Chapter 4

Traditionalist Sufism: Outlining the Foundations of the Journey

1 Introduction

In this chapter we commence with a study of al-Wāsiṭī’s method of sulūk by expounding upon a set of recurring elements in his writings that we may identify as its foundations. Although I do not mean to claim that this endeavor will convey the full spectrum of the foundations of Sufism as he envisioned it, I believe that the themes we will focus on were, in his view, essential to the further continuation on the pathway towards God. It is those elements that can either make or break one’s sulūk, so to speak. Whatever the sālik seeks to attain through Sufism without them, or with a faulty understanding of them, will prove fruitless in his view.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first of these deals with knowledge of the Prophet, the second with knowledge of God. These two sections very much stand together as consecutive steps that are supposed to firmly set the sālik on his path. The third section is concerned with al-Wāsiṭī’s negative definition of Sufism. It aims to give an overview of the polemical side of his writings, by which he intended to provide a solid argumentation against practices and doctrines that he felt will thwart the sālik’s journey. We will thus find that the foundations of Sufism are not only defined in terms of what constitutes the correct path, that is, ‘selfing,’ but also in terms of what leads astray from it, that is, ‘othering.’

I will argue that the common thread that connects each of the subjects under consideration is traditionalism. Even when we can clearly distinguish al-Wāsiṭī’s own creative thought at work, he was, in his own mind, constantly anchored in the scholarly tradition of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth. For as he saw it, to deviate from it would be to deviate from the pure path of the righteous predecessors, the Salaf. As we have seen, he held that out of all Muslim fractions that have come into existence since the beginning of Islam, only the traditionalists continued to represent the true Ahl al-Sunna wa-al-Jamā’a. And as many traditionalists had done before him, he regularly reminds us in his corpus that this title belongs solely to the partisans of ḥadīth by rendering it as ‘Ahl al-Sunna wa-al-Ḥadīth,’ and various other modifications of the label, in order to...
emphasize that to be a Sunni Muslim is to be a traditionalist. Moreover, he often buttresses his school’s authority by counting amongst its ranks such early renowned scholars as Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/797), Ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/819–820), Ahmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), and the well-known compilers of hadith collections, such as al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875). By laying claim to such figures, he effectively presents the Ahl al-Ḥadīth movement as the sole representatives of their legacy – or rather, the legacy of the Prophet, which they conveyed most soundly.

When it comes to the way he defined the foundations of Sufism, the current chapter will demonstrate that he very explicitly aimed to build on a traditionalist basis. Each of the following three sections will illustrate how this is apparent in his teachings. We will first and foremost draw attention to his reliance on the nuṣūṣ, the Qur’an and the Sunna, as the primary sources of spiritual knowledge, and to his use of traditionalist hermeneutics to understand them. Secondly, we will occasionally point to instances of overlap between him and Ibn Taymiyya, not to prove that al-Wāsiṭī’s teachings were directly influenced by his shaykh per se, but rather to highlight that both scholars appear to have operated within the same traditionalist framework. Finally, the third section will demonstrate how al-Wāsiṭī worked from a traditionalist framework to exclude from Sufism those Sufis whom he polemicized against.

2 The Muḥammadan Way (al-Tarīqa al-Muḥammadiyya)

He said: “The Lord came from Sinai, and dawned over them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran.”

(Book of Deuteronomy: 33:2)

These words from the Torah and the Old Testament are quoted in Arabic in al-Wāsiṭī’s Talqīḥ al-asrār, where he comments that the first line is an allusion to the coming of Moses, the second to the coming of Jesus, and the third to the

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1 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risalatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghrībi, p. 108; other variations of the label al-Wāsiṭī mentions are: ‘Ahl al-Ḥadīth wa-al-Sunna,’ ‘Ahl al-Sunna wa-al-Athar,’ and ‘Ahl al-Sunna wa-Fuqahā‘ al-Ḥadīth,’ see: Mīzān al-shuyūkh, p. 236 and Qā‘ida fi al-unmūr allatī yanbaghī an takān hamm al-sālik, p. 192.

2 Al-Wāsiṭī, Madkhal ahl al-fiqh, p. 51; Risāla fi ithbāt, p. 40; Qā‘ida fi tasfīyyat al-akhlāq, p. 93; Qā‘ida fi al-unmūr allatī yanbaghī an takān hamm al-sālik, p. 192; ‘Umdat al-ṭullāb, p. 202; Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghrībi, p. 108.
coming of Muḥammad. He will undoubtedly have taken this interpretation from ‘the Proofs of Prophethood’ (dalā’il al-nubuwwa), one of the subcategories of literature on the Prophet Muḥammad into which he had immersed himself. As we have seen in the previous chapter, he took this direction under the guidance of Ibn Taymiyya. However, we have yet to see the far-reaching impact that this had on his spiritual life. In the current section we will explore the result of his endeavor to formulate a form of Sufism in which the Prophet is allotted a central role. As we shall see, one of the primary foundations of Sufism he describes is centered around acquainting oneself with the Prophet and, eventually, establishing a relationship with him.

### 2.1 The Origins of the Ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya

From the perspective of our Iraqi Sufi, true Sufism was nothing other than the pure inward dimension – the bāṭin – of the Prophet Muḥammad’s Sunna. He sometimes conceptualizes his method of sulūk as the Muḥammadan way (al-ṭariqat al-Muḥammadiyya), the guidance of the Muḥammadan light (al-nūr al-Muḥammadī), and the path of Muḥammadan poverty (ṭariqat al-faqr al-Muḥammadi). To characterize the effects of this particular path as opposed to the paths of those Sufis whom he rejects for straying from it, he occasionally likes to use Sufi terminology with the adjective ‘Muḥammadi’ added to it. He speaks, for instance, of the Muḥammadan taste (al-dhawq al-Muḥammadī) and the Muḥammadan state (al-ḥāl al-Muḥammadī). As we will see, he was thereby separating himself from other trends of Sufism that were at variance with the principles of traditionalism he adhered to. His writings convey again and again that to deviate from the path of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth is to deviate from the Muḥammadan way.

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3 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Talqīḥ al-asrār*, p. 54.
4 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Qāʿida fī bayān ‘amal yawm wa-layla li-al-ābār*, p. 27; Qāʾida fi asnāf al-taʾalluh, p. 151; and in the title of his *Miṣṭāḥ al-marīfa wa-al-ḥāda li-ahl al-talāb wa-al-irāda al-rāghihīn fi al-dukāḥ ilā dār al-saʿāda min al-ṭariqat al-muḥammadiyya allātī laysat munḥarīfatān ‘an al-jāddā* (The key to intimate knowledge and worship for those who seek and desire [God], who wish to enter the Abode of Happiness through the Muḥammadan way, which never deviates from the right course).
5 ʿUmdat al-ṭullāb, p. 198; *al-Tadhkira*, p. 40.
6 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Qāʿida mukhtaṣara fī ṭarīq al-faqr ʿalā minḥāj al-rasūl*; the whole treatise is about Muḥammadan poverty, which is referred to as a distinct ṭariqa, or path, on p. 25. In his *Mīzān al-shuyūkh*, p. 247, he explains that spiritual poverty, or faqr, signifies the effort to remain constantly connected to the Prophet and to God.
7 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Qāʾida fi asnāf al-taʾalluh*, pp. 153–154; al-Bulgha, f. 69a.
8 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Qāʾida fi asnāf al-taʾalluh*, p. 153; Qāʾida tatimma li-hādhihi al-qāʾida fi al-taʾalluhāt, p. 156.
9 A similar observation was made by Geoffroy, “Le traité de soufisme,” p. 95.
In the field of Sufi studies, the term ‘ṭariqa Muḥammadīyya’ is mostly known as a concept that is characteristic of a distinct type of reformist Sufi movement that emerged during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which scholars have referred to as neo-Sufism. Bruce B. Lawrence, for instance, has observed that

the nineteenth century witnessed a more explicit, and more openly public, awareness of the Prophet as the crucial link between God and humankind. It has been etched in the phrase al-ṭariqa al-Muḥammadīyya. What underlies al-ṭariqa al-Muḥammadīyya ... is not just loyalty to the Prophet but connection to his reality (al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadīyya) and to his light (al-nūr al-Muḥammadī).

The ‘Muḥammadan way’ as a Sufi concept with a much longer history has already been established by Vincent J. Cornell, who thought to have found “the apparent originator of the term” in ʿAbd Allāh al-Ghazwānī (d. 935/1528–1529), a Moroccan Sufi shaykh of the Jazūliyya order. The latter coined it as the title for his doctrine that based the “authority of the Sufi shaykh ... on an explicit analogy between the saint and the Prophet Muḥammad.” Evidently, the term actually goes back at least two more centuries before al-Ghazwānī, as it can be found in the writings of al-Wāsiṭī and, perhaps surprisingly, also in those of Ibn Taymiyya.

Fritz Meier already noted that Ibn Taymiyya coined the term ‘Muḥammadīyya,’ and overlooked that he actually used the term ‘ṭariqa Muḥammadīyya’ as well. Ibn Taymiyya adopts it in two treatises as something of an umbrella term for

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10 Bruce B. Lawrence, “Sufism and neo-Sufism,” in The New Cambridge History of Islam Volume 6, ed. R. Hefner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 356, where he specifically identifies the concept with the North African movement of Muḥammad al-Sanūsī (d. 1859) and the north Indian movement of Sayyid Aḥmad Barelwī (d. 1831). Note that the early proponents of the neo-Sufism theory have mistakenly understood the ṭariqa Muḥammadīyya as an effort to develop a concept of union with the Prophet in order to replace the concept of union with God. This understanding has been criticized by Rex S. O’Fahey & Bernd Radtke, “Neo-Sufism reconsidered,” Der Islam, 70 (1973): pp. 64–71; for a response to this criticism, see: John O. Voll, “Neo-Sufism: Reconsidered Again,” Canadian Journal of African Studies Vol. 42, No. 2/3 (2008): pp. 322–324.

11 Cornell, Realm of the Saint, p. 219; see also pp. 226–227. Fritz Meier also discussed the history of the term ṭariqa Muḥammadīyya, and traced back its earliest use to the Ottoman scholar Muḥammad b. ʿIr ʿAli al-Birkawī (d. 981/1573); cf. Nachgelassene Schriften, pp. 335–346, where he also discusses the further history of the term after al-Birkawī.

12 Ibid. p. 157.
the entirety of the traditionalist path towards God. He mentions it in his earlier-quoted letter to the Sufi shaykh al-Manbijî, referring to the **ṭarīqa Muḥammadīyya** as the sound religious path that maintains a perfect equilibrium between the law and the spiritual. Its second mention is in a treatise that addresses al-Ghazâlî’s claim that the Sufis are the best of all Muslim groups he had studied (the ‘groups’ being the *mutakallimūn*, the Ismā‘īliyya Shi‘ites, the philosophers, and the Sufis). Ibn Taymiyya’s response is that “he [al-Ghazâlî] was not aware of the path of the *Ahl al-Sunna wa-al-Ḥadīth* from among the knowers [of God] (‘ārifīn) and thus makes no mention of it, even though this is the pure Muḥammadian way (*al-ṭarīqa al-muḥammadiyya al-maḥḍa*).” What is interesting here is that, like al-Wâsiṭī, Ibn Taymiyya equates the Muḥammadan way with the path of the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth*.

This raises the question as to whether it could have been al-Wâsiṭī who had first coined the term, or whether he took it from his master. Initially, I had deemed the latter option more plausible, since it was, after all, the Ḥanbalī shaykh al-Islām who guided al-Wâsiṭī to focus on the Prophet’s biography.

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13 For Fritz Meier’s mention of Ibn Taymiyya in this regard, see Fritz Meier’s *Nachgelassene Schriften. Band 1. Bemerkungen zur Mohammedverehrung. Teil 2. Die tāṣliya in Sufischen Zusammenhängen. Herausgegeben von Bernd Radtke* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 333–334.

14 Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, vol. 2, p. 452.

15 Ibid. p. 57.

16 It is necessary to mention that Éric Geoffroy (in “Le traité de soufisme,” p. 93) discusses several of the particularities of al-Wâsiṭī’s concept of the Muḥammadian way, among which the method of connecting to the Prophet’s incorporeal presence, which we will elaborate on below. In this method Geoffroy recognizes what he calls an “Akbarian heritage.” He argues that it was due to al-Wâsiṭī’s choice to settle in Damascus that he practiced caution in the formulation of his teachings, which would have been why he only referred to certain doctrines “in an allusive way without naming them.” Thus, Geoffroy continues, “he does not literally use the expression *nūr muḥammadī* or *ḥaqīqa muḥammadiyya*, for this would be equivalent to validating the Akbarian doctrine of ‘the perfect man’ (*al-insān al-kāmil*), reproved by Ibn Taymiyya.” It is certainly not impossible that our Iraqi Sufi was in some way influenced by Ibn ‘Arabi’s school in his formulation of the Muḥammadian way, since he was familiar with its teachings as we have seen in the previous chapter. However, his elaboration on the concept is so different from what Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine says regarding the Muḥammadian reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*) that this seems farfetched to me; cf. for instance: Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, p. 76–77; Michel Chodkiewicz, “Towards Reading the Futūḥât Makkiyya,” in *The Meccan Revelations Volume 11*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz (New York: Pir Press, 2004), pp. 30–34. Moreover, we may note that the concept of the Muhammadan light (*al-nūr al-Muḥammadī*) can actually be traced back to the ninth century already, cf. Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), p. 218. So, at first sight, I would argue that there is no explicit indication that the Muḥammadian way contains purely Akbarian influences.
However, as the following study of al-Wāsiṭī’s writings will show, there are indications that it may in fact have been the other way around.

In order to understand the roots of the ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya we must return to the moment al-Wāsiṭī had started following the Damascene traditionalists, right before he renounced the Shādhiliyya. We may recall that he closed his autobiography with the conclusion that the best path towards God is to combine the theological foundations of the traditionalists with the Sufism of the Shādhiliyya. His story appears to continue in Qāʿida fī aṣnāf al-taʿalluh wa-khuṣūsiyyat taʿalluh kull ṭāʾifa min al-ṭawāʾif (Precept on the Ways to Exercise Devotion to God and Every Group’s Particularity in [Their] Exercise of Devotion), a treatise that clearly postdates his autobiography. Here he mentions that he increasingly noticed that the tastes (adhwāq) of the Sufis he had accompanied were at odds with the essentials of the traditionalists he now aspired to follow. He observed, for instance, that the latter group’s affirmation of God’s highness and aboveness over His Throne (al-ʿuluw wa-al-fawqiyya ʿalā al-ʿarsh) has an illuminating effect on the heart, so that their taste (dhawq) conforms to the verses of the Qur’an, exactly as revealed to the Prophet. But when occupied with his spiritual state during the tastes of the Sufis, al-Wāsiṭī says that his heart would experience constraint (ḍīq) during the recitation of the Qur’an. While he had initially thought that this was simply due to the triumph of this spiritual state, he gradually became convinced that this only occurred when he turned away from the Prophet’s rūḥānīyya – his spiritual presence – in favor of the rūḥānīyya of certain Sufi shaykhs.17 It was only among the traditionalists that he was able to connect to the Prophet’s rūḥānīyya. Thus, he claims his heart became illuminated by the lights of prophethood, the ḥadīth, and the sīra, all subjects he was now closely studying under the guidance of his newly found shaykhs. Nonetheless, he could not help feeling that the traditionalist path was incomplete without the intensity he experienced in the nearness (qurb) and intimacy (uns) that he found through the rūḥānīyya of the Sufis he so greatly admired.18

Referring to himself in the third person, he reflects upon this episode as follows:

17 We have come across the term rūḥānīyya several times now. Due to its significance to the subject at hand, it is in place to provide a brief explanation of it here. Al-Wāsiṭī clearly expected his reader to know what it is he is speaking of, as he never explains what he exactly means by the term. Éric Geoffroy translates it as “présence spirituelle,” and explains that it often means something’s spirituality as opposed to its corporeality. When it comes to the rūḥānīyya of a deceased Prophet or saint, he says, it refers to their spiritual impulse, or even his subtle body, cf. “Le traité de soufisme,” pp. 89–90. In light of al-Wāsiṭī’s use of the term, I agree with Geoffroy that this is indeed the term’s signification in his works.

18 Al-Wāsiṭī, Qāʿida fī aṣnāf al-taʿalluh, pp. 151–152.
O dear God! Would that he knew that it is an incorrect view to hold that the Muḥammadan taste (al-dhawq al-Muḥammadī) is lacking until it is completed by this other taste [of the Sufi shaykhs]! On the contrary, the Muḥammadan taste is perfect and complete and, hence, all good that these [other] paths contain only branches from it, despite their deviation from it. All good that they contain comes from the Muḥammadan taste, while any gloom and darkness that they have comes from their deviation from it. Thus this man fell into a state of confusion, which only God knew, and so he sought His help and appealed to Him to guide him.19

In short, as the contradictions between the way of the Sufis and that of the traditionalists became clear to him, he could not but turn to God for guidance.

