literal statements of ostensible, explicit “agreement” with popular beliefs and

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Tahert in preparing his recent M.A. dissertation on that subject.

<sup>66</sup> Again, particular thanks are due here to the participants in our graduate seminars exploring Islamic political thought in the classical traditions of *ta’rīkh*, hadith and *tafsīr*.

reasoning are meant to imply any deeper accord with the motives and assumptions that would ordinarily be taken as implicit in those particular commonplace formulae and expressions. A very typical example of this in fact highly problematic sort of “agreement” can be seen in his famous anti-Sufi *fatwā* quoted above, with its initial praises of the “path of the Sunna, of the *salaf*, according to the Book and the Sunna,” and so on, and its contrasting condemnation of all heretical “innovations”. Naïve modern readers, without any of the necessary background for understanding Ibn Khaldun’s language and all-encompassing philosophic intentions and assumptions, could certainly be forgiven for reading such a passage as only another example of the familiar “traditionalist” (*salafī*) rhetoric of an Ibn Taymiyya and his generations of imitators. Whereas of course neither “tradition” nor “innovation” have anything at all to do with the actual grounds of Ibn Khaldun’s argument and its intended practical effects in this case!

- **Conscious Misrepresentations:** Finally, the various examples we have given here of repeated massive misrepresentations of key Sufi writers and their doctrines and teachings (so that Ibn ‘Arabi, to take only the most egregious example, comes across almost exclusively in the *Muqaddima* as a would-be magician and soothsayer) should certainly not appear surprising to scholarly students of the rhetorical techniques and assumptions of classical Islamic intellectual traditions.<sup>67</sup> After all, perhaps nothing about this work could be more extreme than the fact that this entire “new science” of culture—which is in so many ways the most elaborate and far-reachingly creative development of the Farabian tradition of Islamic political philosophy, in which virtually every single topic is meant to be understood properly *only* within that philosophical framework—nonetheless outwardly speaks directly of that foundational intellectual tradition within a section explicitly entitled “the refutation of the philosophers”!

What this long catalogue of such recurrent intentional “misrepresentations” should suggest, at the very least, is that we should never imagine that Ibn Khaldun—at least in his *Muqaddima*—is simply speaking as a disinterested, objective “historian” and mere “describer”

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<sup>67</sup> One need only recall the equally extreme, problematic, and no doubt intentionally self-contradictory rhetoric of so many of al-Ghazālī’s classical polemics against the ‘philosophers’ and Shiite ‘esotericists’, for example. See the wide range of examples from various Islamic traditions to be included in our forthcoming sourcebook, *Between the Lines: An Introduction to Islamic Esotericism*.

(or “encyclopedist”<sup>68</sup>) of the Islamic intellectual, artistic, cultural and religious traditions which he discusses. Machiavelli did not write his *Discourses* on Livy for scholars of Latin philology.

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<sup>68</sup> Unless those who have spoken of the *Muqaddima* as an ‘encyclopedia’ are rather disingenuously thinking of the thoroughgoingly polemic and political project of Diderot and his associates. That specific analogy is indeed relevant and illuminating.

**Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies & Polemics**

FREDERIC DE JONG & BERND RADTKE (Eds.), 1999

Leiden, Brill

xiii + 831 pp., £/NG???, ISBN 90 04 113002

The remarkable depth and breadth of this volume are such that it is likely to become a classical reference in Islamic Studies for decades to come. The thirty-five highly specialised essays in this volume are the proceedings of a 1995 conference at Utrecht on ‘Sufism and its Opponents’—a considerably more accurate description than the present title, since (as J. Van Ess ironically points out in his opening address), neither mysticism nor spirituality are the subject of any of these studies! Instead, the vast majority of these highly specialised contributions, each focused on a specific cultural region and/or historical period, examine the shifting forms of political and rhetorical opposition to specific institutionalised Sufi ‘orders’ or associated local forms of popular Islamic religious and devotional life over the past eight centuries, with primary emphasis (twenty contributors alone) on polemics reflecting local responses to the familiar challenges of imperialism, Marxist rule and various types of ‘reform’ within the past three centuries. Only four fascinating studies (each by leading authorities) touch on earlier Hanbali, Mu’tazili, Zaydi and Imami attitudes toward the charismatic or ascetic individuals of the formative, ‘classical’ period in Iraq and Iran, prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequently recurrent figures of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Arabî and ‘Abd al-Wahhâb.

