

Chapter 1: Basic problems

The topic

The topic of this book is early Islamic renunciant piety, which seems to have predominated before the rise of classical Sufism in the later ninth century. To state my history with utmost brevity, I might say that the renunciant piety of the eighth century was about preserving the ethos of the conquest period after the conquests were over. It became increasingly unfeasible as the military was professionalized and more and more people converted to Islam. It was one thing to call for Muslims to spend most of their nights in prayer and qur'anic recitation when the Muslims were a thin stratum at the top of society, supported by tribute from the conquered peoples. It was quite another thing to call for that when Muslims had become the majority and most of them necessarily had to work for a living. Active distrust of the life of austerity began to be respectable from about the last third of the eighth century, even as enthusiasts embraced new, more extreme forms. Following some active persecution of Sufis, a new synthetic piety crystallized around al-Junayd (d. 298/911?) in Baghdad. This was classical Sufism, still calling for austerities but not for everyone; subordinating the old fear of God to cultivating mystical communion with the Divine.

In the following chapters, I shall try to present representative examples of renunciant devotions, accounts of how they were supported materially and their stance *vis à vis* rulers, finally the rise of opposition to world-denying renunciation and the Sufi answer to that opposition. One of my theses is that it is possible to write about Islamic piety historically: to identify stages and to suggest why it moved in some directions rather than others. Scholars must reject the view, however comfortable to believers, that Sufism is a superhistorical essence manifest in the Prophet's lifetime, manifest throughout the conquest period, manifest immediately after the conquest period.

The sources

The chief problem of writing early Islamic history is that so few of our sources are contemporary. That is, to know what happened in the seventh and eighth centuries we mainly have to rely on chroniclers and others of the ninth and tenth centuries. The risk is that chroniclers of the ninth and tenth centuries were projecting backward the ideas of their own time. Sometimes, the anachronisms are obvious, as when the Companions of the Prophet are supposed to have reverently listened

to, memorized, and passed on warnings from the Prophet about errant theological views that they would never themselves hear expressed, nor any but the longest-lived of the generation after them; for example, ‘Every nation has Magians (*majūs*). The Magians of this community are those who say there is no predestination (*qadar*). Whoever of them dies, do not witness his funeral. Whoever of them falls ill, do not visit him. They are the party of the Antichrist.’¹ Sometimes, it is contradictions among different versions of how something happened or what exactly was said that alert us to how little we can be sure of.

Lack of contemporary or even near-contemporary accounts from within the Islamic tradition is worsened by lack of contemporary accounts from outside it. Seventh-century Muslims did not have the sorts of institutions that generate and preserve quantities of documentation, but their neighbours were in only somewhat better condition. Seventh-century Byzantine history is also difficult to make out on account of imperial weakness. The Sasanian empire completely disappeared, and Persian letters did not revive until the later ninth century. We therefore have no Persian chronicles of the seventh and eighth centuries, either.

The authenticity of hadith remains an area of major disagreement in the academy. Briefly stated, my own position is that there are so many anachronisms and contradictions among them that attributions to the Prophet and his Companions in the seventh century are fairly certain to have originated in back projection of current ideas.² In descriptions of the ninth century, when most of the earliest extant literature was written, there are many fewer anachronisms but enough contradictions to require that scholars remain on their guard. Still, it seems probable that across the eighth and ninth centuries, back projection of current ideas was accomplished within a narrowing scope, ever more by the adjustment of the existing record and ever less by the outright invention of new sayings.

The *Muṣannafs* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq and Ibn Abī Shaybah, our best sources for eighth-century debates about the law, are replete with successive topic headings ‘Those who said such-and-such about this problem’ and ‘Those who said the opposite’; for example, ‘those who discouraged talking while circumambulating the

1 Abū Dāwūd, *al-sunnah* 16, *bāb fī al-qadar*, no 4692.

2 Two surveys of the controversy, still unsurpassed, are Motzki, *Origins*, chap. 1, and Berg, *Development of exegesis*, chap. 2. Motzki himself is famous for arguing in favour of authenticity, yet he seldom pushes anything back to the seventh century, merely concluding that it is conceivable that the kernel of the hadith report in question goes back to then. See outstandingly the articles translated in Motzki with Boekhoff-van der Voort and Anthony, *Analysing Muslim traditions*, and Harald Motzki, ‘Dating Muslim traditions’. See also Pavlovitch, *Formation*, and Yanagihashi, *Studies*, for recent studies prepared at the outset to accept Motzki’s *isnād-cum-matn* technique but unconvinced in the end.

Ka‘bah’, then ‘those who permitted talking while circumambulating the Ka‘bah’.³ They often quote Companions on both sides of an issue, a clear sign of back projection, representing later ideas of what these eminent authorities must have said rather than accurate recollections of what they said. And then, especially in collections of the ninth century, we get contradictory accounts of what the Prophet said—again, clearly, the product of back projection, not continuous, accurate transmission.

In the field of qur’anic commentary, lack of knowledge about the early seventh century shows up in multiple successive glosses. For example, Q. 5:51 says, ‘Do not take the Jews and Christians as allies’, concerning which al-Māwardī successively quotes reports that it was occasioned by the conversion of two from Judaism, ‘Ubādah ibn al-Ṣāmit and ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ubayy, who feared to abandon their old alliances; by Abū Lubābah ibn ‘Abd al-Mundhir, who had been given to decide what to do with the Banī Qurayẓah, a Jewish clan the Muslims had just subdued (he would order the men slaughtered, the women and children enslaved); or concerning two of the Muslims of Yathrib who were wavering just before the battle of Uḥud.⁴ It would be reckless to attribute any of these to continuous, accurate transmission. The upshot is that I trust eighth- and ninth-century quotations of the Prophet and his Companions to illustrate the views of eighth- and ninth-century Muslims but not to tell us what was said and thought in the seventh century.