And guidance he received, so he tells us. God facilitated the withdrawal of all other tastes from the core of his heart (sirr), he writes, enabling him to focus completely on the ṭūḥāniyya of the Prophet without interference from the ṭūḥāniyya of any shaykh or Sufi master. In doing so he was provided with the definite way out of his state of confusion, which he shares with his readers in the following anecdote, again written in the third person:

When he did this, God disclosed an idea to his insight (baṣīra) that alludes to a sublime point, of great significance to those who recognize its worth. It was an inspiration (ilhām an) that came from God’s grace upon this weak and confused servant, whose state of affairs had brought him into a depression. This [inspiration] was that it is this ṭūḥāniyya of the Messenger (Ṣ) that is linked [directly] to the Lord (ʿAJ), in the sense that it is His law and His path, and the very Book that He revealed, and His spirit (rūḥ) which He bestowed upon His servant and Messenger.20 It is this [ṭūḥāniyya] that He loves and is pleased with, and it is this [ṭūḥāniyya] that contains no deviation between it and Him. On the contrary, it corresponds with Him in every respect! When this point became firmly established in his innermost secret (sirr), and his heart drank from it in certainty of it, and his soul became convinced of its correctness – then the Abrahamic-Muḥammadan state of intimate friendship made it clear

19 Ibid. p. 152.
20 A reference to the Qur’an, where we often find that there is a particular rūḥ that would serve as a vessel of the revelations God sent to the Prophets. With regard to the Prophet Muḥammad’s contact with this rūḥ, see for instance Q. 26:192–194: “Truly it is the revelation of the Lord of all Being, brought down by the Faithful Spirit (al-rūḥ al-amīn) upon your heart [Muḥammad], so you would be one of the warners.”
to him that, in many respects, what he used to find during the Sufi taste was [actually] the opposite of what he thought it was.\footnote{Al-Wāsiṭī, \textit{Qāʿida fī aṣnāf al-taʿalluh}, p. 153. The last sentence reads: “\textit{ʿakasa ʿalayhi al-ḥāl al-Ibrāhīmī al-khalīlī al-Muḥammadi bi-aḍʿaf aḍʿaf mā kāna yajiduhu fī al-dhawq al-ṣūfī.”} 

This is perhaps one of the most significant passages on our current topic in al-Wāsiṭī’s writings, because it presents us with the first-hand account of the way in which the \textit{ṭariqa Muḥammadiyya} was conceived. We will therefore briefly recount what it is that we are being told here.

The first matter of import is that while his step towards the establishment of the \textit{ṭariqa Muḥammadiyya} was certainly deeply influenced and, in a sense, even provoked by Ibn Taymiyya (and perhaps also other members of the Taymiyyan circle), it was in the end al-Wāsiṭī himself who gave it form. The above anecdote gives the impression that what we are dealing with here is a key aspect of his method in \textit{sulūk} that was very much his own conception.

The realization al-Wāsiṭī claims to have reached through divine intervention was that the purest link between man and God is not found through any Sufi shaykh, but only through the incorporeal presence of the Prophet, his \textit{rūḥāniyya}, as his corporeal being has passed away from the material world. But since the Prophet was the vessel of God’s speech on earth and, as such, the embodiment of the Qur’an, his spiritual presence continues to be mankind’s guide to God.\footnote{Ibid.}

Another point of interest is found in the last sentence of our quote, where al-Wāsiṭī makes mention of the Abrahamic-Muḥammadan state of intimate friendship, ‘\textit{al-ḥāl al-Ibrāhīmī al-khalīlī al-Muḥammadi},’ which later in the same treatise he calls the only correct spiritual state.\footnote{Ibid. pp. 153–154.} We must take note that he is by no means implying that the \textit{ṭariqa Muḥammadiyya} is mixed with the ways of other Prophets, such as that of Abraham in this case. It is to him wholly Muḥammadan. However, for our Iraqi Sufi the bond between these two Messengers, Abraham and Muḥammad, is particularly significant in that God took both of them as His \textit{khalīl}, or intimate friend (hence the added adjective “\textit{al-khalīlī}” in the quoted passage).\footnote{In his \textit{Qāʿida tatimma li-hādhihi al-qāʿida fī al-taʿalluhāt}, p. 156 al-Wāsiṭī specifically addresses this issue, and cites a canonical \textit{ḥadīth} in which Muḥammad reportedly said that, like Abraham, “your companion,” that is, Muḥammad, “is the intimate friend of God.” For this tradition, see for instance: Muslim, \textit{al-Musnad al-ṣaḥīḥ}, vol. 4, p. 1855.} While this state of intimate friendship with God (\textit{khulla} or \textit{khilla}) was particular to their status as Prophets, al-Wāsiṭī holds that the \textit{wali}, or ‘friend of God,’ can also attain a share of it, which he refers to...
elsewhere as the station of Abrahamic-Muḥammadan friendship (maqām al-
khullā al-Ibrāhīmiyya al-Muḥammadiyya).²⁵ As we shall see in chapter 5, the
final stage in al-Wāsiṭī’s Sufism is precisely the point at which God takes the
sālik as His beloved (maḥbūb), which we may take as an indication that he
viewed the terms khalīl and maḥbūb as synonyms in that regard. If we return,
then, to our passage from Qāʿida fī aṣnāf al-ta’alluh, we may conclude that it
was the above divine inspiration he claims to have experienced that compelled
him to connect the entirety of his spiritual journey, from its beginning to its
highest peak, to the example of the Prophet Muḥammad.

What we learn from this is that, as suggested in the beginning of this sec-
tion, al-Wāsiṭī aimed to distinguish his sulūk from that of other Sufis. By laying
claim to the Prophet as the main source for spiritual guidance he effectively
granted Prophetic authority to his teachings, which now represented the au-
thentic inward Sunna rather than the conceptions of some Sufi master. We
may understand this in light of his effort to formulate a Sufism that is compat-
ible with the puritan, nuṣūṣ-based principles of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth. With this
background in mind we now turn to his other writings to study how exactly the
Prophet should function as a guide on the Muḥammadan way.

2.2 How to Practice the Muḥammadan Way

One of the first steps in the Muḥammadan way that is repeatedly mentioned
throughout al-Wāsiṭī’s works is that the sālik should take the Prophet as his
shaykh and stick to his guidance, inwardly and outwardly.²⁶ The proof for
that, he says, is found in the Qur’an, where God commands the Prophet to say
to his followers: “If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive
you your sins” [Q. 3:31].²⁷ Several times al-Wāsiṭī compares this relationship
with the Prophet to the loyal devotion that the Sufis display towards their
shaykhs, concerning which he says: “stick to him like the fuqarā’ in our age
stick to their shaykhs.”²⁸ Beneath the surface of this remark, and others like it,
clearly lays his frustration with the way he had often witnessed the Sufis he
met during his travels putting far too much emphasis on their shaykhs. By al-
lowing their hearts to be filled with the secrets (asrār) and authority (rabbā-
nīyya) of their shaykhs, he argues, they have become veiled from the guidance

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²⁵ Al-Wāsiṭī, Qāʿida fī aṣnāf al-ta’alluh, p. 154; and his Qāʿida fī al-jidd wa-al-ikthād, pp. 250–
251.
²⁶ See al-Wāsiṭī’s ‘Umdat al-ṭullāb, p. 198; Qāʿida mukhtaṣara, p. 25; Miftāḥ ṭarīq al-muḥibbūn,
p. 279; Waṣīyya ilā ba’d al-quḍāt, p. 141.
²⁷ Al-Wāsiṭī, Qāʿidat al-rūḥāniyyāt wa fīhā bayān li-mā qabluhā, p. 297.
²⁸ Al-Wāsiṭī, Waṣīyya ilā ba’d al-quḍāt, p. 141; For similar statements, see his: Qāʿida mukhta-
ṣara, p. 25; Miftāḥ al-maʿrifa wa-al-ʿibāda, p. 264; al-Bulgha, f. 70b–71a.
and supervision of the Messenger, and thus deviate from the path of arrival (wuṣūl). He believes that the true reason why the Sufis fail in that regard is because they are unable to extract the secrets of spiritual knowledge (asrār al-maʿrifa) from the Sunna themselves, thinking that their shaykhs have already done this for them: “They thus allow the Sunna to take direction over their outward being, while turning towards their shaykhs when it comes to the divine secrets and realities (al-asrār wa-al-haqqāʾiq).”

But as he explains in a metaphor, the Prophet is like the pure beginning of a spring; if you fail to drink Muhammadanfaqr directly from him, you will be taking water that has been mixed with salty earth, whose colors have turned yellow due to its distance from the source.

The main drive behind attaching oneself to the Prophet ought to be love, which he divides into two categories. The first of these is an obligatory (fard) expression of love, the second a commendable (sunna) one. Obligatory love is to accept what the Prophet has brought in the way of worship for the sake of God’s love, to abide by the commands and prohibitions as revealed to him by God, and to strive for the victory of God’s religion in jihād with one’s life and wealth.31 To perfect the former, the sālik has to practice the second category of love for the Prophet, which is to closely follow him. This is realized in two ways.

First, one is to excel in imitating his example and to constantly remember him and hold him in great awe, to the degree that the heart trembles at his mention. He explains that one of the methods to reach this is to incorporate praise for the Prophet in one’s daily litany (wird). Litanies were employed by practically all Sufi groups of his age, and mostly consisted of a specific set of Qur’anic verses and invocations put together by a shaykh for the purpose of recital at fixed times. While it is not mentioned whether al-Wāsiṭī himself ever composed one for his disciples, we know from his writings that he strongly encouraged them to take a litany to recite during the last third of the night, and that this should include a multitude of prayers for blessings upon the Prophet (kathrat al-ṣalāt ʿalayhi), commonly known as the taṣliya.

29 Al-Wāsiṭī, ‘Umdat al-ṭullāb, pp. 198–199.
30 Al-Wāsiṭī, Qāʿida mukhtaṣara, p. 24.
31 Al-Wāsiṭī, al-Sirr al-maṣūn, p. 46, and this is mentioned as the third necessary aspect of love for the Prophet in Qawāʿid al-nubuwwāt, p. 300. It must be noted that the necessity of adhering to God’s commands and avoiding His prohibitions is a catchphrase repeated endlessly by al-Wāsiṭī throughout his writings.
32 Remembering the Prophet’s attributes and closely following him is the second necessary aspect of love for the Prophet in al-Wāsiṭī’s Qawāʿid al-nubuwwāt, p. 300. For his mention of the taṣliyya in the werd, see: al-Sīr al-maṣūn, p. 46 where he names it as an aspect of commendable love, and also: Miftāḥ ṭarīq al-awliyāʾ, p. 31; Qāʿida mukhtaṣara, p. 25; Qāʿida
A second way to realize commendable love for the Prophet is to acquire intimate knowledge (maʿrifā) of him. What is interesting here is that al-Wāsiṭī does not appear to define the term maʿrifā as some purely spiritual, God-inspired form of knowledge, as is its usual connotation in Sufism. He holds that there are degrees to maʿrifā, with maʿrifā of the Prophet being the first essential foundation. As he explains it, this particular form of knowledge is the accumulation of as much detailed information about the Prophet’s biography and Sunna as one can acquire, leading to a profound and, indeed, spiritual insight into his being. This is only achieved by reconstructing all facets of his life, from its beginning to its end, through a study of the nuṣūṣ. Of particular importance is the genre of Prophetic biography (sing. sūra, pl. siyar) and its subcategories, such as the accounts of his military expeditions (maghāzī) and the aforementioned proofs of Prophethood (dalāʾil al-nubuwwa), wherein special focus is laid on the Prophet’s character and the stories of his miracles and predictions. A crucial role is also allotted to a study of the ḥadīth collections: first and foremost the Ṣahīḥ books, followed by the Sunan and Musnad categories to acquire more detail.

In al-Wāsiṭī’s view, any reasonable person who devotes himself to maʿrifā of Muhammad’s Prophethood with an unbiased, rational approach should become convinced that he was indeed God’s Messenger. He argues that since his Prophethood is the pillar of sound faith upon which the religion is built, it is essential for the sālik’s heart to reach certainty about him and that all doubts are cast away. The importance of this maʿrifā to the early stages of sulūk is undoubtedly also what motivated our Iraqi Sufi to himself compose several books on the Prophet’s life.

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33 Al-Wāsiṭī, al-Sirr al-maṣūn, p. 46. Gaining maʿrifā of the Prophet’s time and biography and studying his miracles and distinguished status is mentioned as the first necessary aspect of love for the Prophet in Qawāʿid al-nubuwwāt, p. 299.

34 Al-Wāsiṭī, Miftāḥ al-maʿrifa wa-al-ʿibāda, p. 265; ‘Umdat al-ṭullāb, p. 236.

35 Al-Wāsiṭī, Waṣiyya ilā baʿḍ al-quḍāt, p. 141; and also: Madkhal ahl al-fiqh wa-al-lisān, pp. 49–53; and Qāʿida fi ṭaqwiyyat al-sālik ilā al-wuṣūl ilā maṭlūbiḥi, p. 121.

36 Al-Wāsiṭī, Talqīḥ al-asrār, pp. 54–55; Qāʿida fi ṭaqwiyyat al-sālik ilā al-wuṣūl ilā maṭlūbiḥi, p. 121.

37 See for instance al-Wāsiṭī’s Mukhtaṣar sīrat Rasūl Allāh, which is by far his lengthiest work. On f. 3a, he states in the third person that his desire in writing the Mukhtaṣar is to “abridge the entire biography [of the Prophet] out of his affection for other seekers like him, and in order to make that which is difficult from it easy for the aspirants (murīdin)
With the above maʿrifā acquired, al-Wāsiṭī takes a fascinating turn when it comes to its further application. There are several instances where he states that the sālik's knowledge of the Prophet's life and times enables him to meet with him:

If, my brother, you yearn for something of these realities of faith (al-ḥaqāʾiq al-īmāniyya) and tastes of spiritual knowledge (al-adhwāq al-ʿirfāniyya), then think of yourself as if you are in the time of ignorance (fa-jʿal nafsaka ka-annaka fī zaman al-jāhiliyya) and travel to the Messenger of God (Ṣ) so that you can meet him. Then believe in him and become Muslim at the hands of him. Your journey to him and meeting with him is [done through] your study of his biography (sīra) and all that has been narrated from him about his life and normative practice (sunna), and the biographies of his Companions and the elite of his followers.38

In similar statements made in other treatises we find al-Wāsiṭī explaining that maʿrifā of the Prophet enables you to “imagine him in Medina as if seeing him,”39 that “you ought to be present [with him] as if you are seeing him,”40 and that, consequently, “the Prophetic days become such that it is as if they are perceived with the eye.”41 In what is arguably his most detailed account on the way to see the Prophet by means of one’s acquired knowledge of him, we find that this actually pertains to meeting him and establishing a ṣuḥba relationship with him in a literal sense:

Whoever seeks the greatest bliss, the perfect annihilation (fanāʾ) in this world and the Afterlife ... and the unseen treasure ... he must meet the Messenger of God (Ṣ) and accompany him. This is achieved by means of those lights [the servant] has within himself that hold fast to his Sunna

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38 Al-Wāsiṭī, Lawāmiʿ al-istirshād fī al-farq bayna al-tawḥīd wa-al-ittiḥād, p. 94. For the translation, I cite my article: Arjan Post, “A Taymiyyan Sufi’s Refutation of the Akbarian School: ʿImād al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Wāsiṭī (d. 711/1311) Lawāmiʿ l-istirshād,” in CHESFAME proceedings IX, ed. K. D’Hulster, G. Schallenbergh, & J. van Steenbergen (Leuven, Paris, Bristol: Peeters, 2019), p. 322.
39 “Yataṣawwarahu fī al-Madīna... ka-annahu yarāhu,” cf. al-Wāsiṭī, Qāʿida fī taqwiyat al-sālik ʿalā al-wuṣūl ilā maṭlūbihi, p. 121.
40 “Wa-anta ḥādiran ka-annaka tarāhu,” cf. al-Wāsiṭī, Miftāḥ ṭarīq al-awliyāʾ, p. 31.
41 “Wa-taṣīru al-ayyām al-nabawiyya ka-annahā bi-manẓir al-ʿayn,” cf. al-Wāsiṭī, Qāʿida fī al-umūr allatī yanbaghī an takūn hamm al-sālik, p. 193.
and the external aspects of his law (shari‘atīhi). These lights are produced amidst the sparks of [the servant’s] endurance in adhering to the narrated traditions (al-ittibā‘ li-al-āthār), manifestly with his outward body parts, and inwardly with his intentions. Now, meeting [the Prophet], visiting him, and witnessing him is not conceived with one’s external sensory perception (al-ḥiss al-zāhir), for he has passed on from the world of manifestation to the world of the unseen. Accompanying him and witnessing him can only occur while being absent in the unseen realm (ghayb fī ghayb), and inwardly in one’s innermost secret (sīrr fī sīrr).

