

Heresy and Sufism in the Arabic-Islamic world, 1550–1750: Some preliminary observations*

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to throw preliminary light on heretical Sufi groups in the Arabic-Islamic world in the early-modern period (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries). Previous scholarship on antinomian Sufism has tended to focus on earlier centuries and on Persian- and Turkish-speaking groups. Evidence suggests that there is also a history to be written of antinomian mystical groups in the Arabic-speaking world in later centuries. On the eve of modernity in the Arabic-speaking Middle East, groups and individuals existed who rejected or ignored the prevalent scholarly interpretation of Islam and challenged the authority of the class of religious scholars (*‘ulamā’*). A number of sources from the period, usually hostile and/or satirical, attest to the existence of such groups and allow us to reconstruct the overall contours of their outlook.

Laconic, dismissive and hostile accounts by self-styled upholders of orthodoxy are not ideal sources for uncovering the views of “heretics” (*zanādiqa*) in the Islamic world. Nevertheless, they are often all that is available to modern historians. In what follows, I will discuss a number of sources from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that discuss contemporary “heretics” in the Arabic-Islamic world. These include an account of a trial and execution in Damascus in 1610, a number of polemics by Islamic religious scholars from Egypt and Syria, and a satirical work from late-seventeenth-century Egypt. Together, they give at least some information on individuals and movements deemed heretical from the perspective of Islamic religious scholars (*‘ulamā’*). This information suggests that the accusation of “heresy” (*zandaqa* or *ilhād*) tended primarily to be made against certain Sufi groups, at least in Syria and Egypt in the period from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries. This is not of course to say that the terms *zandaqa* and *ilhād* came to be semantically restricted to heterodox Sufism.¹ However, from around 1550 to 1750, the

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1 A work entitled *al-Ṣawā’iq al-muḥriqa fī al-radd ‘alā ahl al-bida‘ wa’l-zandaqa* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhirah, 1956) by the Meccan scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1566) is aimed at pro-Safavid Shiīs. The same scholar described the iconoclastic critic of

“heretics” who appear to have been most present in the minds of Islamic religious scholars in Syria and Egypt were Sufi groups that challenged – to varying degrees – the predominant scholarly interpretation of Islam. These groups have not yet received sustained scholarly attention. The few available studies of anti-nomian or “deviant” Sufism tend to focus on earlier centuries and on Turkish- and Persian-speaking groups. Yet there is abundant evidence suggesting that there is also a history to be written about “deviant” Sufism in the Arabic-speaking world in the early modern period. The present paper is a preliminary discussion of some of this evidence.

I

In late January 1610, a man named Yaḥyā ibn ʿĪsā from the province of Karak (in what is today Jordan) appeared in Damascus. Within a few days – on 2 February – he was executed as a heretic (*zindīq*) in the presence of the Chief Judge of Damascus and some of the leading religious scholars of the city. The prominent Damascene scholar Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 1651), who played a prominent role in the trial and condemnation, has left a first-hand account of the event.² Ghazzī wrote that Yaḥyā al-Karakī started to preach upon his arrival in the city, and that some of his writings started to circulate among local students. He apparently caused some commotion by his preaching in the Umayyad mosque on 29 January, and was as a consequence placed in the city hospital (*Bīmāristān*) by the Chief Judge. The placement may have indicated some initial uncertainty about whether the man was fully sane. It soon transpired, however, that he had written letters explicating his ideas to at least one local scholar. Other writings by al-Karakī were shown to another local scholar by a student who had read and been impressed by them. Ghazzī wrote that some of these writings were shown to him, and that they included a number of abominations: denigrating the Prophet Muḥammad; insulting the class of religious scholars; criticisms of religion (i.e. Islam) and its followers; denying the existence of God; calumniating God and ascribing to Him perplexity and impotence; declaring the prophets to be ignorant; insulting the Damascene scholar Taqī al-Dīn al-Ḥiṣnī (d. 1426) and the venerable founder of the Ḥanbali school of law Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855); belief in “immanentism” (i.e. that God is

mainstream theology, law and popular religion Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) – two heroes of modern Sunni fundamentalism – as *mulḥidūn*; see his *al-Fatāwā al-ḥadīthiyya* (Cairo: Mustafā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1970), 203. Ibn Taymiyya was also called a *zindīq* by Taqī al-Dīn al-Ḥiṣnī (d. 1426); see the latter’s *Daḥ shubah man shabbaha wa tamarrada* (n.p., 1418/1997), for example pp. 126, 131, 189.