The contributions assembled here are of a uniformly high level of scholarship, in many cases representing the fruits of a life’s work of specialised historical study. Accordingly, fellow specialists will delight in the abundance of new references to related sources and studies on often unfamiliar regions of the Islamic world. However, uninitiated readers without a high level of related academic background and interest will probably find this heavy going, since the usual

focus of each essay on localised polemics and struggles for power and public ‘authority’ means that the actual wider forms of religious and devotional life and practice in question—as well as many of the deeper currents of political, social and cultural change underlying those fragmentary polemics—are normally silently assumed by both the original Muslim authors and their specialised students here, with their readers being left to supply those indispensable (and often more interesting) wider contexts. Thus the practical outcome and profound challenges involved in situating each case-study may be compared, for example, to our attempting to reconstruct something of the actual social and cultural realities of recent American religious life—from the perspective of another culture substantially distant in time and space—solely through the analysis of a handful of the surviving polemics and controversies (both learned and popular) between the hundreds of shifting Protestant denominations (to mention only a single analogous element) partly underlying those larger realities.

By far the most important contribution of this volume for Islamic Studies (within the wider field of religious studies) is the broader and more reliable comparative perspective provided by the organisers’ careful inclusion of in-depth studies, at very different periods, of what were too long considered ‘peripheral’ and certainly unfairly neglected regions of the wider Islamic world. Indeed the vast majority of these studies deal precisely with such previously neglected areas: five on China and neighbouring Central Asia, four on Indonesia and Malaysia, five on sub-Saharan Africa and the Sudan, and four from pre-partition India. The comparison and contrast of so many detailed case-studies within the same cultural region is a remarkable help in more accurately contextualising and often questioning familiar stereotypes about broader developments in the ‘Islamic World’, such as the spread of ‘Wahhâbî’ ideas and norms, or the development of diverse forms of ‘Neo-Sufism’ (B. Radtke’s neologism here) in response to such

criticisms of ‘innovation’. Equally important for the student of Islam are the longer-term, diachronic studies of the constantly shifting sociology of religious authority within a given region (here including al-Andalus, Zaydi Yemen, Ottoman Algeria, Eastern Turkistan, and the earlier Ottoman empire), or of the ongoing literary life of recurrent polemic themes (in M. Chodkiewicz’s magisterial discussion of ‘le procès posthume d’Ibn ‘Arabî’).

In short, despite the fragmenting effects of recent area studies and nationalistic emphases, disciplinary specialisations, and the public clamour of contemporary religious polemics, the editors and learned contributors to this volume have brought together a remarkably rich, useful and thought-provoking comparative ‘sourcebook’ which will be indispensable for interested students of Islamic Studies in all its equally indispensable historical and contemporary dimensions.

Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam, by Alexander D. Knysh. Albany, SUNY Press, 1999 (xvi + 449 pages).

Students of Islamic social, religious and intellectual history have long been aware of the central role played for centuries, in virtually every region of the Islamic world, by a certain recurrent polemic "image" of Ibn 'Arabi--one with little or no foundation in either the famous mystic's life or the actual content of his writings--in disputes involving such well-studied figures as Ibn Taymiya, Sirhindi, Simnani (and Kashani), Ibn Khaldun and even recent Egyptian national politics. Many other less-studied episodes from Ottoman, Mogul, Safavid and southeast Asian Islamic history have suggested that those incidents are perhaps only the proverbial "tip of the iceberg," and studies by O. Yahya and M. Chodkiewicz have pointed out the extensive available sources for a more wide-ranging examination of that remarkably persistent polemic tradition. Thus Prof. Knysh's long-awaited study adds another set of important episodes helping to illuminate the genesis of that "polemical image". However, this massively erudite compilation (107 pages of dense footnotes and almost 40 pages of bibliographic references) is clearly intended for a scholarly audience intimately familiar with the issues and personalities in question, with few concessions even to Islamicists from other fields (much less the "educated public"), so the following remarks are intended not only to indicate the contents of this book, but also to suggest something of the contexts (and limitations) which must be understood and provided by each reader in order to appreciate the wider significance of the episodes summarized here.