The principal sources of this study: three genres

Our principal sources for the early history of piety are collections of short texts belonging to three traditions: *adab* (polite letters), Sufism, and hadith. The *adab* tradition aimed at forming character (corresponding to ancient *paideia*), with self-restraint an important constituent of the ideal. It was deliberately comprehensive, so that the gentleman knew something of everything. Naturally, that included something of religion. The section on sermons and renunciation (*al-mawā‘iẓ wa-al-zuhd*) makes up about 1 percent of *al-Iqd al-farīd*, for example, a monumental *adab* collection by the Andalusian Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (d. Cordova, 328/940). The *adab* tradition of renunciatory literature is distinguished from the Sufi and hadith traditions by its attraction to elegant locutions (hence Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih’s pairing), more subtly to humour and miracles. From the ninth century

³ Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Muṣannaf* 4/1:97–8 5:136–8.

⁴ Māwardī, *Nukat* 2:46.

C.E., the *zuhd* sections of al-Jāhiz (d. 255/868–9), *al-Bayān wa-al-tabyīn*, and Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889?), *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, are examples of this tradition, along with the many works of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 281/894), which apparently have the most overlap with the hadith tradition.⁵ For example, Ibn Qutaybah (whose section on renunciation and sermons makes up around 7 percent of *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*) reports that it is written in the Torah, by the inspiration of God,

O Mūsā ibn ʿImrān, master of Mount Lebanon (*ṣāhib jabal lubnān*), you are my servant and I am your God the Judge (*al-dayyān*). Do not condemn the poor man (*faqīr*) or envy the rich man for something little (*yasīr*); at my recollection be fearful (*khāshīʿan*); at the recitation of my inspiration be obedient (*tāʾiʿan*); give me to hear the sweetness of the Torah with a voice that is sad (*ḥazīn*).⁶

Injunctions to renounce worldly goods, fear God, be obedient, and chant with a sad voice are commonplaces of renunciant literature, but they do not usually come with rhetorical flourishes like the rhyming prose in this work of *adab*.

The Sufi literary tradition probably begins with two collections of sayings and stories from the mid-tenth century, those of Ibn al-Aʿrābī (d. 340/952?) and Jaʿfar al-Khuldī (d. 348/959), mostly lost except in quotation. Both were members of al-Junayd's circle in Baghdad at the beginning of the century. It is characterized first by a tendency to present renunciation as a precursor to Sufism (anticipating the standard view among historians today), also to project a mystical outlook onto early figures. The shorter Sufi biographical dictionary of al-Sulamī (d. Nishapur, 412/1021), for example, divides up its subjects among five generations of about twenty each. Only a minority of those in the first generation were ever called 'Sufis' in their lifetimes, and some of the earlier ones are often cited in renunciant literature.⁷ The principal disadvantage of the Sufi collections is just that their main interest is in the Sufis, not their precursors, so they present less information about eighth-century piety.

⁵ As for the last, see Weipert and Weninger, 'Erhaltene Werke'. For his identification with the *adab* tradition, see Chabbi, 'Remarques', 24fn.

⁶ Ibn Qutaybah, *ʿUyūn* 2:266–7.

⁷ Al-Sulamī's greatest work, *Tārīkh al-ṣūfiyyah*, is lost except for quotation and an appendix covering women, published as al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-niswah*. Al-Sulamī declares in the introduction to *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyyah* that this book covers the latter saints (*mutaʾakkhiri al-awliyāʾ*), whereas an earlier book, apparently called *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, had covered Companions, Followers, and the Followers of the Followers (*Ṭabaqāt*, 5). Unlike *Tārīkh al-ṣūfiyyah*, it is not only lost but seldom quoted by later biographers. Other works of his have been published, for which see Thibon, *L'œuvre*, part 3.

I recall no attempt to explain why Sufi authors of the 11th century and later preserved so much of the pre-Sufi, renunciant tradition despite its disagreeing with theirs. In part, presumably, the austerities and attitudes of eighth-century renunciants served to illustrate and inspire those of novices in their day. In part, presumably, it also served to justify odd behaviour of their own. For example, I have pointed to a short section that the early Sufi writer Khargūshī (d. 407/1016?) devotes to preparations for spending all night in worship.⁸ First is a story of the Companion ‘Imrān ibn al-Ḥuṣayn, after whose death it transpired that he had been in the habit of dressing in wool and praying all night, then changing it for cotton at daybreak. Next is a story of ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s having a hairshirt and iron collar in a basket, which he would pull out and wear for the second half of the night, weeping and crying out in a special chamber till daybreak, then putting them away to go out. Finally, we hear of an anonymous Khurasani who would put on his best clothes at nightfall. His wife observed that other people would put on their best clothes in the morning, before they went to their places of trade (*aswāq*). He answered, ‘I am going to my place of trade’ and proceeded to his place of worship (*miḥrāb*). There are many stories in other sources establishing that secret worship, uncomfortable clothing, and nighttime devotions were common features of eighth-century devotional life, although the assignment of these particular devotions to a Companion and a caliph may be doubted.⁹ Khargūshī’s contemporary likewise performs devotions at night, not surprising in a Sufi. (The Sufis were known, after all, for little food, little sleep, and little speech.) But he dresses well for his devotions, in exact opposition to the earlier figures in this section. (Also, what he does in his fine clothes is presumably to praise God, not to abuse himself.) The stories of the two early figures justify social nonconformity in the recent one, however different many details.

If the first disadvantage of the Sufi collections is simply that they provide much more information about the Sufi period than what went on before, the second disadvantage is that they tend to look on the renunciants of the past as they look on practitioners of renunciation in their own day; that is, as persons doing something valuable as a first stage on the Sufi path. They may report behaviour different from that of the Sufis they most admire, as in the example from Khargūshī, but they will also be tempted to give the renunciants mystical objects. Sometimes, what they quote of eighth-century figures is anachronistically mystical only by misinterpretation, as when modern students of Sufism have presumed

⁸ Khargūshī, *Tahdhīb*, 469–430. For my long assessment of Khargūshī, see Melchert, ‘Khargūshī’.

⁹ Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyah* 6:195, relates that Riyāḥ ibn ‘Amr al-Qaysī (Basran, d. 170s/787–97?) would put a fetter on his neck at night and weep till morning.

Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawīyah (Basran, d. 185/801–2?) a mystic for emphatically proclaiming her love of God and God alone, overlooking that she never speaks of communion with God this side of the Last Judgement or of God as loving her.¹⁰ But they also, as observed, quote some early figures as improbably anticipating later Sufi teachings, outstandingly Ibrāhīm ibn Ad‘ham (d. Mesopotamia, 163/779–80?) and Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. Giza, 246/861?).¹¹ It will be objected that Sufi sources quote mystical sayings of such figures, non-Sufi sources only non-mystical, not because Sufi writers were more given to back projection than non-Sufis but because only the Sufi sources troubled to preserve mystical sayings. There is a strong risk of non-falsifiability to such claims. At least one may be systematically sceptical of a relatively late Sufi source that continually relates stories not found in any previous source, sometimes including interactions between persons known from earlier sources not to have been contemporaries.¹²

The hadith tradition is distinguished by attention to chains of transmitters (*asānīd*; sing. *isnād*). To it belong our most voluminous sources for early piety, mainly Abū Nu‘aym (d. Isfahan, 430/1038), *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. Baghdad, 241/855), *al-Zuhd*, Ibn al-Mubārak (d. Hit, 181/797), *al-Zuhd*, the *zuhd* and other sections of Ibn Abī Shaybah (d. Kufa, 235/849), *al-Muṣannaḥ*, and Hannād ibn al-Sarī (d. Kufa, 243/857), *al-Zuhd*.¹³ Abū Nu‘aym was a major collector of hadith. Most of the entries in the *Ḥilyah* begin with stories and sayings having to do with the renunciant life but conclude with hadith related by the subject of the entry. Apart from the *Ḥilyah*, two of Abū Nu‘aym’s chief extant works are wholly collections of hadith: a survey of the Companions with sample hadith they transmitted and a *mustakhraj* of Muslim’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*, meaning a parallel collection offering the same hadith as Muslim but by different chains of authorities.¹⁴ (The third chief work is a biographical dictionary of Isfahani men of religion, mostly transmitters of hadith.¹⁵)

¹⁰ See Melchert, ‘Transition’, 61, favourably citing Caspar, ‘Rābi‘a’, unfavourably some other works.

¹¹ On Ibrāhīm ibn Ad‘ham, see Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder* 1:135–282. On Dhū al-Nūn, see now Ebstein, ‘Dū l-Nūn’, which finds most credible the notices in most of the non-Sufi biographical sources that make him out to have been a renunciant (*zāhid*; see esp. 572). I am unaware of any systematic critical survey of the sources for the biography of either one, though.

¹² The outstanding example is Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (fl. 12th cent.?), *Tadhkiratu ‘l-awliya*.

¹³ For a list of over 60 early works on renunciation, including many not extant, see ‘Āmir Aḥmad Ḥaydar, introduction to Bayhaqī, *Zuhd*, 47–56.

¹⁴ Abū Nu‘aym, *Ma‘rifat al-ṣaḥābah*, and idem, *al-Musnad al-mustakhraj*.

¹⁵ Abū Nu‘aym, *Geschichte Iṣbahāns*. I treat Abū Nu‘aym at greater length in ‘Abū Nu‘aym’s sources’.

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's greatest work was the *Musnad*, a collection of almost 28,000 hadith reports from the Prophet on all topics.¹⁶ Ibn al-Mubārak was widely quoted as a transmitter of hadith, appearing in all of the Six Books. Ibn Abī Shaybah's whole collection comprises almost 40,000 items, predominantly sayings of Followers (persons who quoted Companions but never the Prophet himself). Only Hannād ibn al-Sarī, of these five collectors, has not left us a large body of hadith on other topics than renunciation, although he is quoted in five of the Six Books and not predominantly in their sections on renunciation. All of these collections in the hadith tradition provide more sayings than any source in the traditions of *adab* and Sufism. These also include most of our earliest sources. Moreover, traditionists (collectors of hadith) seem to have been the most inclined to quote accounts of a piety that contradicted their own. Altogether, then, literature in the hadith tradition seems generally the least likely to reflect back projection from the ninth and later centuries.

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Zuhd*, survives in manuscript only in an early-modern abridgement. It was redacted by Aḥmad's son 'Abd Allāh (d. Baghdad, 290/903), and a little over a third of the extant text is made up of additions from him; that is, items he heard not from his father but from others. These additions will be identified in notes. As for items left out of the abridgement, perhaps twice as many as those included, many are quoted in another of the major hadith sources, Abū Nu'aym's *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*. These also will be identified in notes.¹⁷

As for Ibn al-Mubārak, *al-Zuhd*, the published version is based on three manuscripts representing two recensions, by al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Ḥasan (d. 246/860–1) and Nu'aym ibn Ḥammād (d. 228/843?). The first three-quarters of the two recensions are very similar. The editor, A'ẓamī, and many subsequent writers refer to the extra items in the manuscript of Nu'aym alone as his 'additions' (*ziyādāt*), but it seems to me that this term is more appropriate to items inserted here and there (a quarter of the total) in al-Ḥusayn's recension that he received from others than Ibn al-Mubārak. These additions will be identified in notes, along with insertions from subsequent transmitters. We await a proper edition based on all the extant manuscripts, but it is my guess that our manuscript record of al-Ḥusayn's recension is incomplete, so that Nu'aym's recension does not represent a core record from Ibn al-Mubārak to which he has liberally added items, rather represents a fuller text than what survives of al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Ḥasan's.¹⁸

¹⁶ See further Melchert, '*Musnad*'.

¹⁷ See Melchert, 'Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's book of renunciation', esp. 349–53.

¹⁸ See Melchert, 'Ibn al-Mubārak's *Kitāb al-jihād*', esp. 50–8, and *idem*, 'Ibn al-Mubārak, traditionist'.

