Conference Report

Mysticism and Ethics in Islam
(American University of Beirut, 2–3 May 2019)

Conference Organizers:
Bilal Orfali, Mohammed Rustom, and Radwan Sayyid

Report by:
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Held at the American University of Beirut over two intense days and sponsored by the Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan Chair for Islamic and Arabic Studies (marking one hundred years since the birth of Sheikh Zayed), this conference was organized by Bilal Orfali (Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies and Chair of the Department of Arabic and Near Eastern Languages at AUB), Mohammed Rustom (Associate Professor of Islamic Studies at Carleton University and Library of Arabic Literature Senior Fellow at NYU Abu Dhabi), and Radwan Sayyid (Visiting Professor and current Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan Chair for Islamic and Arabic Studies).

The conference was dedicated to exploring the relationship between Islamic ethics and Islamic mysticism, usually known as Sufism—though the debate as to whether "mysticism" is equivalent to "Sufism" or to the Arabic *taṣawwuf* remains open. It brought together well-known scholars in the field from around the world. The Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Nadia El Cheikh, opened the conference along with the organizers, reminding the audience of the history of scholarship in Islamic studies at the American University of Beirut that has been enabled by the creation of the Sheikh Zayed Chair in 1972. Bilal Orfali stressed the importance of encouraging research on and around Islamic mysticism, or *taṣawwuf*, and especially on its relevance to Islamic ethics, a subfield that remains understudied to this day. One of the goals of this conference was to challenge the widely held idea that ethics in Islam and Islamic civilization are mainly inherited from previous or neighboring civilizations, without any notable indigenous contribution. Radwan Sayyid considered the conference a first answer to last year's conference "Towards a Reconstruction of Islamic Studies," also held at the American University of Beirut, while Mohammed

Rustom provided the audience with an overview of the conference's themes and panels.

The conference program consisted of seven panels and a keynote address delivered by Jamal Elias of the University of Pennsylvania, who presented a scholarly discussion on an Ottoman author's reading of Rūmī's *Mathnawī*.

May 2, 2019

Panels 1 and 2: Defining Boundaries

The first two panels, chaired, respectively, by Ramzi Baalbaki (American University of Beirut) and Atif Khalil (University of Lethbridge), opened the conference bilingually, as the first panel's speakers presented in Arabic and the second panel's in English.

Suad al-Hakim (Lebanese University) presented a paper entitled "Ethics in Sufism: Between the Refinement of the Soul and the Refinement of Behavior," based on the works of three Sufi personalities: al-Qaṣṣāb (ninth century CE), al-Jarīrī (d. 923), and al-Kittānī (d. 933). The paper amounted to a reflection on the idea of ethics as public performance and not only as a set of internal qualities.

Chafika Ouail (Orient Institute Beirut) presented "The Ordering of Knowledge to (Re)Produce Ethical Concepts in Sufism," tracing the gradual transformation of ethical values from communally inherited concepts to ontological ideas that bear different meanings and practices from their original forms. The paper also explored the varying social repercussions of such values and their production and practice between the personal and the communal and in relationship with their evolving sociohistorical context.

The paper of Issam Eido (Vanderbilt University), read by Bilal Orfali, was titled "Shades and Hues of Sufis and the Concept of Ethics in Sufi Literature," and it explored and analyzed the two basic Sufi concepts of "station" (*maqām*) and "state" (*ḥāl*) within the nuances of the ideas of fixity and instability, using the theoretical works of Foucault and his analysis of Greek ethical categories.

Concluding the first panel was a paper by Khaled Abdo (*Mu'minūn bilā ḥudūd* Institute), "From Criticism of Sufism to the Reform of Sufi Ethics: Discovering the works of al-Daylamī." The paper presented the interesting case of a scholar who veered from a critical stand on Sufism in general to its adoption, while trying to pave the way to its reformation. This paper explored the works of al-Daylamī (d. 1192), focusing in particular on his book *The Reformation of Ethics* (*Iṣlāḥ al-akhlāq*), which deals with Sufi ethics and the reformation of Sufism as well as the Sufi stance toward philosophy; al-Daylamī's book has been so far overlooked as a potentially theoretical grounding work on this subject.