When the servant knows [the Prophet’s] biography, his times, his Sunna, his distinguishing marks, his supernatural abilities (khawāriqahu), his miracles (mu‘jizātahu), his signs, and his marks of honor, and knows the relationship between him and the Prophets who preceded him – he has then come to know him, arrived unto him with his heart, and witnessed him in the unseen (fī al-ghayb), provided that he loves him at that point.

An indication of love for him is [the servant's] concern for intimate knowledge (ma’rīfa) of [the Prophet’s] Sunna after [having acquired] intellectual knowledge (‘ilm) of his biography. He must then clothe himself with this [love], witnessing the lights of his splendor as if he is with him in his age, neither separating himself from him inwardly nor manifestly!

... As it is said:

Although you are in the unseen, veiled from my gaze
The heart looks at you from a distance, far away.42
Whoever at one point during his lifetime is overtaken by this state, he has arrived unto the Messenger (Ṣ) and his suḥba!43

To place the above passage in al-Wāsiṭī’s overall narrative on the Muḥammadan way, let us reiterate what we have thus far seen. We began with the path towards love for the Prophet, which requires conforming to the religion that God revealed to him, imitating and remembering him, and acquiring ma’rīfa of him through a study of the nuṣūṣ. It is then through the combination of all these steps and the love that is thereby realized that the doors to meeting him and accompanying him are opened. This occurs in the unseen realm, al-ghayb, perceived by the human being with his innermost secret, al-sīrr, which al-Wāsiṭī

42 Interestingly, this line comes from a poem by the controversial Sufi al-Ḥusayn b. Maṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), see his Dīwān al-Ḥallāj, ed. ‘Abduh Wāzin (Beirut: Dār al Jadid, 1998), p. 80.

43 Al-Wāsiṭī, Qā‘ida fī al-wiṣāl wa-al-liqā‘, wa-hiya bughyat al-muḥibbin wa-rūḥ al-mushtaqin, pp. 268–269.
defines as the heart’s kernel (ḥabbat al-qalb). He describes this process on different occasions as seeing the Prophet with the eye of one’s heart (bi-ʿayn qalbīḥiʿ/ʿaynay fuʿādika), one’s insight (baṣīra), or one’s inner vision (ʾiyān), all of which he uses as synonyms. In one treatise he calls it ‘the witnessing of Prophethood’ (mashhad al-nubūwwa), wherein the sālik witnesses the possessor of Prophethood (ṣāḥib al-nubūwwa).

Although he only rarely attempts to elaborate on the nature of this vision, it clearly had to do with connecting to the Prophet’s rūḥāniyya. In one treatise he writes that the above-mentioned trajectory of love is aimed at reaching a state wherein one’s spirit becomes intermingled with that of the Prophet (mamzūjatan bi-al-arwāḥ). In a precept on Prophethood he delves deeper into what he means by that. He explains that when the servant has realized love for the Prophet and clothed himself with it, he obtains the realities of his mysteries from the light of Prophethood; through his baṣīra he will know the link between Muḥammad and the Messengers who preceded him, and acknowledge that their lights come from one and the same niche (mishkāt). He will then find unification (ittiḥād) between their spirits, of which [the servant] will be conscious during his [everyday] conduct (fi muʿāmalatihi).

Based on the above, it becomes clear that al-Wāṣiṭī did not regard the sālik’s attachment to the rūḥāniyya of the Prophet as a mere symbolic act to oppose the Sufis’ exaggerated focus on their shaykhs. He conceived it as an actual master–disciple relationship with the Prophet, who in spite of his absence from the material world could still exercise his influence upon the sālik. Since it is the Prophet’s rūḥ, his spirit, that remains accessible in the spiritual world, the connection with him is necessarily one of the spirit as well.

Besides the Prophet himself, we find occasional hints that the elite of his Companions (ṣaḥāba) are also allotted a role in the ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya. In al-Wāṣiṭī’s view, their guidance is indispensable because they were present as the sīra unfolded and God’s revelations to their Prophet progressed, and they were, in Qur’anic terms, al-sābiqūn al-awwalūn, the First and Foremost in
following him. Although he never explicitly says so, he characterizes them as archetype Sufi masters who, due to their proximity to the Prophet, were able to reach utmost perfection in acquiring a set of spiritual qualities that we may recognize as distinct Sufi terms:

They [the elite of the Companions] were the people most immersed in spiritual states, such as renunciation (zuhd), trust (tawakkul), contentment (ridā), love (ḥubb), longing (shawq), annihilation (fanāʾ), and subsistence (baqāʾ). But due to the strength of their faith and the exaltedness of their ranks, the effects of intoxication (sukārā) that these states bring about were not visible on them. On the contrary, they were strengthened by the light of Prophethood so that they applied these states in [their] deeds and strove on the path of God through long, dark nights. This is the utmost degree of perfection! Do not wonder at this as you would at someone who is sober and drunk at the same time, for the divine gift contains an abundance of Muḥammadan traits that continued through the elect of the Companions, giving them spiritual strength and stability (al-qawwā wa-al-tamkīn), and a state of separation while being united (al-farq fī al-jamʿ), and of sobriety while being intoxicated (al-ṣaḥw fī al-sukr)!52

The last sentence in particular reflects al-Wāsiṭī’s sentiment that the Companions had reached spiritual perfection. What is implied is that even as they were completely absorbed in their awareness of God, they always had their feet firmly planted in the material world. And since the elite of the Companions cannot possibly be surpassed by anyone after them,

it is from what remains of their milk (ridāʾihim) that those [who come after them] will have to be nurtured, and on them that they have to rely for the spiritual realities (al-ḥaqāʾiq). For they had a certain drink (sharābawā) that they would take, of which there [still] remain drops that will quench the thirst of the people who follow them.53

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51 The title al-sābiqūn al-awwalūn comes from the Qur’an, 9:100: “And the Foremost, the first of the Emigrants and the Helpers (al-sābiqūn al-awwalūn min al-muhājirīn wa-al-ansār) and those who followed them in good-doing.” See also: al-Wāsiṭī, ‘Umdat al-ṭullāb, pp. 207–208.
52 Al-Wāsiṭī, Lawāmiʿ al-istirshād, pp. 91–92; Post, “A Taymiyyan Sufi’s Refutation,” p. 319.
53 Al-Wāsiṭī, Lawāmiʿ al-istirshād, pp. 94–95.
As with the Prophet, al-Wāṣiṭī held it possible to enter into their presence and perceive them with the eye of the heart through a study of their biographies.\textsuperscript{54} For although they have passed away, he says, “for those whose hearts are opened to their guidance, they are, in reality, alive with God!”\textsuperscript{55}

2.3 \textit{The Role of the Shaykh in the Muḥammadan Way}

Based on the above, the question arises whether al-Wāṣiṭī saw any need for a living shaykh as a spiritual guide for those who follow the Muḥammadan way. He often gives the impression that the Prophet suffices as one’s shaykh. This, however, is not entirely so. At times he reveals that in the beginning of the path there is in fact a dire need to enter a master–disciple relationship with a teacher who is a knower of God (\textit{ustādhun ʿārifun}), because the spiritual novice (\textit{murīd}) may be susceptible to all kinds of excesses under the guise of Sufism. Constant fasting, for instance, may appear as a pious deed that brings about proximity to God, but in the long term it can do more harm than good to his spiritual state, and eventually even cause him to deviate.\textsuperscript{56} It is one of the tasks of a spiritual teacher to guide him through any such pitfalls. In light of its necessity in the Muḥammadan way, it is thus necessary to briefly scrutinize how al-Wāṣiṭī envisioned this master–disciple relationship.

First, there was, in his view, only one kind of shaykh who is truly fit for \textit{tarbiyat al-sālikīn} – the spiritual training of the travelers unto God – and that is someone who has successfully traversed the entire path himself. From al-Wāṣiṭī’s perspective, this means that he must have gone through all the steps of \textit{sulūk} (which will be discussed in the next chapter) and has thereby arrived unto God spiritually. In the terminology of the Sufis he explains that such a person has returned from intoxication (\textit{sukr}) to sobriety (\textit{ṣaḥw}), from annihilation (\textit{fanāʾ}) to subsistence (\textit{baqāʾ}), and attained the station of stability (\textit{tamkīn}) – though none of this is on his own accord, for a master of this degree has been chosen by God to become a guide (\textit{murshid}) for the \textit{murīd}.\textsuperscript{57} God desires the existence of such men, al-Wāṣiṭī says, to serve as proofs for Him, to cure mankind’s spiritual diseases, take charge over them and govern them, and lead

\textsuperscript{54} Al-Wāṣiṭī, ‘\textit{Umdat al-ṭullāb}, p. 207, and: \textit{Lawāmī’ al-istirshād}, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{55} Al-Wāṣiṭī, \textit{Lawāmī’ al-istirshād}, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{56} Al-Wāṣiṭī, \textit{Qāʿida fī al-umūr allatī yanbaghī an takūn hamm al-sālik}, p. 191; \textit{Qāʿida fī al-umūr al-muwassīla}, p. 222; \textit{Qāʿida fī tajrīd}, pp. 254–255; \textit{Miṭṭāḫ ṭarīq al-muhībbīn}, pp. 280–281.
\textsuperscript{57} Al-Wāṣiṭī, \textit{Lawā’īḥ min qawā’id ahl al-zaygh wa-al-ḍalālīn wa-lawā’īḥ min qawā’id ṭarīq al-ṣādiqīn}, p. 131; \textit{Madkhal ahl al-fiqh}, p. 50; \textit{Mīzān al-shuyūkh}, p. 241.
them unto the path of the revealed law (ṣharīʿa), away from falsehood. They are, in short, the successors of God’s Messengers (khulafā’ al-rusul).\(^{58}\)

On rare occasions al-Wāṣīṭī reveals that he ideally envisioned Sufism being practiced in a group structure wherein murīds are organized around the guidance of such a shaykh. This is attested to most evidently in his treatise on the way of Muḥammadan faqr, where he makes mention of specific rules of etiquette for Sufi aspirants to observe, not only towards their shaykh, but also towards one another. Among these etiquettes we find that the murīd should accompany his fellow fuqarā’ with admiration, renown, and reverence, and prefer them over himself.\(^{59}\) However, if one of them displays insolence towards their shaykh, by for instance shouting at him with harsh words and mentioning his shortcomings, al-Wāṣīṭī maintains rather serious repercussions. His verdict is that such an aspirant

should no longer be accompanied after this, for there is no penance for the disobedience of a murīd among the fuqarā’. That is because that subtlety of the heart (al-laṭīfa al-qalbiyya) that is pursued by means of his spiritual training (tarbiya), through which a share of the Divine may reach him, has been disrupted [by his actions]. Indeed, this share only reaches the murīd when he reveres his shaykh, respects him, honors him, and loves him.\(^{60}\)

Our Iraqi Sufi puts so much emphasis on observing due propriety (adab) with one’s shaykh because this is, in his view, directly linked to the propriety that is due to God and the Prophet. After all, as we noted above, he considers the true Sufi shaykh a successor of the Messengers, so to revere him is to revere God and the Prophet. For that reason, the aspirant should pay close attention to his shaykh, refrain from disagreeing or arguing with him, and carefully inquire into his spiritual expressions (ʿibārāt) and states (aḥwāl) with polite words when there is something obscure in them.\(^{61}\) In return, the shaykh should teach the aspirant how to be rid of the veils that cover his heart, until the utmost end of his guidance is reached.

Al-Wāṣīṭī maintains that spiritual guides are essentially intermediaries (wasāʿīt) between this world and the Prophet.\(^{62}\) There thus comes a degree in

\(^{58}\) Al-Wāṣīṭī, Mızān al-ḥaqq wa-al-ḍallāl, p. 223; this treatise is identical with his Qāʿida fī šīfāt al-ʿubūdiyya, pp. 47-48.

\(^{59}\) Al-Wāṣīṭī, Qāʿida mukhtaṣara, p. 35.

\(^{60}\) Ibid. pp. 34–35.

\(^{61}\) Al-Wāṣīṭī, Madkhal ahl al-fiqh, pp. 48–50.

\(^{62}\) Al-Wāṣīṭī, Madkhal ahl al-fiqh, p. 49; Mızān al-shuyūkh, p. 241.
the sālik’s journey where he arrives unto the Prophet, and his shaykh’s mediating role is no longer required. This occurs when the earlier-mentioned Muhammadan state is acquired, for then

the vision of his own shaykh who brought him to the Prophet (Ṣ) vanishes before him, and he sees the Prophet (Ṣ) from the niche (mishkāt) of his own self (nafs) rather than from the niche of his shaykh. In the beginning [of the path], the murid may perceive the Messenger through the arch (tāqa) of his shaykh, until the Messenger (Ṣ) may at times take shape within his innermost secret (sirrihi) through his shaykh’s instruction (kayfiyya). When he ascends to this rank, he rises from the intermediaries (wasāʾiṭ) to the Messenger (Ṣ), from whom he then receives distinguished love (al-ḥubb al-khāṣṣ), and his spirit will truly be united with his spirit!63

This is a unique passage in that it is perhaps the only instance where al-Wāsiṭī explicitly shares with us how he envisioned the role of the shaykh in the ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya. The shaykh’s niche through which he sees the Prophet is likely in reference to the shaykh’s spiritual connection with the Prophet. What seems to be intended is that the shaykh thereby provides guidance through all the steps we have gone through, from the beginning of this chapter up to the point where the aspirant, too, becomes connected to the Prophet by his spirit, and subsequently perceives him in the unseen. What the sālik reaches at that point is required for his further advancement towards intimate knowledge of God, which is the topic of the next section.

Up till now we have followed all the basic steps of the Muḥammadan way that can be found scattered throughout al-Wāsiṭī’s writings. If we go back to the beginning of the current section, and question once more to what degree we may discern a Taymiyyan influence with all the ground we have now covered, our initial hypothesis that al-Wāsiṭī himself had developed the concept of the ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya as the way to connect to the Prophet and his Companions becomes all the more plausible.64 This does not detract from the fact that Ibn Taymiyya’s influence is visible in the role our Iraqi Sufi allots to the study of ḥadīth and the biographical sources on the Prophet and his Companions – after all, it was the Ḥanbali shaykh himself who pointed al-Wāsiṭī in this direction. Herein we may recognize a distinctly traditionalist, nuṣūṣ-based

63 Al-Wāsiṭī, Qāʿida fī al-ḥubb fī Allāh ḥaqīqatm, p. 54.
64 Geoffroy has also noted the originality of al-Wāsiṭī’s take in that regard in: “Le traité de soufisme,” p. 88.
spirituality, an approach that extends even more visibly to the topic we will cover in the next section.

While the effort to harmonize traditionalism with Sufism is thus clearly visible, we may also observe that al-Wāsiṭī occasionally tilts the balance more towards Sufism in his doctrine. This is especially apparent in the method of connecting to the Prophetic rūḥāniyya and some of the Sufi terminology he uses to describe this process, but also in the way he envisioned Sufism being practiced in a group structure around the guidance of a complete Sufi master. In view of his position as the teacher of Sufism in the Taymiyyan circle, we may take this as an indication that there was apparently a crowd for such teachings among the traditionalists of Damascus. The same can be said for the master–disciple structured practice of Sufism: The mere fact that al-Wāsiṭī deals with the topic seems to imply that such was the nature of the relationship he himself had with his disciples as their shaykh al-sulūk. We may rightfully question whether he would have chosen to express himself through such language and statements if this would have met with the disapproval of the traditionalists who sat at his feet. Since we know he was a respected member of the Taymiyyan circle, this tells us that in all likelihood they generally regarded his teachings as quite normative.