Among the hadith sources, Abū Nu‘aym’s *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’* needs special defence. It is continually abused as a preposterous collection of faulty back projection.¹⁹ Here is a recent example from a textbook on hadith:

Finally, many Shiite hadiths appear in the Sunni collections that aimed merely at collecting as many hadiths as possible and made no pretension at any critical stringency. Many of these collections, such the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’* (The Adornment of the Saints) of Abū Nu‘aym al-Isbahani (d. 430/1038), were works devoted to documenting the rich heritage of Sufism and therefore included a great deal of pro-‘Alid material. ‘Alī was, after all, seen as the progenitor of the Sufi tradition and the beginning of most of the *isnāds* through which the Sunni Sufi orders traced their teachings to the Prophet These reports were generally innocuous, with no sectarian edge, and urged goodly and pious behaviour. While Ibn Bābawayh quoted the fifth imam Muhammad al-Bāqir that the Prophet had said that the best of God’s slaves are those **‘Who, when they seek perfection in their acts, hope for good tidings, seek forgiveness when they do wrong, are thankful to God when they give, persevere when they are tried, and forgive when they are angered,’** Abū Nu‘aym cites it through a very Sunni *isnād* in his *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*.²⁰

Brown’s textbook is generally superior to all its predecessors, but we catch him here at a weak point. Not wishing to say rudely that to someone familiar with Sunni hadith collections Shi‘i collections look like a lot of rubbish, Brown seizes on an eleventh-century Sunni collection whose poor reputation makes it safe for him to suggest that it has crudely borrowed from Shi‘i sources. Had he looked more closely, though, he would have noticed that Abū Nu‘aym offers two chains of transmission for this report, the second one < Abū Muḥammad ibn Ḥayyān < Abū Yaḥyā al-Rāzī < Hannād ibn al-Sarī < Wakī‘, both < al-Awzā‘ī < ‘Urwah ibn Ruwaym al-Lakhmī (Jordanian, d. 135/752–3) < the Messenger of God. The Hannād ibn al-Sarī in the *isnād* is the author of *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, and Brown would have found this report there as well had he troubled to test whether Abū Nu‘aym was making things up.²¹ He might also have noticed the name Wakī‘ ibn Jarrāḥ (Kufan, d. 196/812?), whose more modest collection *al-Zuhd* includes the second half (not quoted by Brown), describing ‘the worst of my community’.²² Ibn al-Mubārak also quotes the second half from Wakī‘’s source, al-Awzā‘ī.²³ Here as in many other cases it is possible to check Abū Nu‘aym against ninth-century sources; here as in many other cases his accuracy of quotation is confirmed. Abū Nu‘aym cannot

¹⁹ A tradition that admittedly goes back as far as Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), who complained that it should not have included sections on the first four caliphs: *Ṣifāt al-ṣāfīyah* 1:3.

²⁰ Brown, *Hadith*, 140, citing Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyah* 6:120.

²¹ Hannād ibn al-Sarī, *Zuhd* 2:363.

²² Wakī‘, *Zuhd* 1:401–2.

²³ Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*, no 758.

be more reliable than our ninth-century sources, but it is irresponsible to laugh him off. On the contrary, his quotations may fill in our knowledge of works otherwise lost to us. For example, Ibn Ḥajar describes Aḥmad's *al-Zuhd* as being three times as large as the extant version. Abū Nu'aym's quotations of Aḥmad, just noted, confirm that the original version was indeed much larger than what survives, somewhat over 500 of them being from the extant version, over 700 evidently from the suppressed part.²⁴

It is admittedly a separate question how far back we may expect that insulation against back projection to extend. How reliably do our ninth-century sources inform us of the centuries before? The principle of dissimilarity—roughly, what sounds most like later orthodoxy is most likely a back projection from that time, what is contrary to it is most likely to be a genuine relic of an earlier time—notoriously gives us a relative chronology, not an absolute. For example, the story of the Satanic Verses, some verses recognizing pagan divinities that Satan once inspired Muḥammad to dictate as part of the Qur'an, evidently goes back to before the dogma of prophetic infallibility had prevailed; however, this is not a strong argument for its going back all the way to the early seventh century.²⁵ My own inclination is to consider attributions to figures of the early eighth century normally reliable, at least at the level of paraphrase and with some allowance for the tendency of sayings (themselves possibly old) to float from one speaker to another. Attributions to figures of the seventh century seem more dubious. I shall continually say here 'so-and-so said', but strictly speaking this should normally be interpreted as 'so-and-so is quoted as saying'.

I would maintain that the renunciant tradition is at least as reliable as the legal. The tendency for the Prophet to call for markedly more modest austerities than renunciants of the early eighth century—austerities whose modesty is more closely in line with Sunni piety of the late eighth and early ninth centuries—has clear parallels in legal hadith. Schacht's perception that attributions to Followers are presumptively older than attributions to the Prophet would work equally well for renunciation.²⁶ Even when it comes to Companions, I would argue that a good measure of their power probably did depend on reputations for piety. Nomads are notoriously difficult to coerce. Presumably, the first charisma that kept them

²⁴ See Melchert, 'Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's book of renunciation', 349–53.

²⁵ See Cook, *Koran*, 128–9, also Ahmed, 'Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic verses'.

²⁶ Schacht, *Origins*, 156.

loyal to the early caliphs was military success, but the piety of those caliphs and other leaders seems likely to have been a vital reinforcement.²⁷

Where to begin?

As suggested by the review of sources, the great problem of early Islamic history is to sort out back projection from the time of our ninth-century sources. Great numbers of Arabs went from being nomads in Arabia to settled citizens in the various provinces of the empire, from North Africa to Transoxania. Their cities were peculiar: except in Syria, the early conquerors preferred to settle in garrison cities away from the existing population centres, outstandingly Kufa and Basra in Iraq, what became Old Cairo in Egypt. Presumably this isolation from the subject populations is what kept the Arabic language from disappearing like Gothic. (Arabic would also have taken over in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq because there the conquerors effectively replaced the old aristocracy, whereas in Persia and Transoxania they seem to have largely fused with the old aristocracy, gradually adopting their language.) The problems of ruling an empire of cities and permanently cultivated areas were very different from managing tribes in Arabia, so the Muslims inevitably developed new techniques. They also inevitably took over numerous administrative practices of the earlier rulers they displaced. Deliberate homogenization of administration in the formerly Byzantine and Sasanian parts of the empire, as by promulgating a uniform coinage with Arabic inscriptions, not Greek or Persian, came only some fifty years after the conquests began.²⁸

The terminology of Islamic piety shows awareness of parallels in other traditions. *Asceticism* refers first to deliberate austerity as part of a life of devotion. With *renunciation*, it is a conventional translation of Arabic *zuhd*, which means more precisely *unconcern*, mainly with the world. The related active participle appears once in the Qur'an, where it is applied to the merchants who sell Yūsuf for a mean sum *zāhidin fih*, 'attaching no value to him' (Q. 12:20). Richard Gramlich thinks the commercial overtones worth stressing, but I doubt they were very strong to eighth- and ninth-century Muslims who used the term.²⁹ Al-Ṭabarī

²⁷ More on this in chapter 7, below. See also Donner, *Narratives*, 98–103, on piety as a form of legitimization in the first Islamic century.