One must begin--as with so many books in Islamic studies these days--by insisting that it is the *subtitle* which in fact accurately describes the contents and context of this volume. As the author himself repeatedly indicates, and as even cursory readers of this journal are surely well aware, the polemic tradition in question at best provides a helpful set of indirect clues to the massive influence of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, disciples and schools of thought and even wider forms of spiritual practice more loosely associated with his work down to the present day. More importantly, Prof. Knysh's case-studies are almost entirely limited to authors from the central Arab-speaking lands (with one chapter on a handful of Maghrebi writers and another on a work of Taftazani composed in Damascus) writing in the 150 years following Ibn 'Arabi's death in 1258 (in any case, prior to the Ottoman empire), immediately following the Crusades,

Reconquista and the devastating Mongol invasions. This was (until recently, at least) a little-studied period of intense religious and institutional creativity, forging a wide range of new institutions, artistic, social and intellectual forms which furthered the spread of Islam, as a *world-religion*, into new areas of Asia and central Europe and which eventually came to characterize the normative Islam of those regions until at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout this creative period, Muslims from the most diverse religious, cultural and artistic standpoints turned to the writings of Ibn 'Arabi not only to inspire, but also--and this is the crux of the perennial polemic whose origins are outlined here--above all to *justify* those new forms of cultural and religious life.

Thus the wider historical significance of the polemics examined by Prof. Knysh lies (on both sides, although his book concentrates almost entirely on the detractors in this debate) in their indirect role, as the reactions of a conservative learned elite to those far-reaching creative developments, in helping us to appreciate the detailed social and political dynamics of those cumulatively decisive changes in their various local contexts. His individual case studies are most informative and most potentially significant when they enable readers to go beyond the sterile rhetorical gestures repeated almost unchanged over centuries, so that they can begin to appreciate the actual local political and social issues active in each case. In this regard, most non-specialist readers will probably gain the most by beginning their reading with pages 49-60, where Prof. Knysh beautifully summarizes the particular political, social and institutional contexts underlying these polemics in the nascent Mamluk (and late Ayyubid) regime. While the particulars of that single situation are of course not applicable to the other cases he discusses, readers will at least be aware that similar constellations of locally disputed power, authority (in many domains) and change (and resistance to change) can be understood to underlie each of the other polemics he discusses.

To take the original case-studies in order, chapter 2 begins with the earliest biographers (including contemporaries) of Ibn 'Arabi, where Prof. Knysh points out that there is in fact virtually no sign of polemical issues or controversial behavior--including both the *ad hominem* characteristics cited by later detractors or the more flagrant *karamat* mentioned by later supporters--in those early writings. Particularly interesting here are the somewhat distanced perspectives of contemporary Sufi observers--to which one could add the similar personal observations of Shams-e Tabriz, recorded in Aflaki's famous Mevlevi hagiography. Chapter 3,

on the scholar Ibn 'Abd al-Salam, is interesting primarily by way of illustrating in detail for naive modern readers--as anyone who has worked with Islamic *tabaqat* and related materials at any period soon comes to realize--the multitude of ways that later writers were not only unashamed, but in fact fervidly creative, *re*-writers of earlier "historical" materials in order to further their own contemporary (and often highly personal) polemical purposes. What is most important at this crucial historical point--and which constitutes, as it were, a key "missing" chapter of the overall story (available, at best, only to a handful of specialists)--is the larger picture of the rapid initial spread not only of Ibn 'Arabi's own writings (especially the Fusus al-Hikam), but also of the "monist" (*wujudiya*) literatures, both learned and especially poetic, associated with such key Arabic authors as Ibn Sab'in, al-Shushtari, and Ibn al-Farid.

For the next section (chapt. 4) summarizes Ibn Taymiya's extensive and--as is often the case with his remarks--*relatively* nuanced and well-informed critiques which, as Knysh rightly observes, (a) have tended to set the tone for virtually all the later condemnations (from a vast range of intellectual and sectarian positions), particularly in their restriction to a handful of "shocking" *topoi* drawn piecemeal from the Fusus; and (b) are totally tendentious and unreliable, in their focus on the pretended ethical and religious dangers of "monism", either as characterizations or as critiques of Ibn 'Arabi's own writings. Indeed, on a more positive note, in highlighting Ibn Taymiya's generally positive appreciation of a wide range of Ibn 'Arabi's works (including the Futuhat) prior to his discovery of the Fusus, Prof. Knysh actually introduces a key theme and important qualification to which he returns in each subsequent chapter: i.e., the distinctive *ambivalence* of almost all learned critics who are known to have actually *read* any of Ibn 'Arabi's writings, whether that be expressed in the pointed ambiguity and diversity of their remarks for different audiences and occasions, or in those many cases where a prudent attitude of public "hostility" is frequently belied by other evidence--as in a telling contemporary anecdote concerning the late Fazlur Rahman--of private reading, study and even teaching. Given Ibn 'Arabi's distinctive style of writing, any serious study of his work is necessarily a demanding (one might even say lifelong) task, and the active engagement of mind and spirit required to begin to understand his intentions, on even the most superficial level, is profoundly incompatible with a "polemic" attitude of any description.