3 Sound Maʿrifa of God and His Attributes

If the shaykh is the intermediary between the sālik and the Prophet, then the Prophet is the intermediary between the sālik and God. It is, after all, by means of the Prophet that God has made Himself known to mankind,65 as al-Wāsiṭī puts it: “Prophethood is a stairway and an ascension unto knowledge and maʿrifa of God by which God is known and served.”66 We have already noted that, according to al-Wāsiṭī’s conception of the Muḥammadan way, intimate knowledge of the Prophet is but the first of the degrees of maʿrifa. It ultimately serves as the required foundation for the branches of maʿrifa of the Divine. In other words, when the sālik has mastered intimate knowledge of the Rasūl, the Messenger, he is ready to ascend to intimate knowledge of the Mursil, the Sender, that is, God. This is done first through God’s risāla, the message He sent to Muḥammad in the form of the Qur’an. In addition, knowledge of God is obtained by studying the Sunna in the form of ḥadīth.67 Our Iraqi Sufi thus

65 Al-Wāsiṭī, Miṣṭāḥ al-maʿrifa wa-al-ʿibāda, p. 265; ʿUmdat al-ṭullāb, p. 206; Qāʿida fī sulūk al-taḥqīq ilā ghāyat al-maṭālib li-al-sāʾir ilā rabbihi al-dhāhib, p. 199.
66 Al-Wāsiṭī, Talqīḥ al-asrār, p. 55.
67 Al-Wāsiṭī, Miṣṭāḥ al-maʿrifa wa-al-ʿibāda, p. 265; Miṣṭāḥ ṭarīq al-muḥibbīn, p. 280.
proceeds from a study of the *nuṣūṣ* on the Prophet to a study of the *nuṣūṣ* on God. The first steps in acquiring *maʿrifa* of God are thus very similar to what we have already seen regarding the acquisition of Prophetic *maʿrifa*.

### 3.1 What is Maʿrifa of God?

Again, rather than being described as knowledge that is the product of a spiritual, God-inspired experience, it is the *nuṣūṣ* themselves that contain the concrete details about God that, when accumulated, provide the *sālik* with *maʿrifa* of Him. In this approach al-Wāsiṭī expresses a note of caution for the Sufis that we have come across several times already in the previous chapters: Sufism ought to be a means to an end, not the end itself. While he accepts Sufism as a legitimate Islamic science that serves to extract spiritual knowledge from the Qur’an and the Sunna, he stresses that it should always be restricted by what the holy texts themselves say. Sufis can never claim to get to know God without the facts of scripture:

Whoever makes the science of the Sufis into the direction (*qibla*) of his heart, he will be accorded a general state (*ḥālan mujmalan*) that contains no completeness of detail (*tafṣīl*). But whoever makes it his pathway until he thereby draws the spiritual realities (*al-ḥaqāʾiq*) from the Book and the Sunna to which the sciences of the [Sufi] community (*ʿulūm al-ṭāʾifa*) allude, he has been granted success and he has been guided unto a straight path. Indeed, the only perfect, comprehensive, straight path, which contains neither distortion nor deviation, is to seek intimate knowledge of God from whence He has made Himself known to us (*maʿrifat Allāh min ḥaythu taʿarrafa ilaynā*), through His exalted names and majestic, beautiful attributes, which are articulated in the Mighty Book and stipulated by the Messenger (Ṣ) through the [Prophetic] reports (*akhbār*) and the [Qur’anic] verses (*āyāt*) on the divine attributes. Now, each of these reports leads to one of the sublime secrets of *maʿrifa* [of God] and one of the eminent qualities of [His] magnificence by which the gates of spiritual knowledge (*al-maʿārif*) are opened to the seekers ...68

The essential point that is made in this passage is a recurring rule in al-Wāsiṭī’s formulation of Sufism, echoed throughout his writings, namely, that *maʿrifa* of God begins with knowledge of the way He describes Himself in the revelation He sent down unto His Prophet. This was in fact a classical position in

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68 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Miftāḥ al-maʿrifa wa-al-ʿibāda*, p. 259.
traditionalist theology. In al-Wāsiṭī’s view, every word spoken by the Prophet about God is a piece of the puzzle of knowledge of God, whether from the Qur’an or from his sayings transmitted in the ḥadīth literature. The entirety of the descriptions found in the nuṣūṣ results in a list of names (asmā’) and attributes (ṣifāt) by which God wants His servants to know Him, for otherwise He would not have revealed them to His Prophet. So, simply put, for al-Wāsiṭī the first essential means to ma’rifā of God is to know all of His names and attributes as found in the Qur’an and the Sunna.

However, knowledge of them alone is not sufficient, for it must necessarily be followed by a correct understanding of their meanings. In al-Wāsiṭī’s sulūk this is tightly interwoven with traditionalist theology. In the previous chapter I have already made note of the indissoluble bond between spirituality and theology that his writings display. It is therefore imperative that we first identify and elaborate upon the specific theological discussions that are connected to his views on ma’rifā.

Upon studying al-Wāsiṭī’s oeuvre, one will find that in most instances this endeavor takes us to the very beginning of his sequence of sulūk, where the sālik is told that a sound creed (ṣiḥḥat al-iʿtiqād) is a condition for undertaking his spiritual journey. For our Iraqi Sufi this means nothing other than abiding by the traditionalist creed of the Ḥanbalī school. In a Sufi poem preserved by al-Dhahabī he writes accordingly:

And constantly remember [God] after [belief in] the creed based on the Sunna,
The creed of Ibn Ḥanbal, which cures the deceases [of the heart].

As we shall see below, theology is, above all, crucial to the way one ought to deal with the so-called mutashābihāt, the ambiguous descriptions of God found in the holy texts. Al-Wāsiṭī argues on several occasions that if the sālik’s beliefs in their regard are corrupted this will have disastrous consequences, as

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69 For the importance of knowing God as He describes Himself in traditionalist theology, see or instance: Hoover, “Ḥanbalī Theology,” p. 633.
70 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risāla fī ithbāt, p. 45; Lawāmiʿ al-istirshād, pp. 94 & 96; ʿUmdat al-tuḥlāb, p. 293; Miṣṭāḥ ṭarīq al-muhībbin, p. 280; Madkhāl ahl al-ṣīqāh, p. 50; Ḥayāt al-ṣulūk, p. 88; Qāʿida fī dhikr asbāb al-maḥabba li-Allāh taʿālā, p. 57; Qāʿida fī asbāb maḥabbat Allāh taʿālā, maʿrifatihi, wa-asbāb maʿrifatihi, pp. 61–62; Qāʿida fī taqwiyat al-sālik, p. 122; Qāʿida fī bayān al-ṭarīq ilā Allāh taʿālā min al-bidāya ilā al-nihāya, p. 181.
71 This has also been noticed by Geoffroy, “Le traité de soufisme,” pp. 85–86.
72 Al-Dhahabi, Muʿjam al-shuyūkh, vol. 1, p. 30.
the degrees of witnessing God (*al-mashāhid*) he must pursue in the later stages of his journey will necessarily be corrupted as well.73

For the roots of the influence of theology on al-Wāsiṭī’s Sufism we again return briefly to his life’s story. In the first chapter we have observed that he may have initially followed the Ashʿarī school in theology, and at some point became inclined towards traditionalism. And as noted in chapter 3, at least by the time he fulfilled the task of shaykh in *sulūk* in the Taymiyyan circle, he had clearly reached a degree of proficiency in his newly adopted creed. A closer look at the process of this transition towards traditionalism as described in one of his creedal works reveals that this occurred during a period of confusion and restlessness that plagued him regarding the descriptions of God from the *nuṣūṣ* whose literal significations are analogous to the attributes of creatures. Does God exist in elevation (*ʿuluw*) and aboveness (*fawqiyya*), seated (*istiwāʾ*) on His Throne? And should such terms as ‘descent’ (*nuzūl*), ‘two hands’ (*yadayn*), ‘face’ (*wajh*), and others that can be found in the Qur’an and/or ḥadīth in relation to God be considered as actual attributes (*ṣifāt*) of Him according to their apparent meanings or not?

The way al-Wāsiṭī saw it, the theological schools he had studied offered four approaches to these issues: The first is to dismiss their concrete realities by applying *taʾwil*, a metaphorical interpretation, which was probably the method observed by many of his former Shāfiʿi-Ashʿarī teachers, and as it seems initially by himself as well.74 The second option is to read over them without comment (*imrār*), which was a position that existed among certain traditionalists.75 The third option is to refrain from passing any judgment about them (*wuqūf*), a position that existed among certain Ashʿarīs as we have seen in chapter 2. While this approach seems very similar to the preceding one, al-Wāsiṭī never elaborates on the actual difference between them as he understood them. The fourth option is *ithbāt*, the position he will have found in Ibn Taymiyya’s circle, and which he understands as the affirmation of the attributes with their apparent meanings.76 After a careful study of the arguments

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73 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Qāʿida fī taṣfiyyat al-akhlāq istiʿdādan li-yawm al-ḥashr wa-al-talāq*, p. 93; *Qāʿida fī bayān al-ṣariq ilā Allāh taʿālā min al-bidāya ilā al-nihāya*, p. 182; *Qāʿida fī al-umūr allatī yanbaghī an takūn hamm al-sālik*, p. 192; *Qāʿida fī al-umūr al-muwaṣṣila wa-al-umūr al-qaṭīʿa*, p. 217; *Qāʿida fī naṣīyy al-khawāṭir*, p. 241; *Waṣiyya*, p. 137; *ʿUmdat al-ṭullāb*, p. 232; *Miṣfāḥ ẓariq al-muḥibbin*, p. 279; *al-Sīr al-maṣīḥa*, p. 55; *Madkhal ahl al-fiqh*, pp. 51 & 53.

74 For his initial inclination towards *taʾwil*, see: al-Wāsiṭī, *Risāla fī ithbāt*, p. 26.

75 *Imrār* was for instance advocated by Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī, cf. Hoover, “Hanbalī Theology,” p. 633.

76 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Risāla fī ithbāt*, pp. 25–26. It must be noted that although Ibn Taymiyya viewed his theology as being grounded in the tradition of the *Aḥl al-Ḥadīth*, it was quite complex and innovative; on this, see: Hoover, “Hanbalī Theology,” pp. 637–638. A good example of
put forth by the different schools, al-Wāsiṭī claims to have received an unveiling (kashf) from God that opened his heart to ithbāt and made him turn away from ta’wil – a claim we may take as indication that he did indeed at one time adhere to the latter position. This switch would, in effect, have been a turn from the kalam theology of the Ash’arīs to the traditionalist theology adhered to by Ibn Taymiyya and his circle.

3.2 Affirmation versus Metaphorical Interpretation

This conversion should not be taken lightly, as adherents of both positions had been diametrically opposed to one another for several centuries. In the new traditionalist capital of Damascus, too, dissension (fitna) between Ḥanbalīs and Ash’arīs (especially the Shāfi’īs) was frequently noticeable, both before and after al-Wāsiṭī settled there. The Ash’arīs’ main criticism towards traditionalists who affirmed the apparent meanings of the above descriptions from the nuṣūṣ as attributes of God was that this inevitably leads to understanding them in an anthropomorphic sense (tashbīh) and likening God to His creation (tamthīl). This, they held, contradicts reason and revelation, which both demonstrate that God is utterly transcendent (munazzah) and nothing like His creation. More or less in line with al-Wāsiṭī’s overview discussed above, the Ash’arīs were roughly divided into two camps when it came to the preferred solution to the problem of the divine attributes. Some preferred to simply delegte the true meanings of such ambiguities from the holy texts to God (tafwīḍ), while another group would resort to ta’wil. Although our Iraqi Sufi disap-

Ibn Taymiyya’s argumentation for ithbāt as the affirmation of the apparent meanings of the attributes, and against the use of ta’wil – most notably that of the Ash’arīs – is his al-Fatwa al-Ḥamawīyya al-kubrā, MF, vol. 5, pp. 5–120. In some respect the approach to the divine attributes appears similar to that of al-Wāsiṭī, which we will set forth in the following pages of our study.

77 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risāla fī ithbāt, pp. 40 & 43.
78 On their fitna in Damascus, see especially: Michael Chamberlain, Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 169–173.
79 I am indebted to Jon Hoover for sending me his forthcoming article: “Early Mamlūk Ash’arīs against Ibn Taymiyya: on the nonliteral reinterpretation (ta’wil) of God’s attributes,” to be published in: Philosophical Theology in Islam: The Later Ash’arīte Tradition, ed. Jan Thiele and Ayman Shihadeh (Leiden: Brill). This article gives a useful and concise overview of the different approaches to the divine attributes among the early Mamlūk Ash’arīs. Hoover notes that some of those who resorted to ta’wil considered this method to be for trained scholars only, whereas others felt this should be the general method for all Muslims. We may also note that safeguarding God’s tanzīh has always been at the center of Ash’arism, see: Richard M. Frank, “Elements in the Development of the Teaching of al-Ash’arī,” Le Muséon 104 (1991), pp. 163–164. For the textual proof for God’s utter
proved of both options, his objection to those who practiced ta‘wil was much stronger. Let us therefore briefly consider the line of argumentation of the latter group of Ash‘aris before we turn to al-Wāsiṭī’s own discussions on the matter.

According to the Ash‘aris who made ta‘wil, logic dictates that if God exists in an upward direction, seated on His Throne, He is necessarily confined and limited by space. Whenever such is the apparent meaning of statements from the holy texts, they believed that this requires a metaphorical interpretation so as to avoid the attribution of limitation to God. Hence, they interpreted God’s sitting on the Throne as His subjugation (qahr) of the Throne. The same principle applies to corporeal terms in the Qur’an, as found, for instance, in the verse “What prevented you prostrating to what I created with My own two hands (bi-yadayya)?” [Q. 38:75]. They argued that if the term ‘(two) hands’ is taken literally, this means by reason that God has a body and a form. Again, because this is in contradiction with God’s utter transcendence, they interpreted the ‘hands’ as God’s creative power (qudra). It must be noted that al-Wāsiṭī was not unaware of this line of reasoning. He reveals in several works that he knew very well how such Ash‘aris interpret terms from the revelation that they viewed as ambiguous.

However, from his understanding as a traditionalist, there was an intrinsic fallacy to ta‘wil in such cases. His argumentation is as follows: Whenever the Prophet intended a certain word or phrase from the revelation as a metaphor, this is either clear through the linguistic context of the wording, or because he explicitly added a statement indicating that a change of the apparent meaning to a metaphorical one is required. If the Prophet made no indication of ta‘wil transcendence, reference is often made to the Qur’anic verse “There is nothing like unto Him” [Q. 42:11]. The diversity of opinions among Ash‘ari scholars regarding the divine attributes has since long been noted; see for instance: Allard, Le problème, p. 427.

See for instance the well-known Ash‘ari authority, ‘Abd al-Malik b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), who is an excellent example of someone who rigorously applies ta‘wil in his Kitāb al-Irshād ilā qawāṭi‘ al-adilla fī uṣūl al-iʿtiqād, ed. Muḥammad Yusuf Mūsā & ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Jamāʿat al-Azhar li-al-nashr wa-al-taʿlīf, 1950), see on God’s aboveness, pp. 39–40, and on His sitting on the Throne, pp. 40–41.

This approach suggests two methods of Qur’anic exegesis: tafsīr of the Qur’an through the Qur’an, and ‘tafsīr bi-al-maʿthūr,’ i.e. exegesis on the basis of the Sunna. This hermeneutical approach was also applied by Ibn Taymiyya, see for instance: Walid Saleh, “Ibn Taymiyyah and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of “An Introduction to the Foundation of Quranic Exegesis”, in Ibn Taymiyyah and His Times, ed. Shahab Ahmed and Yossef Rapport (Lahore: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 144–145.
by means of either of these two ways, then that is enough to know that the apparent meaning is intended. After all, during the Prophet’s teaching sessions both intellectually gifted and deficient individuals would be present, so he will surely have guarded them against any form of misunderstanding when it comes to the revelation. As an example, al-Wāsiṭī takes the following words from the Qur’an: “Are you not aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth? Never can there be a secret confabulation between three persons without His being the fourth of them ...” [Q. 58:7]. Here, he says, it is clear that God is not with mankind with His essence, since the context of the verse indicates that it is rather God’s knowledge that is with them. In other words, al-Wāsiṭī’s ta’wil of this particular verse is that they cannot hide from God’s knowledge, for He is ever aware of what they do. For an example where ta’wil is not allowed, he refers to the earlier example of the Qur’anic words “My (two) hands” (yadayya). While we have noted that a branch of Ash’arīs would interpret ‘hands’ as God’s creative power (qudra), al-Wāsiṭī contests that there is no indication that a metaphor is intended, because in the Arabic language the word ‘hand’ that bears the meaning of qudra does not come in pairs. In order for it to be taken metaphorically, it would had to have read the singular form yadī, ‘my hand,’ instead of the dual form yadayya, he says. The conclusion is, then, that the attribute of ‘hands’ is not ambiguous, because it is clear that there is no explicit or implicit proof to view it as such. As a consequence, to make ta’wil of it would be to strip it of its apparent meaning and subsequently deny it as an attribute by which God describes Himself in the revelation. Besides straying from the method of the Prophet, one would thereby deprive oneself of a piece of the puzzle of ma’rifah and fall short in knowledge of God.

