The Sacralization of the Caliph and the Rise of the Cult of Saints

HSTAFM 162
Lecture 5.2
The Caliph and the Sulṭān

- From the tenth century onward, most Muslim rulers in the Eastern Islamic world were nominally vassals of the ‘Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad. E.g., the Buwayhids (934-1055), the Seljuqs (1037-1194), and the Ghaznavids (963-1186)

- Symbols of authority
  - Titles: Ex. Maḥmūd of Ghazna is called Yamīn al-Dawla “the right hand of sovereignty”
  - Gifts: A robe that had embraced the body of the caliph allowed its wearer to embody sovereign charisma.
The Caliphs and the Descendants of ʿAlī

- Fāṭimids (909–1171) claimed legitimacy through descent from Fāṭīma and ʿAlī.

- Early on, the ʿAbbāsids too had relied on ʿAlīd propaganda, raising black banners as the sign of the imminent rise of an ʿAlīd savior in their efforts to foment rebellion against the Umayyads.

- At the height of his power, the caliph Maʿmūn (d. 833) had designated ʿAlī al-Riḍā as his successor and abdicated, allowing ʿAlī to rule in name only. Maʿmūn later constructs ʿAlī al-Riḍā’s tomb near the grave of his own father.

- ➞ Mashhad
The Shrine of Imām Ḥusayn, Karbalāʾ
Shrine of ʻAlī al-Riḍā in Mashhad
What is Sufism?

- The derivations of Sufi:
  - ṣūf, wool, garment of ascetic denial
  - ṣafā’, “purity”
  - taṣawwuf, “becoming a Sufi” explained by teaching definitions

- How might that differ from “Sufism” as part of the catalog of “isms”? 
Origins of Sufism in the Near East

Near Eastern Tradition:
- Christian desert ascetics & monks of Syria
- Late Antique Cult of Saints: saints as ‘the Friends of God’
- Gnostic Tradition: salvational knowledge to escape prison of material world and reunite with God

Islamic Tradition:
- Quranic notion of ‘awliya’ Allah’ – ‘the Friends of God’
- Quranic notion of God as ‘Light of all Lights’
- Quranic notion that “all vanishes but the face of God most high”
Human Face composed of the names of God, Muhammad, and ʻAlī
Ibn Khaldun on Sufism

- “belongs to the sciences of the religious law that originated in Islam”
- Divine worship, devotion to God, aversion from the world, abstinence from wealth, retirement into solitude for worship – all common among early Muslims
- Special name “Sufi” developed a couple of centuries later [compare special technical terms of Islamic law and hadith]
Ibn Khaldun: characteristics of Sufism

- Asceticism
- Intuitive perception of psychological states and stations
- Self scrutiny and quest for knowledge and unity with God
- Special language for inner experience, parallel to other fields of religious knowledge
Ibn Khaldun explains Sufism

- Philosophical psychology as an explanation of Sufi experiences
- “Removal of the veil” as a key metaphor for perception that goes beyond the senses
- Different views on God as separate or one with creatures; alleged similarity with philosophical and Christian views
- Disapproval of Sufis by legal scholars (muftis, who give fatwas)
Ibn Khaldun criticizes Sufism

- Theories of absolute oneness (*waḥdat al-wujūd*): only God exists
- Theory of cosmic imagination
Sufism as Theosophical Tradition

- Mid 800’s – appearance of Gnostic themes in Sufism: a model of emanation and return
  - Salvational Knowledge – Ma’rifa معرفة
  - 3 tiers of society: the masses, the religiously devout, and the Gnostics (‘arif / عارف)… Quran?
  - Goal is constant awareness of God, realization that God is the only Truth, only Good Fana’ (فناء)

- ‘Sober’ (later ‘orthodox’) Sufis:
  - Prominent in Baghdad and Iran: ex. Junayd (d. 910), al-Sarraj (d. 988), al-Qushayri (d. 1072)
  - Attempt to Portray Sufism as Thoroughly ‘Islamic’: early Islamic heroes like Ibn Hanbal are portrayed as Sufis and Gnostics

- ‘Ecstatic’ (‘unorthodox’) Sufis:
  - Exemplified by Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922): ‘I am God/the Truth!’ and al-Bistami (d. 874) ‘Most glorious am I!’
Sufism as Theosophical Tradition

Mainstream Acceptance/Gnosis and Light:
- Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111): God is ‘Light of all Lights’
  – Gnostic model
- Al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191): the emanation of lights from the True Light
- Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273): the cry of the reed-flute...

Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) Sufi Cosmology & The Microcosmic Return:
- Unity of Existence: nothing is real except God; God reveals Himself in creation
- The Muhammadan Reality / Quṭb (axis): ‘Muhammad’ is the perfect reflection of God
1. Listen
   as this reed
   pipes its plaint
   unfolds its tale
   of separations:

2. Cut from my reedy bed
   my crying
   ever since
   makes men and women
   weep

3. I like to keep my breast
   carved with loss
   to convey
   the pain of longing --

4. Once severed
   from the root,
   thirst for union
   with the source
   endures

–Mawlānā Rūmī, Maṣnavī