²⁸ See Robinson, 'Abd al-Malik.

²⁹ See Gramlich, *Weltverzicht*, 43. A much-cited study is Kinberg, 'What is meant by *zuhd*', which quotes many definitions, mostly from sources of the Sufi period. It seems to me her conclusion is uselessly vague ('it becomes obvious why *zuhd* ... should be understood as a general way of conduct, or simply as ethics'; 44). She commits herself to a vague definition from the start

quotes no gloss of the word at the appropriate point in his commentary. Neither, surprisingly, does the Sufi al-Qushayrī, who mainly contrasts the small price for which the people of the caravan sold Yūsuf with the large sums bid for him in Egypt.

In the renunciant literature, *zāhid* as ‘unconcerned’ is continually contrasted with *rāghib*, ‘desiring’. For example, Ibn ‘Umar (Medinese, d. 73/693?) heard a man asking, ‘Where are the *zāhidīn fī al-dunyā* (those unconcerned with the world) and *al-rāghibīn fī al-ākhirah* (those who desire the afterworld)?’ He showed him the tombs of the Prophet, Abū Bakr, and ‘Umar and said, ‘You are asking about these.’³⁰ Bilāl ibn Sa’d (Damascene, d. 100s/719–29) said, ‘It is sin enough that God should consider us to be indifferent to the world when we desire it. Your renunciant is desiring (*zāhid*, *rāghib*), your learned is ignorant (‘*ālim*, *jāhil*), and your worshipper is falling short (‘*ābid*, *muqāṣṣir*).’³¹ A Shi‘i source quotes the fifth imam, Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. Medina, 115/733?), as saying, ‘The *faqīh* is the *zāhid* concerning the world, *rāghib* concerning the afterworld, holding onto the *sunnah*.’³² ‘Awn ibn ‘Abd Allāh (Kufan, d. bef. 120/738) complained of those whose talk of the world is that of the *zāhidīn* (indifferent) while doing the work of the *rāghibīn* (desiring).’³³

I have taken to calling *zāhids* and others who are the concern of this book ‘renunciants’ rather than ‘ascetics’ partly because the Greek word *askētēs* means literally ‘athlete’ and thus corresponds most closely not to *zāhid* in Arabic but to *mujtahid*.³⁴ In the renunciant tradition, *mujtahid* is used of someone who maintains a strenuous schedule of devotions, especially supererogatory ritual prayer (more on this in chapter 4). The Greek word corresponding most closely to Arabic *zuhd* is not *askēsis* but *apátheia*. A mystic, in the sense of someone who continu-

by trying to determine what it means for ‘the daily life of the individual Muslim’ (28) or ‘the Islamic way of life’ (29); that is, trying to come up with a definition to satisfy all parties.

³⁰ Hannād, *Zuhd* 1:314–15; Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 400 477 (< ‘Al.); same contrast introducing a different story of Ibn Mas‘ūd: Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyah* 1:135.

³¹ Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 385 461. Variants (with, significantly, not ‘*ābid* but *mujtahid* contrasted with the *muqāṣṣir*) *apud* Ibn al-Mubārak, *Zuhd*, nos 180, 484, Jāḥiẓ, *Bayān* 3:143, and Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyah* 5:225.

³² Barqī, *Maḥāsīn*, 173. *Faqīh* has the technical meaning ‘jurisprudent’ but means literally ‘discerning’, so this saying is partly one of many assertions that experts in the law urgently need to be exemplars of piety.

³³ Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyah* 4:262.

³⁴ Cf. Sviri, *Perspectives*, 175, pointing out the parallel between *askēsis* and *riyāḍah*, ‘exercise’. I find the latter term rare in renunciant literature, however, and doubt I have ever seen there the active participle *murtāḍ* for a practitioner.

ally seeks the experience of communion with God, may well choose to live austere, with minimal creature comforts. For this reason, I prefer the term ‘renunciation’ to the previously conventional ‘asceticism’, except where the contrast between mystical and ascetical piety is at issue.³⁵

Another word often applied to renunciants, *‘ubbād* (sing. *‘ābid*), means straightforwardly ‘worshippers’. ‘Worship’ is *‘ibādah*, cognate with Hebrew *‘ab-ôdāh* (‘service’), prominently applied in the legal tradition to rituals. Like *ijtihād* (in the pious tradition), it tends to connote in particular devotion to supererogatory prayer. More difficult to interpret is *nussāk* (sing. *nāsik*), also often applied to renunciants. Dictionaries state that it is a synonym of *zuhhād*, probably in its widest sense; the related noun *nusuk* is said to be a synonym of *zuhd* (likewise variants *nask*, *nisk*, and *nusk*). It is connected in the legal tradition to the pilgrimage ritual, where the *manāsik* are sites of special rituals (e.g., the Ka’bah, the hills al-Şafā and al-Marwah) and, by extension, the rituals of the pilgrimage generally. However, although some renunciants were known for supererogatory pilgrimages, I have observed no special association between pilgrimage rituals and the term *nussāk*. The Hebrew cognate of *nusuk*, *nēsekh*, means a pouring out, particularly a drink offering. The Qur’an evidently uses *nusuk* for a blood sacrifice: apropos of requiring that pilgrims shave their heads, it says, ‘Those of you who are sick or suffering from an injury to the head—there may be a redemption in the form of fasting or alms-giving or an offering’ (Q. 2:196). Perhaps some idea of self-mortification (or, less probably, dedication to God) made *nussāk* equivalent to *zuhhād*. The Qur’an commentator al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273?) proposes that *nusuk* may have originally meant *worship*; is said by some to have originally meant *washing*, ‘as if the worshipper washed off the filth of sins by worship’; and that some have said it had to do with *silver ingots*, ‘as if the worshipper refined himself of the impurity of sins’.³⁶ These all suggest some awareness of cognates.