As for the argument of the Ash’arīs that affirming such attributes according to their apparent meanings necessarily results in anthropomorphism, al-Wāsiṭī replies that this is only from the viewpoint of their inconsistent line of reasoning. Like Ibn Taymiyya, he holds that ithbāt is in fact the golden mean between ta’til, denying God by stripping Him of His attributes, and tashbih, anthropomorphism by assimilating God’s attributes to those of creatures. To underline that He is definitely exempted of the latter, al-Wāsiṭī frequently states that all of God’s attributes ought to be affirmed in a way that befits His majesty and

84 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, p. 105; Risāla fī ithbāt, pp. 36; Waṣiyya, pp. 138–139; ʿUmdat al-ṭullāḥ, p. 203.
85 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh, pp. 105–106.
86 Al-Wāsiṭī, Waṣiyya, p. 137. On Ibn Taymiyya’s utilization of the middle way, al-wasat, as an argument, see: Jon Hoover, Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 173.
magnificence, without imagining them to be in any way similar to those of His creation (bi-lā tamthīl) or in an anthropomorphic sense (bi-lā tashbīh), and without inquiring into their modality (bi-lā takyīf).87 Like the Ashʿarīs, he considers the basis for God’s dissimilarity from His creation to be the Qur’ānic verse “There is nothing like unto Him” [Q. 42:11].88 The mistake of the Ashʿarīs here, he argues, is that they effectively deny those attributes that they consider ambiguous because they cannot but understand them in a way that befits created beings. He thereby turns the accusation around, implying that it is actually the Ashʿarīs themselves who are guilty of anthropomorphism – a classical Ḥanbalī counterargument we may note, that was also utilized by Ibn Taymiyya.89 Furthermore, al-Wāsiṭī points to the fact that the Ashʿarīs do affirm seven basic attributes of God, namely, life (ḥayāt), hearing (samʿ), sight (baṣr), knowledge (ʿilm), power (qudra), express will (irāda), and speech (kalām).90 He argues that, even though any of these could be understood as an accident (ʿaraḍ) that exists in a corporeal body, they do affirm these as attributes in a way that befits God. To this he objects that

it is not fair that they are only able to understand [God’s] sitting, descent, face, and hand as attributes of created beings and thus feel the need to interpret [them] metaphorically and alter [their meanings]. For if that is how they understand these attributes, that should compel them to [also] understand the seven attributes [that they do affirm] as attributes of created beings resulting from accidents!91

If the Ashʿarīs reply that the seven attributes are certainly not accidents but apply to God in a way that befits Him, al-Wāsiṭī replies that, likewise, God’s sitting on the Throne applies to God without limitation (ḥaṣr) but in a way that befits Him.92

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87 Miftāḥ al-maʿrifa wa-al-ʿibāda, p. 260; Miftāḥ ẓarīq al-muḥibbīn, p. 279; al-Sīr al-maṣūn, pp. 55-56; Risāla fi ithbāt, p. 44; ʿUmdat al-ṭullāb, p. 211.
88 Al-Wāsiṭī, Qāʿida fī dhikr asbāb al-maḥābbā, p. 59; Waṣiyya, p. 140.
89 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risāla fi ithbāt, p. 44. For Ibn Taymiyya, see Hoover, Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy, p. 50. For an example of an earlier Ḥanbalī authority who used this argument, see: Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. al-Farrāʾ Abū Yaʿlā (d. 458/1066), Ibtāl al-taʾwīlāt li-akhbar al-ṣifat, ed. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ḥamad al-Maḥmūd al-Najdī (Maktabat Dār al-imām al-Dhahabī, 1990), pp. 45 & 49.
90 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risāla fi ithbāt, p. 44. These seven basic attributes can be traced back to al-Ashʿarī himself, who considered belief in them to be one of the fundamental theological truths, cf. Frank, “Elements in the Development,” p. 154.
91 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risāla fi ithbāt, p. 45.
92 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risāla fi ithbāt, p. 45; ʿUmdat al-ṭullāb, p. 204.
As a consequence of having embraced the traditionalist position against *ta’wil* in favor of *ithbāt*, the *nuṣūṣ* now offered al-Wāsiṭī a considerable number of divine names and attributes that he would hitherto have rejected as such. This naturally meant that whatever his former Ashʿarī-Sufi colleagues had claimed of *maʿrīfa* of God was by reason of their theological affiliation incomplete and deficient. It is therefore that al-Wāsiṭī often emphasizes the gravity of the aforementioned rule, that a sound creed is a condition for one’s *sulūk*. As a firm traditionalist, it was his understanding that any mistake in this discipline will have dire consequences for one’s knowledge of God.

### 3.3 The Critical Importance of Direction

Here, we must take note that, within the subject of the *ṣifāt*, the previous example of God’s position vis-à-vis His creation (His aboveness and elevation and sitting on the Throne) is repeated most frequently by al-Wāsiṭī in relation to *maʿrīfa*. Without a doubt, he considered this the most important aspect of creed that ought to be verified by knowledge and assent (*taṣdīq*).\(^{93}\) That is so, he states, because it serves as the foundation (*aṣl*) and basis (*asās*) for the *sālikīn* and their starting point of spiritual knowledge (*mabdaʾ al-maʿārif*).\(^{94}\) He therefore puts in extra effort to convince his audience of the necessity to affirm these as attributes of God. Fully aware of the heated debates on the matter (especially from the side of the Ashʿarīs, as noted above), he admits that the *sālik* may initially be reluctant to do so out of fear that God is thereby restricted by direction, which would violate His transcendance.\(^{95}\) He argues that its correctness can nonetheless be confirmed based on both revelation and reason, and that to do so is imperative for one’s further *sulūk*, as we shall soon see.

When it comes to the Qur’an and the *ḥadīth* literature, al-Wāsiṭī tries to demonstrate on numerous occasions that they are filled with evidence for his creedal position on this matter. He cites at least fourteen verses that, in his opinion, support the reality of God’s aboveness and elevation – such as: “They fear their Lord above them (*min fawqiyyihim*)” [Q. 16:50] – and he cites two verses in support of God’s sitting on the Throne – such as: “The All-Merciful, sat on the Throne (*ʿalā al-ʿarsh istawā*)” [Q. 20:5].\(^{96}\) As for proofs from the *ḥadīth*
literature, he often refers to a report popular among traditionalists, wherein the Prophet asks a slave girl where God is, to which she replies that He is in heaven (fi al-samāʾ) while pointing towards the sky. The Prophet then validated her answer and rejected none of it, al-Wāsiṭī adds.97 His argumentation also draws from the well-known tale of the heavenly journey, the miʿrāj, during which the Prophet reportedly ascended through the seven heavenly spheres until he reached a distance of two bows or less from God. This, too, is in his eyes a clear confirmation that God exists over His creation.98

While such proofs would have sufficed for the classical traditionalist, al-Wāsiṭī also deploys logic to defend his position against the accusation of attributing limitation to God. This approach was perhaps inspired by his master, Ibn Taymiyya, himself an advocate of harmonizing reason and revelation. There is, however, some irony in the fact that to absolve God from any limitation by direction and space, our Iraqi Sufi turns to a typical Ashʿarī argument. He first tries to solve the supposed contradiction between God’s transcendence and the attributes of aboveness and sitting by admitting that it would indeed be unbelief and anthropomorphism to assert that God is restricted and enclosed by any direction, or that He is carried by any place: “He [God] was and there was nothing with Him in His antiquity and pre-eternity”99 (kāna wa-lā shayʾ maʾahu fi qidamihi wa-azaliyyatihi). God existed before the creation of boundaries (ḥudūd) and directions (jihāt), and since nothing new befalls Him in His essence or His attributes, “He is now as He was (huwa al-ān kamā kāna).”100

If we refer to chapter 2, we may recall that the words “He was and there was nothing with Him” were actually taught to al-Wāsiṭī as a fundamental spiritual maxim by his Shādhilī shaykh, Najm al-Dīn al-Iṣbahānī, in relation to the vanity of self-direction (tadbīr). We may also recall that the notion of God’s pre-eternity was similarly used by the Ashʿarī-Shādhilī Sufi Ibn al-Labbān to denounce literal aboveness as a divine attribute, arguing that God is now as He was without any direction and, consequently, without aboveness. It thus seems that al-Wāsiṭī’s line of reasoning against limitation and anthropomorphism

97 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, p. 104; ‘Umdat al-ṭullāb, p. 205, Risāla fi ithubāt, pp. 40–41.
98 Al-Wāsiṭī, Miftāḥ al-maʿrifa, p. 265; Risāla ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, p. 108; ‘Umdat al-ṭullāb, p. 205, Risāla fi ithubāt, p. 27.
99 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, p. 109.
100 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, p. 109; Risāla fi ithubāt, p. 41, where he says that, before the creation “God was and there was no place, Throne, water, space, air, void, or cosmos” (kāna wa-lā makān wa-lā ‘arsh wa-lā māʾ wa-lā faḍāʾ wa-lā hawāʾ wa-lā khalāʾ wa-lā malāʾ).
here may actually be adapted from his knowledge of Shādhili doctrine rather than Ibn Taymiyya’s formulation of traditionalist theology.

Having acquitted himself of *tashbīh*, our Iraqi Sufi proceeds to make his argument for *fawqīyya* and *istiwā* as follows. He states that when God’s express will (*irāda*) decreed the existence of creatures restricted by direction, who by necessity require aboveness, underness, rightness, and leftness, He decreed that they exist in locality (*maḥall*).101 Being created in this fashion, the judgment of [God’s] magnificence of lordship (*ḥukm ʿaẓamat al-rabbāniyya*) required that He be above His kingdom, and that the kingdom be under Him – which is in terms of the temporality (*al-ḥudūth*) inherent to the creation, not in terms of the pre-eternity inherent to the Creator. So when I refer to Him, it is impossible that this be done by a downward direction, a right direction, or a left direction. Rather, it is only fitting to refer to Him by the direction of elevation (*ʿuluw*) and aboveness (*fawqīyya*). Again, such reference is from the viewpoint of [created] existence, its temporality, and its downward direction. ... When this is known, then [understand that] sitting (*al-istiwā*) [too] is an attribute of Him that existed in His antiquity (*fī qidamihi*), although its property only manifested upon the creation of the Throne, in the same way as the reckoning (*ḥisāb*) is a pre-eternal attribute of Him whose property will only manifest in the Afterlife.102

Al-Wāsiṭī thus assumes that the only appropriate mode of existence for the creation is in a downward direction (*jihat al-taḥt*); God directs us from above, ever remaining unbounded by any physical boundary or restriction as He has always been in His pre-eternity. This he connects to the Qur’anic verse “Surely your Lord is God, Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then sat on the Throne, directing the affair” [Q. 10:3].103 Due to mankind’s reality as temporal, created beings bounded by direction and space, we can never truly comprehend the notion of ‘directionlessness’ (*ghayr-jihāt*), al-Wāsiṭī argues. We therefore refer to God by *fawqīyya*, the highest part of the created realm as we understand it, because it is the most appropriate point of reference for Him.104 When the *sālik* understands this, he will know that there is no anthropomorphism in affirming *fawqīyya* and *istiwā*: “Whoever verifies this in his

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101 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Risāla fī ithbāt*, pp. 40–41; *Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī*, p. 109.
102 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Risāla fī ithbāt*, p. 41.
103 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī*, p. 109; *Risāla fī ithbāt*, p. 41; *Rihla*, p. 46.
104 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī*, p. 109.
Traditionalist Sufism: Outlining the Foundations of the Journey

...his heart will be freed from the resemblance [it has] to attributing limitation [to God] and the discomfort experienced at referring to the direction [of aboveness].”105

Although al-Wāṣiṭī considered this sufficient as an explanation, if we further inquire into his reliance on traditionalist cosmology, we may better grasp how he really understood God’s existence in literal aboveness, seated on the Throne. As he puts it, there is a boundary where the created realm stops and God’s mode of existence without directions (jihāt), distances (masāfāt), boundaries (ḥudūd), and dimensions (aqṭār) starts: “[God] is bounded by a boundary (ḥadd) that distinguishes His magnificence and essence (dhāt) from all that He created.”106 God does not become part of the creation’s restrictions by entering it – which would be incarnation (ḥulūl) – but is rather ever separate (bā’in) from it. Our Iraqi Sufi thus differentiates between existence inside the created world (dākhil al-ʿālam) and existence outside of it (khārij al-ʿālam).107 The former applies to creatures, the latter to God. From the viewpoint of human beings existing inside the created world, it would require an ascension from earth through the seven heavenly spheres to reach the boundary of ‘the outside,’ al-khārij, which starts from God’s Throne. What lays beyond the Throne neither reason nor imagination can comprehend, for it is the unfathomable reality where God exists in His essence.108 In other words, the only way to reach the realm where space and direction cease to exist is to go upwards, and it is from there that the creation located under it is governed by God.

Why is this so important to al-Wāṣiṭī? In full acknowledgment of mankind’s limited nature, he holds that we are inherently in need of a qibla: a direction to face towards during our acts of worship. That is so, he argues, “because we are temporal beings (muḥdathūn), and a temporal being cannot get around direction when it turns itself towards [God].”109 And since the revelation makes it very clear that God exists in an upwards direction from the viewpoint of His creation, that should naturally be our qibla.110 However, most Sufis literally miss the mark here, he says, due to their disavowal of aboveness:

105 Ibid.
106 Al-Wāṣiṭī, Risāla fi ithbāt, p. 41.
107 Al-Wāṣiṭī, Waṣiyya, p. 143; Miṣtāḥ al-ma’rifâ, p. 261; Risāla fi ithbāt, p. 42.
108 Al-Wāṣiṭī, Risāla fi ithbāt, pp. 41–42.
109 Ibid. p. 49.
110 Al-Wāṣiṭī, ‘Umdat al-ṭullâb, pp. 204–205; Qâʿida fi al-umûr allatī yanaqūhī an takūn hamm al-sâlik, p. 197; Waṣiyya, p. 142; al-Sârî al-maṣûn, p. 55; Madkhal ahl al-fiqh, pp. 53–54; Risāla fi ithbāt, p. 49.
More numerous are those who deviate from spiritual realization (taḥqīq) due to their ignorance in this regard. Indeed, I found that the majority of the sālikīn and seekers I have come across do not have a qibla that they turn themselves towards, because they have not verified that their Lord is above all things, separate from His creation, and are thus confused about this. Among them are those who believe that there is no ‘inside’ to the [created] world nor an ‘outside,’ that it has no ‘above,’ nor an ‘under,’ and among them are those who say that [God] is everywhere. It is certain that their hearts will never reach the reality of this affair ....

Hence, the foremost concern of the truthful ones (al-ṣādiqīn) is their maʿrifa that their Lord is above all things. For those among them who acknowledge this, it becomes their heart’s qibla whenever they direct themselves towards Him and supplicate Him, in the same way as someone who performs the ritual prayer takes the Ka’ba as his qibla when he prays: he turns himself in its direction, and this is of the same nature [as turning towards the Throne]. Now, when the aspiring seeker (al-ṭālib al-murīd) becomes certain of this, the Throne becomes his heart’s qibla whenever he turns himself towards God and desires Him, and it will be from this elevated place (al-maḥall al-ʿulwī) [of the Throne] that blessings descend upon him and the realities of divine openings (futūḥāt) are revealed to him – by the will and volition of God!  

Evidently, al-Wāsiṭī envisioned the heart’s qibla being upwards as more than a mere direction to focus on during worship. For him it is the only way to become connected to the Throne, which he considers the required gateway to God for one’s further sulūk. The sālik should therefore aspire to have his heart constantly directed upwards in all deeds performed for the sake of God, so that it ultimately becomes connected to the Throne. By doing so, he states in a letter: “The heart ascends upwards (ilā al-ʿuluw), one heavenly sphere after another, until it ends up at the Throne. When it ends up at the Throne, directions, distances, limits, and dimensions are nonexistent, and all that remains is He who has no likeness and is not restricted by any limit.”

What becomes clear from the above is that the role of fawqīyya in al-Wāsiṭī’s Sufism leaves no room for any other theological denomination to lay claim to maʿrifa. In his view, only the adherents of the Ahl al-Sunna – which we know he considers a synonym for the Ahl al-Ḥadīth – can make the Throne into their

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11 Al-Wāsiṭī, Miftāḥ al-maʿrīfā, pp. 261–262. A very similar description is given in ‘Umdat al-tullāb, p. 204.
112 Al-Wāsiṭī, Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, p. 112.
hearts’ qibla, whereas those who strip God of His attributes (ahl al-taʿṭīl) – a typical traditionalist label for the Ashʿarīs – are unable to experience this. In light of that, his mention of the sālikīn who fail to verify God’s aboveness in the earlier quote will surely have been chiefly directed at those who ascribe to the Ashʿarī school. He contests that, although they may know God by such attributes as hearing, sight, and pre-eternity, their maʿrifa is incomplete because they remain lost in their ignorance of the direction of their object of worship.\footnote{Al-Wāsiṭī, Risāla fī ithbāt, p. 49; Waṣiyya, p. 142.}

After the sālik has acquired a sound theological understanding of the divine attributes, the next step of maʿrifa in al-Wāsiṭī’s Sufism is to recite the Qur’an and reflect on it as if hearing it directly from its original Speaker (min mutakal-limihi) from above the Throne. While the sālik would previously only recite the Qur’an for the sake of God, he now ascends to a degree in which he perceives God’s Self-manifestations (tajalliyyāt) in the words of revelation through the divine names and attributes.\footnote{Al-Wāsiṭī, Qāʿida fī maẓāhir al-shuhūd wa-al-maʿrifa, p. 140; Qāʿida fī dhikr asbāb al-maḥabba li-Allāh taʿālā, p. 57; Qāʿida fī nafyī al-khawāṭir, p. 241; Miftāḥ tariq al-muḥibbīn, pp. 280 & 283; Miftāḥ al-maʿrifa, p. 265.} For the time being we must pause here, as it is from this point that al-Wāsiṭī’s doctrine takes the sālik from theory to practice by means of his acquired maʿrifa of the attributes, ultimately leading to what
he calls ‘the witnessing of divinity,’ mashhad al-ilāhiyya, a degree in his sequence of sulûk that belongs in the next chapter.