The second panel began with Michael Arnold (American University of Beirut), who presented a paper entitled "Sufism as an Ethical Panacea? Situating *Taṣawwuf* in Islamic Ethics." Acknowledging that no exact equivalent of ethics as a philosophical category can be found within the Islamic intellectual heritage, and recognizing that Muslim scholars have not methodically studied this category as defined today, this paper explored the place of the Sufi tradition in dealing with ethical considerations in the Sunni intellectual tradition while challenging the commonly held view that the latter

took an antiphilosophical and antirational turn after al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) critique of philosophy.

Following on the discussion of al-Ghazālī's heritage in the previous presentation, Sophia Vasalou (Birmingham University) presented a paper entitled "Does al-Ghazālī Have a Theory of Virtue?" Focusing particularly on al-Ghazālī's works, the paper shed light on the dynamic between philosophy and Sufi discourse and on how virtue (*faḍīla*) is problematized within the broader concern with the "ethics of virtue" as found in the works of thinkers more closely associated with philosophy, such as al-Fārābī (d. 950) and Miskawayh (d. 1030).

Concluding the second panel, Jeremy Farrell (Emory University) presented "A 'Value Theory' of Obligations: Early Sufi Approaches to *Zuhd*." Understanding *zuhd* as supererogatory ethical practice in the context of early Sufism, this paper showed that "value theory" allows us to better understand why early Sufis adopted such practices. It traced the reasoning behind such practices in the works of al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857) and late tenth-century Sufi handbooks.

Panel 3: From Grief to Love

Chaired by Sebastian Günther (University of Göttingen), the third panel was opened by Riccardo Paredi (American University of Beirut) with his paper "To Grieve or Not to Grieve? The Concept of *Ḥuzn* in Early Sufism." Tracing the notion of *ḥuzn* and its evolution from the Quran through the first three centuries of Islam, when it was initially viewed as a negative emotion (as in the Quranic "Do not grieve"), the paper showed that in early Sufi literature, this emotion is seen as positive and its virtuous merits are discussed, as, for example, in the chapter dedicated to *ḥuzn* in *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*.

Then Atif Khalil (University of Lethbridge) presented "On Patience in Early Sufi Ethics," which dealt with a quality with obvious virtuous dimensions that has played a central role in Islamic piety. The paper analyzed the importance of the notion of patience, which is one of God's qualities but did not become a subject of wide discussion until the work of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240). Along the way, Khalil explored the works of Sarrāj (d. 988), Kālābādhī (d. 990), Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 998), al-Qushayrī (d. 1072), Hujwīrī (d. 1072), and Sirjānī (d. 1077) and their approaches to *ṣabr*.

Kazuyo Murata (King's College) presented a paper titled "Sufism and the Pursuit of Happiness." Whereas the Greek concept of *eudaemonia*, translated in Arabic as *saʿāda*, is heavily discussed by Sufi writers versed in *falsafa*, this paper argued that the Sufi discourse on happiness as a goal of human life is not a simple carryover of this Greek antique term. Rather, it covers different ideas and their associated notions, such as *riḍā*, *surūr*, and *faraḥ*, all under the generic umbrella of "happiness." These various notions have been explored by the likes of al-Qushayrī (d. 1072), Khwāja ʿAbd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d. 1087), and Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (d. 1209).

Mohammed Rustom (Carleton University) concluded this panel with his paper "*Theo-Fānī*: ʿAyn al-Quḍāt and the Fire of Love" on the famous Sufi martyr ʿAyn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī (d. 1131), who belonged to the Persian Sufi "school of passionate love" (*madhhab-i ʿishq*).

The paper explored ʿAyn al-Quḍāt's multifaceted understanding of love as it pertains to the Divine-human relationship and the lived human experience of love.