‘Influence’ and ‘borrowing’ have come to be rude words, as if belittling the culture that takes up styles and concepts from another. ‘Cross-pollination’ has been one proposed inoffensive alternative.³⁷ Sara Sviri has recently proposed ‘continuity’ as another, while I have written of ‘variant development’.³⁸ An advantage of these two is that they will not reinforce the conception that there was

³⁵ I also follow the example of two excellent studies of the 1990s, Karamustafa, *God’s unruly friends*, and Cooperson, ‘Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr al-Ḥāfi’.

³⁶ Qurṭubī, *Jāmi’* 2:384, ad Q. 2:196.

³⁷ Goodman, *Jewish and Islamic philosophy: crosspollinations in the classic age*; Akasoy, Montgomery, and Pormann, eds, *Islamic crosspollinations: interactions in the medieval Middle East*.

³⁸ Sviri, *Perspectives*, 8; *EP*³, s.v. ‘Asceticism’, by Melchert.

once a pristine Arabian Islam only later subjected to outside influence, also conceivably capable of being restored. Indeed, there is a restorationist project behind the late-medieval identification of certain borrowings as *isrā'īlīyāt*.³⁹ Sunni Muslims have found it congenial to imagine that the Sunni Islam of the ninth century was a rediscovery of the uncontaminated Islam of the Prophet and his Companions in the seventh century. There is a similar story of how catholic Christianity was reasserted in the fourth century after two centuries of being threatened by bad ideas from outside (Judaizing, gnosticism), another of how original, law-centred Judaism was restored by the Rabbis after several centuries of being threatened by bad ideas from outside (Hellenism, Christianity). But all three stories are unlikely compared with gradual development and retrojection of later orthodoxy. (Shi'i Muslims retrojected their own versions of orthodoxy.)

Contrary to a theory of a pristine Arabian Islam, the Qur'an itself is already heavily engaged with the biblical tradition, recounting stories of prophets so sketchily that they must have been familiar already to the Prophet's first audience, and polemicizing against Jews and Christians, although the literature of the eighth century and later denies that there were any Jews or Christians in Mecca, where the revelations began, or Christians in Medina, where the Prophet established a state. The Qur'an itself sometimes recommends consulting Jews and Christians and remarks but does not always deny charges that the Prophet depends on informants.⁴⁰ Loan words make up some of the central terms of the cult; for example, *ṣalāh* and *zakāh*, continually paired in the Qur'an as the defining duties of ritual prayer and the alms tax, whose qur'anic orthography betrays an Aramaic origin.⁴¹ Unless we admit supernatural origins, either the Qur'an must have been generated not in faraway Mecca and Medina but the fringe of the Fertile Crescent or seventh-century Arabia must have been imbued already with the religious ideas of the larger Middle East. In the twenty-first century, the latter view has become fairly prevalent in European and North American scholarship.⁴²

I have also observed that the early ascetics saw themselves as living in continuity with a longer tradition, so that, for example, a source as late as Aḥmad's *Zuhd* comprises as many stories and sayings of pre-Muḥammadan prophets as of

³⁹ See Tottoli, 'Origin', and Calder, 'Tafsīr', 125.

⁴⁰ See Gilliot, 'Informateurs'.

⁴¹ The classic study is Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary*.

⁴² The idea of development on the fringe of the Fertile Crescent is associated most strongly with Wansbrough, *Quranic studies*, and *idem*, *The sectarian milieu*. For the idea of an Arabia already imbued with religious ideas of the larger Middle East, see for example Neuwirth, Sinai, and Marx, eds, *Qur'ān in context*, and Hallaq, *Origins and evolution*, chap. 1.

Muḥammad himself.⁴³ The tricky question is the extent of Islamic dependence, for its pious tradition, on the Christian tradition before it. It has been proposed that earliest Islam started out as a puritanical movement meant to restore a pristine monotheism common to the Christian and Jewish traditions.⁴⁴ Several studies have sketched similarities between the early Islamic renunciant tradition and contemporary Christian monasticism.⁴⁵ For myself, Vööbus' survey of Syriac monasticism before and at the time of the Arab conquests reminds me strongly of early Islamic renunciant practice.⁴⁶ (There is admittedly one major exception, the 'visionary experience' that Vööbus identifies as a major expectation of the Syrian monks, apparently absent from the Islamic tradition until the mid-ninth century.⁴⁷ I will say only that whatever borrowing went on from one community to another, the Muslims as borrowers evidently took over what made sense to them, not everything they encountered.)

A recurrent question in modern scholarship has been the internal or external origins of Sufism. The gap between 'official Islam', the universally valid Islam of the law and jurists, and Sufi Islam has sometimes seemed sufficiently wide to require separate origins.⁴⁸ The Sufi tradition portrays itself as going back to an earlier renunciant tradition, the subject of this book, most clearly in biographical dictionaries like *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*. Abū Nu'aym introduces his bio-

43 For two manifestations of felt continuity, see Melchert, 'Quotations of extra-qur'anic scripture', on biblical prophets, and Melchert, 'Islamic literature', on interactions with Christian monks.

44 Notably Donner, *Muhammad and the believers*. Compare Julian Baldick: 'In a way, Islam is Christianity: technically, from a Christian standpoint, it is a Christian sect, since it recognizes Jesus as the Christ; from a Muslim standpoint, it is the religion of the messiah, which the Christians have deformed' (*Mystical Islam*, 2). For monasticism as a vestige of the true religion of the messiah, see Sviri, '*Wa-rahbāniyyatan*', and Pagani, 'L'invention', also Sahrer, "The monasticism of my community".

45 Andrae, 'Zuhd und Mönchtum'; Ogén, 'Did the term "*ṣūfī*" exist before the Sufis?'; Ofer Livne-Kafri, 'Early Muslim ascetics'; also Molé, *Mystiques musulmanes*, chap. 1.