What this tells us is that while the current section has led us through a complex set of theological principles that may at first sight appear to have little to do with Sufism, al-Wāsiṭī envisioned them as the very basis from which the sâlik proceeds to traverse the required degrees of witnessing (mashâhid) that should eventually lead to the apex of the spiritual path. Thus, if we were able to recognize a distinctly traditionalist, nuṣūṣ-based spirituality in the previous section on the Muḥammadan way, then this is all the more so when it comes to his treatment of maʿrifa of God. Not only does it revolve around basing one’s knowledge of God solely on the Qur’an and the Sunna – that is, “knowing God as He describes Himself” – but it actually leans directly on the notion that adherence to the traditionalist creed is an essential requirement for one’s sulûk. Without affirming all of God’s attributes from the nuṣūṣ, one falls short in maʿrifa of Him; and without affirming the literal meanings of God’s aboveness and sitting on the Throne, one is left worshipping God without direction, and it becomes impossible to connect one’s heart to God’s Throne.

It isn’t hard to fathom that such a traditionalist approach to the concept of maʿrifa will have met with the approval of Ibn Taymiyya and the members of his circle. I would therefore argue that the teachings of al-Wāsiṭī we have analyzed in the present section should be understood against the background of their shared activism for the traditionalist cause. His doctrine of maʿrifa sets an unmistakable course for a full rejection of any kalâmi – and especially Ashʿarî – inspired form of Sufism, a topic we will further elaborate upon in the following section.

4 What Sufism is Not: Refuting the Deviations of Sufis

The misconception that Ibn Taymiyya saw no place for Sufism in Islam is still surprisingly strong today. For the most part, this is because much of his written effort on the subject was aimed at attacking and refuting those practices and/or doctrines of Sufis which he thought contradict the original religion of the Prophet. From his perspective, however, rather than refuting tašawwuf, he was cleansing it of incorrect and heretical notions by pointing out what Sufism is not, or should not be.115 Occasionally, his pupil al-Wāsiṭī displays a similar attitude in the polemical side of his writings. While he certainly never reaches

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115 It has been said that this is in fact Ibn Taymiyya’s approach to religion in general: to show what Islam is by pointing out what Islam is not. See for instance: Bazzano, “Ibn Taymiyya,
the depth and intensity of his master’s polemics, we can find many examples where he tries to argue what true Sufism is by ‘othering’ those interpretations he disagrees with.

It will not come as a surprise that his critiques in the field of Sufism are conditioned by his experiences described in the previous three chapters. We will therefore focus on the three most significant recurring issues from his polemics, according to the chronological order of his journey. We will start with his refutation of *samāʿ*, the Sufi audition, which he often connects specifically to the Rifāʿīs. Then, following on from the Ashʿarī–traditionalist divide discussed in the previous section, we turn to al-Wāsiṭī’s staunch opposition to the influence of philosophy and *kalām* on Sufism. Here, special attention will be given to an isolated instance where he expresses harsh criticism towards Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhibi, the eponymous founder of the Shādhiliyya. Finally, we turn to his most fierce polemics, which are reserved for Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers, whom he regarded as the most dangerous Sufi group in his age. Throughout these topics, I will occasionally make note of the overlap he displays with the spirit of Ibn Taymiyya’s polemical thought. As stated before, this is not to prove that he was necessarily directly influenced by him or copied his arguments, but rather to stress once more that he was working from the same *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* framework as his shaykh. In the conclusion to this chapter, we will discuss how al-Wāsiṭī’s polemics may be linked to our analysis of the ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya and *maʿrifā* of God.

### 4.1 Sufi Audition (*Samāʿ*)

Although al-Wāsiṭī had found that *samāʿ* was also practiced by the Sufis of Baghdad and the Akbarians of Cairo, he was evidently most troubled by the manner in which it manifested amongst the *fuqarāʾ* of the Rifāʿī order of Wāsiṭ and its surroundings.116 There are several instances in his writings where he cautions against *samāʿ* by specifically calling attention to their practice of the ritual, which he clearly considered its most extreme form.117 That this was no
trivial matter, in his view, is evident from his *Mīzān al-shuyūkh*, where he puts forth the same characteristic descriptions of their *samāʿ* rituals that we have come across in his autobiographical account in chapter 1: They are once more depicted as innovators who dance during *samāʿ*, allow men and women to associate with one another, and eat live snakes and other forbidden things. Al-Wāṣīṭī then testifies by God that if the Prophet, the first four caliphs, the emirs of the Companions, or the Umayyads would see them in such a state, “they would call them to God; and if they’d refuse, they would wage holy war against them (*jāhadūhum*) with their swords ...”\(^{118}\) Although this statement is not solely directed at the Rifāʿī *samāʿ*, he considered this particular issue to be at the heart of many of the immoralities he saw them practice under the guise of Sufism.

Needless to say, the *samāʿ* was a matter that he found deserving of critical attention, perhaps even more so because it was such a widespread practice among the Sufis of his age. It is likely that his critical attitude resonated well with the community of traditionalists in early Mamluk Damascus, among whom there probably existed something of a general dislike towards the practice. The Ḥanbalī master Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī had already issued a fatwa against it, and Ibn Taymiyya also launched attacks against it in several of his writings.\(^ {119}\) In his aim to keep Sufism compatible with traditionalism, al-Wāṣīṭī may thus have regarded it as something of an obligation to formulate why, from the perspective of a Sufi, *samāʿ* has no place in the pure Sufism of the Muḥammadan way. This he tries to do, above all, in *al-Bulgha wa-al-iqnāʿ fī ḥall shubhat masʾalat al-samāʿ* (*The Sufficiency and Convincement to Solve the Obscurity on the Issue of Samāʿ*), a treatise dedicated solely to the subject. We will therefore go through his main arguments found therein, and supplement it with references from his other writings that are of relevance.

\(^{118}\) Al-Wāṣīṭī, *Mīzān al-shuyūkh*, p. 246.

\(^{119}\) For Ibn Qudāma’s fatwa, see his *Dhamm mā ʿalayhi muddaʿū al-tasawwuf* (Beirut/Damascus: al-Maktab al-Īslāmī, 1983). For Ibn Taymiyya, see *MF*, vol. 11, pp. 557–586 and pp. 587–649 for two fatwas against *samāʿ*; he also deals with the topic in his *al-Tuhfa al-Īrāqiyya fī al-aʾmāl al-qalbiyya*, ed. Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Hunaydī (Riyad: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2000), pp. 430–443.
First, it is interesting to note that al-Wāṣiṭī was able to see why one could easily be confused regarding the impermissibility of samā’. He clearly appreciates some of the effects the samā’ may have on its listener, admitting that it is not altogether void of good. He writes, for instance, that one’s inward being (al-bāṭin) can be positively affected by the melody, vocals, and tones of the beautiful, spiritual poems that are recited. This may aid in casting out concern for all that is not God (al-aghyār) and put to rest distracting whispers (wasāwis), ease the carnal soul (nafs), and stimulate the heart in what it requires of spiritual states (ahwāl) such as love for God (maḥabbah), longing for Him (shawq), intimacy with Him (uns), and nearness to Him (qurb). On top of that, al-Wāṣiṭī acknowledges that Muslim scholars differ on the legal status of the samā’. Some jurists hold it to be permissible, while others hold it to be forbidden. Even among the Sufis, he says, there are some of the later knowers of God (al-ʿārifīn al-muta’akhkhirīn) who practiced it, some who did not, and still others who used to do it and then later repented from it.

His own verdict is simply that the evil of samā’ outweighs its good, and that this is why it was never ordered by the Prophet. If the performance of samā’ would increase us in virtue and nearness to God, or if it would be a path towards God’s contentment, then the Prophet would not have concealed it from us, he argues. The truth of the matter is that it does result in evil, such as unlawful love, unlawful assemblies, and unlawful gazing. Under the pretext that it is a gathering of the pious it becomes, in the end, a gathering of the corrupt. For the most part, this depiction of the effects of samā’ appears to be based on what he himself claims to have observed during the sessions of the Rifā‘īs, wherein handsome young boys and women would supposedly participate, as seen in chapter 1.

In the knowledge that samā’ was not prescribed by the Prophet nor by the first four caliphs, al-Wāṣiṭī makes it plain that it is essentially an innovation (bidʿa). Going for the typical Ḥanbalī argument, he stresses that we ought to be on our guard against innovations, since the Prophet said that “every newly invented thing is an innovation (bidʿa), every innovation is an error, and every error belongs in the hellfire.” He believes that this is also why it would not be sufficient to defend samā’ on the basis of its acceptance by some of the well-known Sufis. He simulates a discussion on the matter as follows:

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120 Al-Wāṣiṭī, al-Bulgha, f. 64b and 66a.
121 Al-Wāṣiṭī, Masʾalat fī al-samā’, The National Library of Israel, JER NLI AP Ar. 158/7: f. 62b.
122 Al-Wāṣiṭī, al-Bulgha, f. 66b–67a.
123 Al-Wāṣiṭī, al-Bulgha, f. 67a. This well-known hadith can be found in: Abū ’Abd al-Raḥmān Aḥmad b. Shu’ayb al-Nasāʾī, al-Sunan al-sughrā, ed. “Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (Aleppo: Maktab al-maṭbūʿāt al-Islāmiyya, 1986), vol. 3, p. 188.
Someone may argue: This *samāʿ* was practiced by a group of the friends [of God] (*awlīyāʾ*) whose high station with God we do not doubt, such as the generations of Sufis [sic] of Junayd and his companions, al-Shiblī and his like, Yūsuf b. al-Ḥusayn al-Rāzī, and those before him such as Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, and others like them. Then how can it be acceptable to us that you disregard them?

It is said [in response]: Even if it was practiced by a thousand renunciants, worshipful, pious individuals – or more or less [than that] – it has still been omitted by the generality of the Companions of the Messenger of God (Ṣ), and they were on intimate terms with him! If Dhū al-Nūn had [indeed] done it, then it was still omitted by Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddiq. Or even if it was attended by Junayd, it has been established on his own account that he repented from the *samāʿ* and renounced it before he passed away.\(^\text{124}\)

As we have noted before, a core aspect of al-Wāṣīṭi’s *sulūk* is the premise that the religion is perfectly complete as it was taught by the Prophet, and that there is no need to go beyond the *nuṣūṣ*. Just as this applies to the way God describes Himself in the revealed texts, this also holds true for the rituals of worship by which one means to draw closer to God. Based on this premise, al-Wāṣīṭi holds that there are no grounds for practicing the kind of *samāʿ* that involves dancing, singing, and the beating of drums, since neither the Prophet nor the Companions ever did this.\(^\text{125}\)

He does offer an alternative, however, by differentiating between two types of *samāʿ*. On the one hand, there is the variety we have thus far been discussing, for which he says the word ‘*samāʿ*’ has become the technical term agreed upon by the people of his age, thus labeled ‘*al-samāʿ al-isṭilāhī*’.\(^\text{126}\) On the other hand, there is the variety that is rightful by the revelation, thus labeled ‘*al-samāʿ al-mashrūʿ*’. He argues that it ought to be realized that the former variety is made up of doubt (*shubha*) and worldly appetite (*shahwa*). Doubt, he explains, is the uncertainty concerning the truth of what one experiences during the *samāʿ* gathering, as the references to God’s love in the poetry that is recited therein may at times lead one to find a share of the spirits (*naṣīb al-arwāḥ*). Worldly appetite, on the other hand, is the share of the carnal souls (*naṣīb al-nuṣūs*) that is intermingled with the share of the spirits, which eventually causes the *samāʿ* to become something that is done for the Devil rather than for God. As for the rightful *samāʿ*, in accordance with the covenant (‘*ahd*) of

\(^{124}\) Al-Wāṣīṭi, *al-Bulgha*, f. 67a.
\(^{125}\) Al-Wāṣīṭi, *Mīzān al-shuyūkh*, p. 244.
\(^{126}\) Al-Wāṣīṭi, *Masʾalat fī al-samāʿ*, f. 62b, where he says: “*istalaḥa ʿalayhi ahl ḥādhā al-zamān*.”
the Prophet, the rightly guided caliphs, and the Followers (tābiʿīn), that is to listen closely to the Qur’an. As opposed to samāʿ iṣṭilāḥī, al-Wāsiṭī holds that this variety is purely for the spirit, so that neither the carnal soul nor the Devil can have a share in it.\textsuperscript{127}

He then tries to demonstrate that the two varieties of samāʿ are in truth irreconcilable by highlighting the essential differences between them. He states that those Sufis who practice samāʿ iṣṭilāḥī supposedly argue that the Qur’an does not behoove the innate nature of man (ṭibāʿ al-bashar), so that one will not find ecstasy (wajd) when listening to its audition. They are said to believe that poetry does behoove man and softens the heart, so that one ought to listen to that instead.\textsuperscript{128} As to be expected, al-Wāsiṭī rejects this as a vile argument, stating that as a consequence of this erroneous claim, such Sufis are unable to find any spiritual sensation – or dhawq, ‘taste,’ as he calls it – in the recitation of the Qur’an (tilāwa) and the ritual prayer (ṣalāt):

The realizers (muḥaqqiqūn) have verified that the taste of samāʿ conflicts with the taste of ritual prayer. Hence, anyone who is enraptured during the samāʿ iṣṭilāḥī and finds therein the perfection of his taste will not find the taste of Qur’anic recitation and ritual prayer. In all likelihood, the one who tastes samāʿ will never find the taste of ritual prayer, because there is a conflict between these two tastes that is known by those who know the distinguished taste of Islam.\textsuperscript{129}

By the word ‘realizers’ al-Wāsiṭī likely means the true Sufis, those who have attained to ḥaqīqa, the deeper, spiritual reality of things. He continues his argumentation, emphasizing how curious it is that the hearts of some Sufis who claim to love God have no room for the samāʿ of God’s Speech, and are instead filled with the samāʿ of poetry and hand-clapping.\textsuperscript{130} As we have alluded to in the previous section, he holds that it is in the Qur’an that the sālik finds tajalliyāt: those verses wherein God manifests Himself to His servants through His divine names and attributes. He therefore considers it essential to listen attentively to the recitation of God’s verses and reflect on their meanings, as they are a gateway to intimate knowledge of Him (maʿrifa).\textsuperscript{131}

Such is, in his view, the only true and rightful samāʿ as practiced by the Salaf and the righteous Sufis of old and, as such, a trademark of those who stick to

\textsuperscript{127} Al-Wāsiṭī, \textit{al-Bulgha}, f. 67b–68a.
\textsuperscript{128} Al-Wāsiṭī, \textit{Qāʿida mukhtaṣara}, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{129} Al-Wāsiṭī, \textit{al-Bulgha}, f. 68b.
\textsuperscript{130} Al-Wāsiṭī, \textit{Qāʿida mukhtaṣara}, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{131} Al-Wāsiṭī, \textit{Qāʿida mukhtaṣara}, p. 39; \textit{al-Bulgha}, p. 69a.
Muhammadan poverty (*ahl al-faqr al-Muḥammadī*).\(^{132}\) He claims that among those who adhered to it were Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyāḍ, Ibrāhīm b. Adham, Wahb b. al-Ward, Wahb b. al-Munabbih, Ḥudhayfa b. al-Mar‘ashi, Sufyān al-Thawrī, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī, Shaqīq al-Balkhi, Ḥātim al-Aṣamm, Sahāl al-Tustarī, Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī, Sarī al-Saqāṭī, Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd, and others like them.\(^{133}\) In laying claim to these names, he creates the image that the *samāʾ* that is rightful by revelation was in fact part of the tradition of the early models of authentic Sufism, sadly abandoned by the majority of the later Sufis.