Keynote Address

Jamal Elias (University of Pennsylvania) presented a keynote lecture entitled "Revisiting Rūmī's *Mathnawī* as the 'Persian Qurʾān' through the Lens of Anqarawī." The lecture provided a glimpse into a commentary on Rūmī's *Mathnawī* by one of the most influential Mevlevi shaykhs, Ismāʿīl Rusūkhī Anqarawī (d. 1631). Entitled *Majmuʿat al-laṭāʾif wa maṭmūrat al-maʿārif* (Collection of subtleties and treasure of knowledge) and consisting of seven volumes, it is usually known as *Sharḥ-i Mathnawī.* It curiously contains a commentary on what is supposed to be a seventh volume of Rūmī's *Mathnawī*, which Elias analyzed in the context of the frequent reference to the *Mathnawī* as the "Persian Quran" by classical scholars and authors such as Jāmī (d. 1492)—although it should be noted that this comparison is not to be understood in the sense of a formal resemblance to the Quranic text but is rather is to be seen as emphasizing its great importance in and impact on the Persianate world.

May 3rd, 2019

Panel 4: Late Pre-Modern Sufism

The conference's second day opened with a panel chaired by Bilal Orfali (American University of Beirut). Matthew Ingalls (American University of Dubai) began with his presentation, "Al-Shaʿrānī's *Laṭāʾif al-Minan* and the Virtue of Sincere Immodesty." This work addresses the tension between the virtue of hiding one's spiritual accomplishments in order to preserve their pure intention and the role of a Sufi master in showing his students the different blessings bestowed by God upon him as a guiding example for them. The paper explored this tension and the author's knowledge of it, his way of dealing with the problem, the possible cynicism that future readers of this work may have, and the attendant ethical stand the reader would adopt in order to avoid this potential pitfall.

The paper by Rizwan Zamir (Davidson College), presented by Mohammed Rustom, was entitled "'Dogs Are Better than You!' Mockery in Punjabi Sufi Poetry." The paper analyzed the poetry of three well-known South Asian Sufis, Shah Husayn (d. 1593), Sultan Bāhū (d. 1691) and Baba Bulleh Shah (d. 1758), focusing on the aspect of mockery, which Zamir sees as reflecting ethical, mystical, social, and personal discussions in a Punjabi society whose hollowness and hypocrisy the poets decried.

Then Alexandre Papas (French National Center for Scientific Research) presented "Sufism and Ethics in Central Asia: Ṣūfī Allāhyār's *Thabāt al-ʿĀjizīn* and Its Legacy," a paper exploring the work of Ṣūfī Allāhyār (d. 1721), a Naqshbandī Mujaddidī Sufi from Samarqand whose influence was greater as an author than it was as a Sufi shaykh. Composed in *mathnawī* form, his work became popular in Central Asian madrasas, exposing a sober Sufi view on faith, observance, morals, and ethics.

Marcia Hermansen (Loyola University Chicago) presented a paper titled "Shāh Walī Allāh and the Virtues," which discussed the different frameworks for conceiving of the relationship between mysticism and ethics that can be found in

the work of Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762) of Delhi at the juncture between premodern and early modern Islam. The paper uncovered his formulation of the virtues one needs to cultivate in order to attain felicity, and his view of how these virtues are related to the four Platonic virtues in a Sufi ethical context.

Concluding this panel was a presentation by Paul Heck (Georgetown University), "Mystical Traditions of Prophetic Ethics in Moroccan Sufism: The Case of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Dabbāgh (d. 1719)." Starting with the works and example of this Moroccan mystic, this paper presented the ethical aspects of the spiritual path in the late premodern Islamic West, with a focus on how spiritual sovereignty interacts with worldly power.

Panel 5: Literary Engagements

Chaired by Enass Khansa (American University of Beirut), this panel was opened by a presentation in Arabic by Lina Jamal (American University of Beirut), "Sufi Dreams," which discussed the influence of Greek thought on oneiric Sufi writings and their symbols. The paper analyzed the symbolism of wool (*ṣūf*) in dreams from Artemidorus (second century) to al-Nābulsī (d. 1731) and demonstrated how this symbol was adopted by Sufis for their own concerns. This adoption represents an example of a Greek element used and modified within the Islamic tradition.