46 E.g., 'Ephrem instructs his readers further that the grave and painful thoughts of sin, death and punishment determine all their sentiments so that only one disposition is able to conform to this spiritual atmosphere—namely sadness, mourning, grief and affliction': Vööbus, *History* 2:283. Cf., among many examples, the saying of Mālik ibn Dīnār (Basran cl., d. ca 130/747–8), 'A heart without sadness is like a house gone to ruin' (Ibn Abī Shaybah, *Muṣannaf* 14:49 12:454; Aḥmad, *Zuhd*, 320–388). In his discussion of what distinguished the Syriac tradition from the Hellenistic Egypt, the similarities are almost all between the Islamic tradition and the Syriac, as in Egyptian rejection of weeping (Vööbus, *History* 1:293–8).

47 Vööbus, *History* 2:307–15.

48 'Official Islam' alludes to Waardenburg, 'Official and popular religion'. It is what the urban ulema maintain; i.e., the Qur'an and Islamic law. 'Valid Islam' is where Sufism belongs in Waardenburg's scheme, a wider or narrower category depending on who is asked.

graphies of seventh- and eighth-century figures with little rhymes that refer to Sufism, implying that these early renunciants were exemplars of Sufi values, but the stories that follow do not call them Sufis, just ‘renunciants’, ‘worshippers’, and so on, so that he actually portrays a tradition from which Sufism grew. European Islamicists have generally accepted this sequence, although more or less resisting back projection of Sufi values.⁴⁹

If eighth-century renunciation and ninth-century Sufism are to be distinguished, it becomes a question what earlier forms renunciation developed out of. Here, too, European Islamicists have generally accepted the story of endogeny. Louis Massignon argued strenuously that the Islamic pious tradition sprang from contemplation of the Qur’an.⁵⁰ His argument is that the technical terms of Sufism overwhelmingly have qur’anic precedents. It would be surprising if the literary elaboration of Sufism were not heavily qur’anic. But the terminology of the earliest piety suggests to me mixed origins, confirming other evidence that neither the Qur’an nor even the Qur’an together with the precept and example of the Prophet were by themselves the exclusive authorities they became across the eighth and ninth centuries.

Among modern students of Sufism, the thesis of Iranian, Buddhist, or other origins has been favoured mainly by Muslims distrustful of Sufism and happy to find it an intrusion from without. For example, the editor of several important renunciant texts distinguishes what he calls ‘philosophical Sufism’, apparently equivalent to what I call ‘classical Sufism’, and the earlier form apparently equivalent to what I call ‘renunciation’. ‘This philosophical Sufi thought’, he says, ‘is alien to Islam. It goes back to the thought and schools that prevailed in the lands of the Persians and Romans. The most important sources (*maṣādir*) that influenced philosophical Sufism in a general way were the following ...’ He then lists

⁴⁹ Standard affirmations of endogeny are Nicholson, ‘Historical enquiry’, esp. 305, and Massignon, *Essay*, 104–7. On opposition to Sufism among Muslims, see de Jong and Bernd Radtke, eds, *Islamic mysticism contested*, and Sirriyeh, *Sufis and anti-Sufis*. Carl Ernst continually asserts the opposite, that exogeny was the Orientalist position: *Shambhala guide*, *passim*. To my mind, this absurdly elevates R. C. Zaehner above R. A. Nicholson, Louis Massignon, Fritz Meier, and others as definers of Orientalist scholarship. Although Zaehner has had no influence that I can detect among students of Sufism (*contra* Ernst), he admittedly comes up repeatedly in theoretical surveys of mysticism for his categories of theistic, monistic, and nature mysticisms—but this contrast also has not been endorsed by later scholars. See for example King, ‘Mysticism’, 331–2, reviewing earlier critiques of Zaehner by Smart, Staal, and Stace.

⁵⁰ Massignon, *Essai* (1922, rev. edn 1954).

(1) the Qur'an and hadith, (2) *kalām* (dialectical theology), (3) Platonism, (4) Indian mysticism (*al-taṣawwuf al-hindī*), (5) Christianity, and (6) the Persians.⁵¹ The thesis of Indian and Persian origins would seem to require that the earliest signs of Islamic mysticism have been manifest early on, when Buddhism and Magianism were strongest, and in the eastern parts of the Islamic world, whereas mysticism seems to show up first in the ninth century, not the late seventh, and in Egypt and Iraq, not Khurasan or Persia. (Conversely, modern defenders of Sufism have continually been at pains to deny all extra-Islamic influence.⁵²)

However, the Christian background to the Islamic renunciant tradition is a major historical question that I shall largely ignore in this study, keeping to the post-conquest period. This is mainly because I do not command the sources, especially not reading Greek or Syriac. I find Julian Baldick's sketch convincing but shall not attempt to elaborate on and defend it.⁵³ I intend as my contribution to addressing that question little more than to present an accurate and fairly comprehensive survey of early Islamic renunciant theory and practice for comparison, as Voöbus did for the Syriac tradition of Late Antiquity.

Research covering the development of Christian and Islamic piety together has been hindered by the assignment of Eastern Christianity and Islam to different departments, by deans's impatience with prolonged language study (it is asking a lot from students also to pile years of studying Arabic on top of years spent studying Greek and Syriac, or the other way around), by the disproportion of resources devoted to each side (Byzantinists feel neglected by comparison with students of Latin Christendom, but they have been much more numerous than students of Middle Eastern history in the same period, so that they presume a great deal of preliminary work that is still to be done on the Islamic side), finally by reluctance among Arab Muslims to investigate Middle Eastern Christianity, among Arab Christians to investigate the Islamic tradition. Existing scholarship commonly compares Late Antique Christian asceticism not with contemporary Islamic renunciation but with later Sufism. The intersection of seventh- and eighth-century Syriac Christian and Islamic renunciant literatures will be investigated in time, though.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Farīwā'ī, introduction to Waki', *Zuhd* 1:130–1.

⁵² E.g., Fayḍī, *Ṣūfiyah*, 58–60, dismissing as absurd the suggestion of borrowing from Christianity, since the Prophet told the Muslims to be unlike Christians and Jews and since monasticism is about the rejection of property.