Interestingly, Ibn Taymiyya has the exact same argumentation concerning *samāʾ*. He, too, differentiates between what he views as the newly invented *samāʾ* of the later Sufis and the Qur’anic *samāʾ*. Likewise, he claims that the latter variety of *samāʾ* was originally practiced by the very same list of early Sufi authorities also mentioned by al-Wāṣiṭī.\(^{134}\) Although such arguments may very well predate both Ḥanbalī scholars, I have yet to find earlier examples wherein Qur’anic *samāʾ* is similarly linked to the first generation of the Sufi figures. If this notion was actually brought into being by either al-Wāṣiṭī or Ibn Taymiyya, it remains impossible to say whether one had appropriated the arguments of the other, or whether they simply shared a method that coincidentally led to the same conclusions on this issue.

### 4.2 Philosophy and Kalām

Moving on to the second object of al-Wāṣiṭī’s polemics, he held that the majority of the fallacies and heresies he found in the words and deeds of his fellow Sufis can be traced back to foreign influences that entered Islam. He names the books of the ancient philosophers (*al-falāsifa*) and sages (*al-ḥukamāʾ*), in particular, as the main source of deviation that slowly poisoned the pure religion (*al-sharīʿa al-khāliṣa*) by inspiring the establishment of such sciences as logic (*manṭiq*) and speculative theology (*kalām*) within the domain of Islam.\(^{135}\) Again, he leans on the traditionalist premise that the pathway unto God can only be known by what God Himself has revealed, so that the faculty of reason (*quwwat al-ʿuqūl*) should not be allotted any role therein. Because God was the source of knowledge for the Prophets, only they proclaimed absolute truths, he contends. The philosophers, on the other hand, rely on reason, which can be flawed. Therefore, he argues that in its utter perfection and completeness,

\(^{132}\) Al-Wāṣiṭī, *Qāʿida mukhtaṣara*, pp. 39–40.

\(^{133}\) Al-Wāṣiṭī, *Mīzān al-shuyūkh*, p. 245.

\(^{134}\) Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, vol. 11, p. 592; and also his *al-Tuhfa*, pp. 430–431 & 439–440.

\(^{135}\) Al-Wāṣiṭī, *ʿUmdat al-ṭullāb*, p. 202.
God’s religion should not be intermingled with sciences that are the product of mankind’s own reasoning.  

He claims, however, that this is exactly what many Muslims have done since they have gradually turned to *kalām*. He places the beginning of this development around the third and fourth century after Hijra, not long after the end of the age of the *Salaf*, we may note.  

In *Talqīḥ al-asrār*, he specifically names the reign of the ‘Abbāsid caliph Abū Ja‘far Abd Allāh al-Ma‘mūn (r. 198–218/813–833) as the turning point from which the religion began to become weak and disunited. Now, al-Ma‘mūn was the caliph responsible for instigating the famous *Miḥna*, the inquisition known especially for enforcing the doctrine that the Qur’an is created, which was officially adopted by the ‘Abbāsid caliphate. Since this *Miḥna* was perhaps the greatest clash between the rationalist partisans of *kalām* and the traditionalist partisans of *ḥadīth*, it is unsurprising that al-Wāsiṭī mentions this particular caliph when he speaks of what he views as the decay of pure religion. It is often disregarded that this episode did not revolve solely around the createdness of the Qur’an, but also meant to censure the traditionalists’ affirmation of the apparent meanings of the ambiguous descriptions of God from the *nuṣūṣ*, which was considered anthropomorphism from the *kalāmī* point of view. The *Miḥna* resulted in the persecution and flogging of the eponymous founder of al-Wāsiṭī’s own madhhab, Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, and demonstrated more clearly than ever before that the *mutakallimūn* were a force to be reckoned with.

I have argued several times before that, although never stated explicitly, al-Wāsiṭī’s allusions to the presence of *kalām* theology in the religious landscape of his own context would, above all, have been made in relation to the Ash‘arīs. They had by then become the most authoritative *mutakallimūn* in Sunni Islam, having triumphed over practically all opposing theologies of the other *kalām* schools. In *Miḥtaḥ ūṭariq al-awliyā‘*, al-Wāsiṭī even directly admits that the true traditionalists have become a minority in his age when he adjures his

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136 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Hayāt al-qulūb*, p. 74.
137 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī*, p. 105; *Waṣiyya*, p. 139.
138 On the clash between rationalism and traditionalism during the *Miḥna*, and Ibn Ḥanbal’s story in that regard, see for instance: Nimrod Hurvitz, “Miḥna as self-defense,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 92 (2001): pp. 93–111; Christopher Melchert, “The Adversaries of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal,” *Arabica* 44:2 (1997): p. 252.
139 Speaking of *kalām* in his age, al-Wāsiṭī mentions how the kind of *taʾwīl* we have treated in the previous section has come to dominate Muslim theology. This, as we have noted, was also the position of a branch of the Ash‘arīs. See his *Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī*, p. 105; *Waṣiyya*, p. 139.
140 Makdisi, “Hanbalite Islam,” pp. 220 & 228; Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) pp. 94–95.
reader to follow the jurists, *fuqarā‘*, and Sufis of the *Ahl al-Sunna wa-al-Ḥadīth*, “who base themselves on the science of *ḥadīth* and *athar,*” and adding that “they are but few.”¹⁴¹

When it comes to Sufism, he holds that the majority of the Sufi masters of old would have adhered to the traditionalist creed, and that *kalām* – again, most likely in the form of Ashʿarism – only infiltrated the ranks of the later ones. Among the early traditionalist Sufis who would have affirmed God’s aboveness he specifically names al-Muḥāsibī, al-Tustarī, ‘Amr b. ‘Uthmān al-Makkī, al-Junayd, and perhaps surprisingly, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, a proto-Sufi reproached by Ibn Taymiyya on several occasions.¹⁴² Among the increasingly rare examples of traditionalist Sufis from the generations that followed after them al-Wāṣiṭī only names ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī and ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, both Ḥanbalī Sufis we may recall.¹⁴³

A noteworthy observation is that while he is frequently critical of the influence of *kalām* on later Sufism, he hardly ever sees the need to do so in connection to any particular individual or group. One of the rare instances where he attaches a name to his criticism is an isolated mention of Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), whom he says “would fanatically cling to the school (*madhhab*) of those who make *ta‘wil* and negate direction,” a remark that is clearly directed at al-Qushayrī’s Ashʿarī affiliation. Apart from al-Qushayrī, I have only found him explicitly mention *kalām* in relation to the Shādhiliyya.

Despite his claimed dislike for *kalām* well before his entry in Damascus, his changing views on the Shādhiliyya after he had settled there suggest that his

¹⁴¹ Al-Wāṣiṭī, *Miftāḥ ṭarīq al-awliyā‘*, p. 35.

¹⁴² Al-Wāṣiṭī, *Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī*, p. 108, where he says that “even al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī – may God have mercy on him – states in his writings that the hearts ascend to the heavens, until they eventually end in *al-ma‘laq*, which is a place in the Throne where the hearts of the friends [of God] who have reached nearness are suspended: they are the gathered hosts of them, the ones set above the others.” This shows that al-Wāṣiṭī was probably familiar with al-Tirmidhī’s famous *Sīrat al-awliyā‘* (better known as *Kitāb khatm al-awliyā‘*), a book that was severely criticized by Ibn Taymiyya (see for instance: *MF*, vol. 11, pp. 373–382). Compare al-Wāṣiṭī’s quoted words with the critical edition of *Sīrat al-awliyā‘*, in: al-Ḥakīm Muḥāammad b. ‘Ali al-Tirmidhī, *Thalāṭat muṣannafāt li-al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī*, ed. Bernd Radvke (Beirut/Stuttgart: In Kommission bei Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992), p. 18; and in translation, see: Bernd Radvke & John O’Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism: Two Works by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī; an Annotated Translation with Introduction* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), p. 68; Interestingly, on pp. 64–65 Radvke also makes note of al-Tirmidhī’s more traditionalist *ḥadīth*-based understanding of Islamic cosmology, which he says had not yet been influenced by the ancient Greek philosophical world model.

¹⁴³ Al-Wāṣiṭī, *Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī*, pp. 107–108; *Madkhal ahl al-fiqh*, pp. 51–53.
comments in censure of rationalist theology within the domains of Sufism were to some degree influenced by his membership of Ibn Taymiyya’s circle. Clearly, his stance towards his fellow Sufis became more and more defined in accordance with the principles of traditionalism as he lived amongst the Taymiyyans. In chapter 2 we have already seen that he had addressed his disappointment with the Shādhilīs’ reliance on kalām quite carefully in his autobiography; for although he strongly disapproved of it, he still found much good in their spiritual teachings. However, his attitude is markedly different in Qāʿida fi aṣnāf al-taʿalluh. In this treatise he states that there is in some ways a distance between the Shādhilī way and the Muḥammadan way, only known to those who know the ṣaṭarīqa Muḥammadanīya. His main argument against the Egyptian Suḥi ṭāʾi⁠’fa is that al-Shādhilī had “associated with the sciences of the philosophers (ʿulūm al-falāsifa), because he refers to the universal intellect (al-ʿaql al-kullī) in his discourse.”144 Al-Wāsiṭī then goes on to say that whoever attaches himself to the Moroccan shaykh will therefore be molded by some precepts that are correct, and some that are not.

We may perceive this change of tone as an indication of his increasingly hardened stance towards non-traditionalist Sufis. As we have noted in chapter 3, this occurred against the background of his growing rigor in adhering to the principles of traditionalism from the moment he had settled in Damascus onwards. This left no room for elements that were not in some way based on the nuṣūṣ, at least from his point of view. It seems that, more than before, traditionalist theology had become the balance to measure which Sufis were part of the Ahl al-Sunna and which ones were not, and thus ought to be avoided.

There is reason to believe that Ibn Taymiyya’s teachings played some role in this development. The Ḥanbalī shaykh al-Islām displays a very similar outlook on the influence of philosophy and kalām on Sufism in his writings. Like al-Wāsiṭī, he claims that the early Sufis belonged to the Ahl al-Ḥadīth and affirmed all of God’s names and attributes. And again, apart from al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, he names the exact same authorities to give examples of Sufis he accepts as traditionalists. Only among the later shaykhs does he start to distinguish roughly between two categories of deviating Sufis: those who were influenced by the kalām theology of the Jahmiyya, such as the Ashʿarī Sufi al-Qushayrī and his ilk, and those who were influenced by Greek philosophy, such as the Sufis of Ibn ‘Arabī’s school of ittiḥād.145

144 Al-Wāsiṭī, Qāʿida fi aṣnāf al-taʿalluh, p. 151.
145 Ibn Taymiyya, Kitāb al-ṣaḍafidiyya, vol. 1, p. 267; Darʾ taʿāruḍ, vol. 5, pp. 4–7, vol. 6, p. 266, vol. 7, p. 145; al-Raddʾ alā al-Shādhilī, p. 39.
The influence of Ibn Taymiyya on al-Wāṣiṭī in measuring Sufism according to the balance of traditionalism was likely also what caused the latter’s change of heart regarding the Shādhiliyya. In fact, he may have borrowed the above-mentioned argument against al-Shādhili from his Ḥanbalī master. Although relatively unknown, Ibn Taymiyya composed a refutation of the Moroccan Sufi, which goes into considerable detail to censure some statements of his in the field of Sufism. The second half of the book deals exclusively with a lengthy passage quoted from a treatise that is attributed to al-Shādhili, wherein the latter makes mention of the primordial intellect (al-ʿaql al-aṣlī) and the necessary intellect (al-ʿaql al-ḍarūrī). Ibn Taymiyya, who was without a doubt much more knowledgeable in philosophy than al-Wāṣiṭī, then goes to great lengths to show that these two terms originate from philosophy and have nothing to do with the pure religion of the Prophets. What is interesting is that, contrary to al-Wāṣiṭī’s claim, to my knowledge the eponymous founder of the Shādhiliyya never uses the term ‘universal intellect’ (al-ʿaql al-kullī) in the writings attributed to him. However, commenting on the two intellects that are indeed mentioned by al-Shādhili, Ibn Taymiyya says in his refutation that the philosophers view ‘the active intellect’ (al-ʿaql al-faʿʿāl) as the intellect that is closest to us “and [that] they say that the scriptures that came down unto the hearts of the Prophets come from it, and that [God’s] words that reached Moses came from it.” In other words, Ibn Taymiyya apparently understood one of the terms used by al-Shādhili as a reference to the ‘active intellect.’ Because the ‘universal intellect’ mentioned by al-Wāṣiṭī and the ‘active intellect’ mentioned by Ibn Taymiyya happen to be synonymous, it becomes very plausible that the former may have taken his argument against al-Shādhili from the latter. If this is indeed the case, then we have here another clear indication that al-Wāṣiṭī’s hardening attitude towards Sufis who did not operate strictly within the boundaries of traditionalism was, at least to some degree, influenced by Ibn Taymiyya. Whether the same can be said of our next and final topic, his polemical activity against the Akbarian Sufis, is not so clear-cut as we will now see.

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146 Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh, *Durūt al-asrār*, p. 134.
147 Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Radd ʿalā al-Shādhilī*, p. 132.
148 While al-ʿaql al-kullī is more commonly known as al-ʿaql al-faʿʿāl, its use can be traced back to the Brethren of Purity (ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ), see for instance: Ismail K. Poonawala, “Humanism in Ismāʿīlī Thought: The Case of the Rasāʾīl Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ (The Epistles of the Sincere Brethren and Faithful Friends),” in *Universality in Islamic Thought*, ed. M. Morony (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), p. 71.
4.3 The Monistic Akbarians

Based on our study in the previous chapter, it appears that al-Wāsiṭī's severe animosity towards the monism (waḥda), unification (ittiḥād), and incarnation (ḥulūl) supposedly professed by the Akbarians had sprung forth from his own experiences among them in Cairo rather than under the influence of Ibn Taymiyya's polemics. It remains difficult to assess whether the latter's writings and arguments against their teachings did inspire the refutations al-Wāsiṭī subsequently composed himself against the Akbarian school, as there certainly are parallels that can be drawn between them. However, it is also true that Ibn Taymiyya is much more elaborate in his argumentation, and also delves into philosophy when discussing Ibn ʿArabī and his doctrine, a field al-Wāsiṭī never really quite dares to engage with.149 I have not found the latter ever bring up philosophy in relation to the Akbarians, whereas we have noted above that his Ḥanbalī shaykh specifically linked the roots of monistic Sufism to it. This, I would argue, indicates that the arguments al-Wāsiṭī sets forth in refutation of Akbarian Sufis were rather the fruits of his own labor.

It is important to note that by far the bulk of his polemical effort in the field of Sufism is directed against Ibn ʿArabī and his followers. He authored at least three refutations that deal solely with the heresies he found in their doctrine, two of which have been at my disposal. These are: Lawāmiʿ al-istirshād fī al-farq bayna al-tawḥīd wa-al-ittiḥād (Flashes of Guidance to Differentiate Between Divine Unity and Monism) and Ashīʿʿat al-nuṣūṣ fī hatk astār al-Fuṣūṣ (Rays of Statements to expose ‘the Fuṣūṣ’).150 The former is meant as a rather elementary and general warning against monistic Sufism, while the latter is specifically written as a step-by-step rebuttal of Ibn ʿArabī’s treatise Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam. Besides these two titles and the section on the Akbarians from al-Wāsiṭī’s autobiography, there are at least seven more works that contain passages in which he attacks them and their teachings.151

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149 Below I will give a summary of al-Wāsiṭī’s argumentation against the Akbarians. For Ibn Taymiyya’s detailed refutation of them, see for instance his Ḥaqīqat madhhab al-ittiḥād-diyin, in MF, vol. 2, pp. 134–284.

150 Unavailable to me has been al-Bayān al-mufīd fī al-farq bayna al-ittiḥād wa-al-tawḥīd (The Beneficial Elucidation on the Differentiation between Monism and Divine Unity), which al-Wāsiṭī mentions in Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, p. 114. Note that I have consulted two editions of Ashīʿʿat al-nuṣūṣ, one of which is published in al-ʿImādiyyāt (pp. 53–85). The other edition is published under the variant title Bāshūrat al-nuṣūṣ fī hatk astār al-Fuṣūṣ and misses certain words and phrases found in the former, which sometimes make the text less clear. I have therefore chosen to rely on the former rather than the latter.

151 Talqīḥ al-afhām, pp. 152–153; Lawāḥih min gawāʾid, pp. 124–128; al-Tadhkira, pp. 35–36; Miftāḥ al-maʿrīf, p. 253; Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, pp. 113–117; ʿUmdat al-ṭullāb, pp. 214–215; Qāʿida fī bayān al-sulūk, p. 163.
Below will follow a summary of the main arguments directed against them and the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the unity of being. In the previous chapter we have already been given a taste of al-Wāsiṭī’s problem with the latter concept, which revolves around the Akbarian conception of existence in relation to God’s unity. However, since his autobiographical account does not convey the full depths of his argumentation, there is still more to be said in that regard.