Richard McGregor (Vanderbilt University) presented a paper titled "Beauty, Vision, and the Disciplines of Bodies in Sufi Aesthetics." With an emphasis on Egyptian traditions, this paper delved deeper into the relationship between ethics and visual practice in Sufism and into the discipline of the mind and body in the pursuit of "beauty" geared toward the development of a virtuous self.

Concluding this panel, Vahid Behmardi (Lebanese American University) presented "Social Ethics in Rūmī's *Mathnawī*." Discussing Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) for a second time in this conference, this paper explored the social ethics that can be read in his *Mathnawī*, which is not restricted to a purely personal mystical dimension but also gives the reader social values to be developed in society so that the spiritual and religious being can simultaneously flourish.

Panels 6 and 7: Sufism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

The sixth panel was chaired by Lyall Armstrong (American University of Beirut) and started with a presentation by Ahmed El Shamsy (University of Chicago) entitled "Modernist Appropriations of Sufi Ethics." Looking beyond the existing view of Muslim reformers' criticism of Sufism, this paper described how, on the contrary, such reformers embraced and promoted certain aspects of classical works of Sufism, a prime example being the *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* by al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), which was used by reformers such as Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) and Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) in driving home their own ethical concerns.

Leila Alzamova (International Relations Kazan Federal University) presented "Sufism and Modern Muslim Ethics in 20th Century Russian Islamic Thought," which explored the differing views of two Muslim scholars in twentieth-century imperial Russia, Ziyaaddin Kamali (d. 1942) and Musa Bigiev (d. 1949), and their divergent criticisms of Sufi shaykhs and

their practice in the context of the great changes brought by modernity and the perceived backwardness of the Islamic world vis-à-vis the West.

Oludamini Ogunnaike (University of Virginia) presented a paper titled "The Existential, Epistemological Ethics of *Tarbiyah*: Ibrahim Niasse's *Maqāmāt al-Dīn al-Thalāth*." This presentation focused on the branch of the Tijāniyya Sufi order that is the largest in in the world and the most popular one in sub-Saharan Africa thanks to the significant influence of Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse (d. 1975). Analyzing his works, the paper shed a great deal of light on Niasse's spiritual training, tracing its origins and exploring the relationship it postulates between ethics, epistemology, ontology, and Sufi anthropology.

The seventh and final panel of the conference was chaired by Bashshar Haydar (American University of Beirut), with two presentations in Arabic. The first of these was by Mohammed Helmi, "The Question of Sufism on the Contemporary Horizon: History and Destinies." It presented an overview of the last century's criticisms of Sufism, from internal criticism by prac-titioners of Sufism to external criticism from non-Sufis, according to different religious approaches and currents identi-fied by Helmi.

Then Adbelouahab Belgherras (Centre de recherche en anthropologie sociale et culturelle) presented "Sufi Ethics in Contemporary Discourse: The 'Perfect' Man and World Citizenship." This paper discussed the contemporary relevance of the Sufi understanding of the "perfect human" in regard to the idea of "world citizenship" through examples such as the International Day of Living Together in Peace on May 16 of each year, which was recently adopted by the United Nations as the result of an initiative by Shaykh Khaled Bentounes of the ʿAlawiyya International Association.

These intense two days gave the audience a window into trends in the current scholarship and research being conducted on Islamic mysticism—both on its established themes, such as Rūmī's works and heritage, and less known but promising fields, such as early Sufi texts and non-Arabic works from different parts of the premodern Islamic world.

The particular focus on ethics, an area that is overall not yet systematically researched in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies, helped bring together scholars specialized in different time periods and different Islamic languages, which made for fruitful exchanges among participants and with the public.

The conference also proved to be a logical step in the context of a growing interest, both scholarly and otherwise, in the subject of Sufism. This is hopefully the beginning of regular exchanges and organized discussions around Sufism in particular and Islamic studies in general at the AUB, an institution uniquely situated to bring together scholars from different traditions and disciplines. Indeed, the AUB can help foster a rare dynamic and discussion between scholars from within and outside of the Islamic world.