⁵³ Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, chap. 1.

⁵⁴ See Pietruschka, 'Apophthegmata Patrum', overemphasizing written transmission as opposed to oral, perhaps, but highly promising for a start.

To save space, I give only abbreviated references in footnotes, to be filled out from the list of works cited at the end. An embarrassingly large number of these are to articles of my own. Usually, they treat one topic or another in greater detail than I do here. As for the many passages in this book that duplicate what I have already said in articles, I can only say that I have undertaken this book largely to lay out my theses and their documentation in one convenient place.

More happily, I will name two topics I shall not separately treat here because I have satisfactorily treated them elsewhere (that is, to near the best of my ability). One is women's involvement in the renunciant movement. Women will be named in the study to come as exemplifying this or that practice, as they come up in the renunciant literature. Muslims expected to hear of saintly women. However, examining reports of women as a group, I came to the conclusion that neither in outward actions (weeping, keeping vigil at night, supererogatory prayers, and so on) nor inward attitudes were female renunciants significantly different from male.⁵⁵ There is occasionally some acknowledgment of peculiar difficulties in the way of women's participation, as when Nasīyah bint Salmān, wife to Yūsuf ibn Asbāṭ (Antiochene, *fl.* late 8th cent.), said on giving birth, 'O my Lord! You did not consider me worthy of serving you, so you have preoccupied me with this child.'⁵⁶ Progress in understanding the place of women in the Islamic renunciant movement seems likely to come not of searching out hitherto-neglected accounts by and about female renunciants but of a more sophisticated reading of the familiar extant sources, one that conceives of 'gender studies' as pertaining equally to men and women.

The other topic is renunciation among Shi'i Muslims. The extant literature is much more voluminous on the Sunni side, and Shi'i reworking of the past across the ninth century seems to have been even more energetic than Sunni, making it even harder to tell from it what was going on in the eighth. Still, Shi'i imams are quoted as giving the same sorts of advice as authorities quoted in the Sunni literature. For example, Ja'far al-Šādiq (d. 148/765) is quoted as saying, 'Much laughter kills the heart.'⁵⁷ In the Sunni tradition, the Prophet said, 'Do not laugh much,

55 Melchert, 'Before *ṣūfiyyāt*'. Some further comments in Melchert, 'Transfer of knowledge'.

56 Sulamī, *Early Sufi women*, 93. This is about the only collection of renunciant sayings we have in English translation, usefully featuring parallel English and Arabic texts. I continually assign it to students. I will add that I continually find Cornell's translation questionable in detail and systematically given to projecting later Sufi conceptions (and some much later feminist ones) back into the eighth and ninth centuries.

57 Kulaynī, *Kāfī* 2:664, *al-'ishrah, bāb al-du'ābah wa-al-ḍahīk*.

for much laughter kills the heart.’⁵⁸ Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) also said, ‘Much laughter kills the heart.’⁵⁹ And Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/777?) said, ‘Do not over-eat, for it hardens the heart; suppress laughter and do not laugh much, for it kills hearts.’⁶⁰ Such sayings attributed to multiple persons are an example of how pervasive renunciant piety was in the early centuries. The only significant divergence I have uncovered concerns wool, with the Shi‘i tradition apparently hardening its position against wearing it as a badge of proper contempt for the world just as the Sunni community was embracing Sufism.⁶¹

Yet another topic not given special attention here is the place of apocalypticism in early Islamic piety. It is a major theme of the Qur’an that we are looking forward to the Last Judgement.⁶² Hadith adds the concept of an eschaton, an imminent period when present social arrangements will be upended—when the world will be filled with justice as it is presently filled with injustice. It seems as though expecting the world to come to an end should have been especially important to starting and sustaining a movement of contempt for worldly goods. At the same time, it is widely observed, people build up sustaining institutions as apocalyptic expectations fade. Examples from the post-conquest period of Islamic history might be the issuance of words-only Arabic coinage and the elaboration of Islamic law. One might expect renunciant circles to have nurtured apocalypticism as they increasingly became differentiated from rival circles of jurists; yet in fact talk of the End Times seems to be no more prevalent in collections of renunciant sayings than in general collections of hadith. Perhaps this is a measure of how far the ninth-century traditionists responsible for those general collections of hadith tried to conserve both the renunciant and juridical traditions of the century before. Anyway, although admittedly uneasy, I shall let suffice what I and others have said elsewhere about apocalypticism in the early Islamic tradition.⁶³

The cultural effects of modern consumer capitalism have been enumerated as reluctance to make long-term commitments, unwillingness to put down roots,

58 Hannād, *Zuhd* 2:501, 553 (shortened version of same); Tirmidhī, *al-zuhd* 2, *man ittaqā al-maḥārim*, no 2305; Ibn Mājah, *al-zuhd* 19, *bāb al-ḥuzn wa-al-bukā’*, no 4193, and *al-zuhd* 24, *bāb al-wara’ wa-al-taqwā*, no 4217; Aḥmad, *Musnad* 2:310 13:458–459; Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyah* 1:167.

59 Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyah* 2:152.

60 Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyah* 7:36.

61 Melchert, ‘Renunciation (*zuhd*) in the early Shi‘i tradition’.

62 ‘After the doctrine that God is one the doctrine of the Last Judgement may be reckoned the second great doctrine of the Qur’ān’: so Watt, *Introduction*, 158.

63 See Melchert, ‘Apocalypticism in Sunni hadith’, esp. 267n on other studies and 272 on lack of special prominence in renunciant literature.

indifference to the heritage of the past, impatience with moral distinctions, and diminished respect for expert opinion. When the proper object of life is taken to be satisfying desires, an ascetical piety of mortifying the flesh and constantly sorrowing over sin will seem grotesque. I have not particularly tried to sell renunciant piety here. I do not say that people should read about these stern ascetics and feel ashamed of their own frivolity. But it clearly was the predominant style of piety in most of the first three centuries of Islam and has continued to attract the admiration of many Muslims to the present. The early history of the Islamic tradition will not be understood in disregard of it. And I admittedly do hope to show that it was an outlook of integrity, deserving respect.