Indeed the recurrent citation of public book-burnings and the frequent executions and other tribulations of scholars caught up in local political intrigues--dramatic incidents that are

perhaps especially numerous in the revealing chapter 7 (on "Ibn 'Arabi in the Muslim West")--are an indispensable reminder of the mysteries, for the non-expert reader, and often unexplored *particularities* of each of the specific socio-political contexts actually underlying the "polemics" in question; the historian who digs deeply enough inevitably discovers that the battles in question involved far more than words and theological concepts. (Cf. the similar role of Marxist-Leninist polemics in Stalinist Russia or other socialist regimes.) In this regard, for readers with limited background, the discussion of the life and fate of the famous Grenadan vizier and litterateur Ibn al-Khatib (one of the rare "defenders" of Ibn 'Arabi discussed in any detail here) is a particularly vivid painting of the extraordinary circumstances facing creative intellectual and religious spirits in many regions at this time. However, one of the important virtues of Prof. Knysh's juxtaposition of so many cases from a fairly limited time-period is to highlight the primacy--in actual historical terms--of the *particular* local contexts and situations, thereby combating, as he often points out, the misleading stereotypes (of the type "legalism vs. Sufism", "sharia" vs. antinomianism, oppression vs. "liberty", etc.) which often arise from uninformed (or later polemic) encounters with one or another of these disputes. (In this regard, his most detailed case studies demonstrate some of the same clarifying virtues of Carl Ernst's classic study of the actual political contexts of classical Sufi martyrdoms.) One of the especially important "particularities" of Ibn 'Arabi's image (even polemic) in the Maghreb highlighted here is the way it was closely associated at first with his earlier Maghrebi writings--i.e., *not* the Fusus al-Hikam and its philosophic commentators, as typically throughout the later *Mashriq*--and was often directly connected in polemics there (albeit in blatant contradiction with Ibn 'Arabi's own teachings!) with the ongoing North African and Andalusian historical experience of would-be Mahdis and politically active Sufi reformers, or with disputes between various Sufi groups.

Chapters 5 and 8 deal, in historical succession, with a representative range of polemics in Egypt and the central Arab lands, highlighting the repetition of earlier critical motifs--and the frequent ambivalence of '*ulama*' themselves by this time often intimately bound up in the institutions and practices of various forms of Sufism and popular *wali*-centred forms of religious life which had begun to represent influential forms of religious life necessarily finding important support and financing among the Mamluke rulers of Egypt in ways which presaged the dominant structures of Islamic religiosity, far more widely, for centuries to come. If Knysh's account of the deeper background and context of those polemics is relatively summary in those chapters

(and virtually absent in his theological summary of a derivative polemic by the much later Taftazani in chapter 7), his historical approach is far more detailed and helpful in Chapter 9, "Ibn 'Arabi in the Yemen", which constitutes the most detailed and adequate account of the local context of this genre of polemics. There he enables the reader to follow the intrigues and complex power-struggles (and more lasting socio-cultural developments) in which these polemical writings were only one, often relatively superficial weapon, exactly as we can clearly situate and contextualize literally almost identical polemics today in the context of the Egyptian parliament or revolutionary Iran (or at certain points in the past, in light of the detailed contextual studies mentioned in the opening paragraph).

Once we have grasped the local, immediate factors in each of these polemics--and have recognized their unbridgeable distance from actual writings and teachings of Ibn 'Arabi himself--one might still ask if there is not some deeper significance to the recurrence and longevity of this particular polemic, quite apart from the particular historical meanings of each individual case and incident. (This is a particularly challenging question in that each of the world-religious traditions can be seen as being "defined", to some extent, by a range of similarly profound--and long-lived-- internal and external tensions.) Prof. Knysh, in his introductory and concluding remarks, alludes to such questions while suggesting much caution, as befits a conscientious historian. Certainly one is not likely to arrive at an adequate formulation of this deeper question--not to mention any sort of responsible "answer"--without radically calling into question the fundamental assumptions of the medieval '*ulama*' (which curiously often seem to be presented as accurate and self-evident even in the more analytical passages of this study) regarding their supposedly "authoritative" role in creating, defining, and preserving "religion" and religious "community". And it is worth noting that students of religion who would attempt to formulate that further question in an adequate and comprehensive fashion even today still tend to turn to Ibn 'Arabi, directly or indirectly, and openly or surreptitiously, and increasingly *whatever* the historical religious tradition in question....