If one undertakes to study what it is al-Wāsiṭī says about Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers in his other writings, it soon becomes apparent that his most vicious slander is directed against them. This should not come as a surprise, as we have seen that of all the Sufi groups he had come across he was evidently most troubled by them. We may thus presume that, as with the subject of *samāʿ*, he saw it as something of a necessity to distance himself and the science of *taṣawwuf* from their doctrine in unequivocal terms – and this he indeed does. He displays no reluctance to openly declare that those with Akbarian leanings are outside the pale of Islam, and on several occasions even calls upon God to eradicate them from the face of the earth. In one letter, he argues that it is forbidden to say the customary invocation for a deceased Muslim, “may God have mercy on him,” after mentioning the names of Ibn ‘Arabī, Ibn Sabʿīn, al-Qūnawī, Ibn Hūd, al-Balyānī, al-Tilimsānī, and their ilk. At times, their deviant nature is emphasized by comparing their heresy to that of the Bāṭiniyya and Qarāmiṭa Shi‘ites, and by linking their doctrine to the eponymous founder of the Jahmiyya, Jahm b. Safwān (d. 128/745), and to the Murji‘ī theologian Bishr b. Ghiyāth al-Marīsī (d. 218 or 219/833 or 834).

It would nevertheless be wrong to assume that al-Wāsiṭī’s treatment of the Akbarians does not surpass mere name-calling. As we have seen in the previous chapter, he appears to have become well familiar with Ibn ‘Arabī’s madhhab (school or doctrine) when he stayed in Cairo. This is indeed substantiated by his analysis of their teachings as found throughout his writings.

Because he was convinced that anyone who desires to know the true doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabī should consult the *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, the majority of his polemical attention is devoted to this book. When he brings forward proofs for what he considers the heresy in Akbarian teachings, he almost exclusively does so by referring to or quoting from the *Fuṣūṣ*. A typical example is the following passage from his *Ashi‘at al-nuṣūṣ*:

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152 Al-Wāsiṭī, *ʿUmdat al-ṭullāb*, p. 214; *Ashi‘at al-nuṣūṣ*, pp. 30 & 58.
153 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī*, p. 113.
154 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Lawāmiʿ*, p. 94; *Talqīḥ al-afhām*, p. 153.
155 Al-Wāsiṭī, *Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī*, pp. 114.
O people of intelligence, ponder over these words and you will understand their intent; [Ibn ‘Arabī] says [in the Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam]: “[God] is your mirror in which you see yourself ...” Do you understand what this means? It means that, since His essential existence emanated upon you, He is like a mirror in which you see that your immutability in non-existence exists. Thus, the existence of the Real is your mirror in which you see yourself.

Then he says: “... and you are His mirror in which He sees His names and perceives their properties (aḥkām).” This means that if you did not exist, His names would not be manifest. Hence, you are a mirror for Him, so that His names can manifest, in the same way as He is your mirror in which you yourself manifest.156

In al-Wāsitī’s view, such lines from the Fuṣūṣ he quotes here perfectly exemplify what the doctrine advocated by Ibn ‘Arabī entails. Let us therefore elaborate on this passage.

In his introduction to Ashīʿat al-nuṣūṣ, al-Wāsitī tells us that the Akbarians believe that existents only come into being after God’s essential existence (wujūdahu al-dhātī) emanates upon what they call either ‘quiddities’ (māhiyāt) or ‘concrete things’ (a’yān). These are immutably fixed in non-existence (thābitatan fī al-ʿadam) until they receive existence through this emanation (fayd) in accordance with their predisposition (istiʿdād) to do so. This, the Akbarians are said to believe, is the only way they become existents. When this occurs, God’s own existence enters the perceptible realm (fī al-ẓāhir), in which the properties (aḥkām) of His names and attributes then manifest.157 These names and attributes are not other than Him, but in truth identical with Him. Hence, unity (waḥda) becomes manifest in multiplicity (kathra) without thereby becoming manifold, as God’s essence ever remains one. As an example, al-Wāsitī considers a creature that is granted provision, ’al-marzūq’ in Arabic. He explains that the Akbarians would say that this creature remains immutably fixed in non-existence until God’s existence emanates upon it. Only then can it be perceived as al-marzūq, whereby God’s divine name al-Razzāq, the Provider, simultaneously becomes manifest. According to our Iraqi Sufi, the Akbarians hold that this Self-manifestation of God (al-tajallī) is motivated by His desire to become acquainted with Himself through Himself, since

156 Al-Wāsiṭī, Ashīʿat al-nuṣūṣ, p. 63. A very similar analysis of the same passage from the Fuṣūṣ is provided by al-Wāsiṭī in his Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, p. 116.

157 In Ibn ‘Arabī’s terminology, the properties (aḥḵām, sing. ḥukm), refer to “the ruling power or the governing control of the divine names in the cosmos,” cf. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination (State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 39.
He is able to see Himself in the quiddities/concrete things at the moment He reveals Himself to them.\(^{158}\)

Al-Wāsiṭī observes several elemental problems here, which, in his view, contradict the very tenets of Islam. First, if the quiddities/concrete things only receive existence from God in accordance with their predisposition, that would mean that they have a degree of free disposal, independent of God. While God may decide to emanate existence or not, He has no choice when it comes to the measure in which they are predisposed to receive it from Him. Second, if nothing of His existence emanates on them, that would mean that He has no name or attribute in a state of manifestation at all, so that, as a consequence, He becomes something non-delimited (muṭlaq) without existence. Third, if God is dependent on them for His Self-manifestation, that would mean He is in need of them – for whoever is sustained by something is in need of it. As long as they do not receive existence from Him, neither God's own existence nor His names and attributes manifest in the perceptible realm. In that sense, they are thus His source of sustenance. The same goes the other way around: The quiddities/concrete things are in need of God for their existence, for without it they remain non-existent, immutably fixed in their non-existence. Hence, as al-Wāsiṭī understands it, Akbarian doctrine comes down to the notion that there is a mutual dependency here: God serves the creation, and the creation serves God.\(^{159}\) He argues that this is in complete disagreement with the doctrine of the Muslims, according to which God's essence and His names and attributes are in continuous existence since pre-eternity. There is nothing newly added to God by what is brought forth from what He creates that has not already been a part of Him in His pre-eternity. God's creation, on the other hand, only comes into being by His will and is ever utterly dependent on its Creator.\(^{160}\)

In Lawāmiʿ al-istirshād al-Wāsiṭī explains that the roots of this heresy are deviation from the traditionalist premise of upholding the way God describes Himself and not going beyond what the nuṣūṣ explicitly state. It is in essence due to the Akbarians' exaggeration in affirming God's unity (al-tawḥīd) that they have ended up practicing what al-Wāsiṭī calls the worst form of polytheism. He contends that while the polytheists of the pre-Islamic era (al-jāhiliyya) ascribed equals to God by worshipping false idols, stones, stars, trees, and other similar vile objects of worship, the Akbarians actually make all existents into associates with God by affirming that they are identical with Him. To them,

\(^{158}\) Al-Wāsiṭī, Ashiʿʿat al-nuṣūṣ, pp. 57–58; Talqīḥ al-afhām, pp. 152–153; Lawāʾiḥ min qawāʾid, pp. 124–126; Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, pp. 114–115.

\(^{159}\) Al-Wāsiṭī, Ashiʿʿat al-nuṣūṣ, pp. 58–60; Talqīḥ al-afhām, pp. 152–153; Lawāʾiḥ min qawāʾid, pp. 124–126; Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, pp. 114–115.

\(^{160}\) Al-Wāsiṭī, Ashiʿʿat al-nuṣūṣ, p. 58 and again on p. 81.
“every created thing is a locus of manifestation in which the Real manifests with His very essence (bi-ḥaqīqatihi) and [in which] He discloses Himself with His existence and ‘I’-ness (bi-wujūdihi wa-aniyyatihi). They thereby reach the essential meaning of polytheism.”\textsuperscript{161} With this doctrine, al-Wāsiṭī says, it becomes possible to assert that worshipping idols is in reality no different from worshipping God, something Ibn ʿArabī himself actually dared to utter in the \textit{Fuṣūṣ}, he points out.\textsuperscript{162} Such beliefs come down to incarnation and unification (\textit{al-ḫulūl wa-al-ittiḥād}) – although, he acknowledges, the Akbarians themselves would deny that, saying that for one thing to become incarnate in something else requires duality; and this can never be the case as everything is one in their view.\textsuperscript{163}

While for al-Wāsiṭī the heresies inherent to this doctrine were apparent, he still felt it posed a very real threat to the Muslim community due to its strong potential to misguide people through its manipulation of allusions (\textit{ʿibārāt}) and terminology of the true Sufis from among the Muslims (\textit{ṣūfiyyat ahl al-Islām}). His genuine concern appears to have been that if those who are heedless of the objectives of the Akbarians hear such teachings as related above, phrased in the language of the Sufis, they may think that it refers to the Sunni creed of \textit{tawḥīd} and the truthful witnessing of God’s actions (\textit{shuhūd al-afʿāl}) to which the Sufis allude. That, he says, is because their words resemble the actual truth, namely, that everything in existence only exists by God’s express will.\textsuperscript{164} In \textit{Lawāʾiḥ min qawāʿid ahl al-zaygh} he sketches the following picture to exemplify how people may be misguided by Akbarian teachings:

If someone from them studies these [Akbarian] fundamentals (\textit{qawāʿid}), writes them down, believes in them, and then enters a spiritual retreat (\textit{khalwa}) with an empty belly, invoking God with the profession of His unity for some time,\textsuperscript{165} it will not take long before this illusion (\textit{wahm}) [of \textit{waḥdat al-wujūd}] becomes strong in him. It is very well possible that he becomes deluded by it through a state that hits him, or some inspiration (\textit{wārid}) that comes over him. He will then depart from his retreat, imagining that he has become reality itself, saying: “glory be to me!”\textsuperscript{166}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[161] Al-Wāsiṭī, \textit{Lawāmiʿ}, p. 93; Post, “A Taymiyyan Sufi’s Refutation,” p. 320.
\item[162] Al-Wāsiṭī, \textit{Ashiʿʿat al-nuṣūṣ}, 67.
\item[163] Al-Wāsiṭī, \textit{Qāʿida fī bayān al-sulūk}, p. 163; \textit{Lawāʾiḥ min qawāʿid}, p. 127.
\item[164] Al-Wāsiṭī, \textit{Lawāmiʿ}, pp. 95–96; \textit{Lawāʾiḥ min qawāʿid}, p. 124.
\item[165] Literally: “... invokes ‘there is no deity but God’ for some time” (\textit{wa-yadhkuru “lā ilāha illā Allāh” muddat}).
\item[166] Al-Wāsiṭī, \textit{Lawāʾiḥ min qawāʿid}, p. 127.
\end{footnotes}
What al-Wāṣiṭī speaks of here is what he regards as an example of the way Akbarians manipulate the Sufi concept of annihilation in God (fanāʾ), and render it into a spiritual state of intense awareness of the unity of existence. Hence the expression “glory be to me!” which is actually meant in glorification of God, in their eyes is the only true reality of existence. He contends, however, that “this is not the fanāʾ of the lovers [of God] from the Sufis (al-muḥibbīn min al-ṣūfīyya), who are annihilated through the One they love so that they become absent from their ‘selves.” But, he concludes, someone who is not aware of the Akbarians’ heresy will not be able to differentiate between their fanāʾ and that of “the folk of truth.”

With this line of argumentation, al-Wāṣiṭī once more differentiates between true Sufis and impostor Sufis. Leaning on the notion that the true Sufis acted in accordance with the principles of traditionalism, and were indeed themselves traditionalists, Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers are by reason of their monistic doctrine automatically excluded from their ranks. He makes the same point in Lawāmiʿ al-istirshād, where he writes:

We, the people of reason, should not exceed the tawḥīd that [God] has made plain to us, but only seek intimate knowledge [of Him] (maʿrifa) by means of what He has revealed to us. We should not be greedy in seeking tawḥīd and adopt everything as a divinity, thus exaggerating in the confession of His unity. By acknowledging that only God has existence we would be making Him identical with everything. We would thereby fall into religious laxity and neglect the obligations, pertaining to what is forbidden and what is permitted, break down the barrier of the revealed law, and exceed the guidance of those who preceded us from our Prophet’s Companions and the shaykhs of our [Sufi] community (ṯāʾīfatinā), such as Sahl [al-Tustarī], al-Junayd, al-Sarī [al-Saṭarī], ‘Amr b. ‘Uthmān [al-Makkī], Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz, Ibn ‘Aṭāʾ, and their generations.

The aim of this passage is, of course, to belittle the Sufi credentials of the Akbarians by laying claim to several of the same respected early Sufi authorities we have come across in the previous discussions on samāʿ and philosophy. Al-Wāṣiṭī alludes to these Sufis as ‘ṭāʾīfatinā’ to single them out as representatives of traditionalist Sufism, who, in his view, never dared to profess the likes of

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167 Al-Wāṣiṭī, Risālatuhu ilā al-shaykh al-Maghribī, p. 117.
168 Al-Wāṣiṭī, Lawāʾiḥ min qawāʾid, p. 126.
169 Al-Wāṣiṭī, Lawāmiʿ, p. 96; Post, “A Taymiyyan Sufi’s Refutation,” pp. 324–325.
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waḥdat al-wujūd. He thereby once more tries to emphasize the ‘otherness’ of Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers.

5 Conclusion

As we have now reached the final word on al-Wāsiṭī’s polemics against Akbarian doctrine, our concluding topic, it will be useful to briefly reflect on the pattern we may recognize throughout the sections of the present chapter in order to tie them all together. As a general observation, we can say that we have been able to discern a distinct presence of Ḥanbali traditionalism in each of the subjects that we identified as one of the foundations of al-Wāsiṭī’s Sufism. It is therefore not unfitting to speak of it as ‘al-sulūk al-athari,’ the traditionalist spiritual way, as it was called by Ibn Rajab. This is a label our Iraqi Sufi in all likelihood would not have been unappreciative of.

To start at the beginning, in the first section of this chapter we found that al-Wāsiṭī spoke of his way of sulūk as the ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya to highlight that he envisioned it as being based solely on the inner dimension of the Prophet’s Sunna. Therefore, rather than connecting spiritually to any Sufi shaykh, he taught a method of spiritually connecting to the Prophet’s incorporeal being, which could be established through one’s love for him on the basis of intimate knowledge (maʿrifa) of his life and times. Thus, the first foundation of his Sufism was primarily a textually based method that revolved around a close study of the nuṣūṣ in order to become acquainted with the Prophet and his Companions. The second foundation was very similar in that it also started with a close study of the nuṣūṣ, only this time to gain maʿrifa of God and connect to Him by becoming intimately acquainted with Him “as He describes Himself” in the revelation. For al-Wāsiṭī, this could only be reached through a traditionalist understanding of what the nuṣūṣ say regarding the divine names and attributes, especially when it comes to God’s aboveness and sitting on the Throne. Thus, the second foundation of his Sufism was first and foremost a matter of studying the descriptions of God from the Qur’an and the Sunna in accordance with the traditionalist creed.

This reliance on traditionalist theology was also the common thread in his polemics. We have seen that, whether it concerned the practice of samā’, the presence of philosophy and kalām in Sufism, or Akbarian doctrine, he considered them all illegitimate on more or less the same grounds. In his view, they all lacked any explicit basis in the texts of the Qur’an and the Sunna, so that their existence essentially depended on deviation from the nuṣūṣ. Of course, what constitutes deviation is in the eye of the beholder, and the way al-Wāsiṭī
circumscribed it depended heavily on his adherence to the theological framework of traditionalism as he understood it. With regard to his polemics, it is also significant to note that he repeatedly laid claim to several, widely respected Sufi masters to lend credence to his traditionalist vision of Sufism. He thereby aimed to effectively highlight the ‘otherness’ of those practices and doctrines he polemicized against by disassociating such well-known, and often legendary, shaykhs from them.

As a final observation, we may notice that al-Wāsiṭī and Ibn Taymiyya not only had very similar concerns when it came to the state of Sufism in their age, but also shared a common approach to address the problems they perceived therein. Their shared effort to filter Sufism of what they saw as deviations, and their utilization of a very similar language to do so, is not so much an issue of the authoritative influence of one over the other, as it is a matter of group identity. For both of them, their outlook on Islam was anchored in the tradition of the Ahl al-Ḥadīth, or perhaps more accurately, in their specific image and understanding of this tradition. I would therefore argue that we should see the similarities between them in light of the traditionalist activism that we have noted in the previous chapter as a characteristic element of the Taymiyyan jamāʿa – a cause Ibn Taymiyya strove for as the group’s leading jurist and theologian, and al-Wāsiṭī, evidently, as the group’s leading authority in the field of Sufism.