- 2 Najm al-Dīn Ghazzī, *Lutf al-samar wa qatf al-thamar min tarājim a’yān al-tabaqa al-’ulā min al-qarn al-ḥādī ‘ashar*, ed. M. al-Shaykh (Iḥyā’ al-turāth al-‘Arabī, 55, 57. Damascus: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa al-Irshād al-Qawmī, 1981–82), 57: 698–707. Lutz Berger has an extended description and discussion of the case in his illuminating *Gesellschaft und Individuum in Damaskus, 1550–1791* (Kultur, Recht und Politik in muslimischen Gesellschaften, 10. Würzburg: Ergon, 2007), 288–301. My overall understanding of the case coincides with Berger’s, though we differ on a number of details.

immanent or incarnate in the world) and the transmigration of souls; and declaring freely available what is privately owned by Muslims. Ghazzī added that he became disheartened at the fact that such brazen impieties could be expressed in Damascus with impunity, and rallied a number of his fellow scholars to join him in calling for the execution of the heretic. Ghazzī and a number of other scholars went to the Chief Judge and accused Yaḥyā al-Karakī of a number of ideas that they claimed amounted to plain unbelief (*kufr*). The accused confessed to having these ideas, and a demand for his execution was sent to the Ottoman Governor of the city, who – apparently after some hesitation – sent his permission. The idea that the heretic be pilloried and executed in public was abandoned for fear that his sympathizers in the city would cause problems, and he was beheaded then and there in the court of the Chief Judge. He was buried on the banks of a stream notorious for being polluted with the waste and refuse of Damascus. Ghazzī expressed his satisfaction with the outcome, and recorded three lines of poetry he composed celebrating the happy end to the affair.

Ghazzī's account, though related first-hand, is laconic. We are not told, for example, why Yaḥyā al-Karakī insulted the late fourteenth-/early fifteenth-century scholar Taqī al-Dīn al-Ḥiṣnī. Ḥiṣnī was a scholar of the Shāfi'ī school of law and a follower of mainstream Ash'arī theology who was notorious in his day for his vehement hostility to the ideas of the iconoclastic critic of scholastic jurisprudence, theology, mysticism and popular religion Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).³ However, a follower of Ibn Taymiyya would hardly have been accused of also insulting Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (the founder of the legal school to which Ibn Taymiyya belonged), nor is it likely that his ideas would have been found so unacceptable that they would lead to execution within a few days. The account is also perplexing because the various elements in Ghazzī's account do not cohere. We are told that al-Karakī denied the existence of God and yet affirmed that God is immanent in worldly things and that God may be described as perplexed and ignorant. We are told that he insulted God, the Prophet Muḥammad and religion in general, and yet that a number of students, janissary soldiers and commoners reacted to his ideas positively and that he had written letters to some religious scholars in Damascus hoping to win their support. Obviously, Ghazzī was not interested in giving his readers anything like a detailed and dispassionate exposition of the views of Yaḥyā al-Karakī.

In this respect, the account left by Ghazzī may be contrasted with the sources that have made possible such classic studies of heresy in late medieval and early modern Europe as Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*.⁴ Both studies are based on records of the Inquisition, that early precursor of what Michel Foucault called "disciplinary"

3 Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi'īyya* (Silsilah al-jadīdah min maṭbū'āt Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmānīyah, 5/j/7/1–5/j/7/4. Hyderabad Deccan: Maṭba'ah Majlis Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmānīyah, 1980), 4: 97–9.

4 C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. J. Tedeschi and A. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, the Promised Land of Error*, trans. B. Bray (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

power.⁵ These records are of extraordinary richness, giving very detailed information about the thoughts and lives of the accused. The Inquisitors remained in the background, recording the prompted answers of the heretics at great length. The account of Ghazzī, by contrast, bears no trace of a disciplinary power characterized by objectification, surveillance and “incitement to discourse”. On the contrary, the ideas of the heretic were so distasteful to him that he wasted few words on them. The narrative focus in Ghazzī’s account of the trial is on the prosecutors and their reactions and discussions, whereas the heretic himself is silent, and whatever he said at his trial is not quoted. His narrative role is merely to affirm or deny a few questions put to him. The contrast with the Inquisition records utilized by Ginzburg and Le Roy Ladurie could hardly be more striking.

A few pieces of information that are incidentally revealed by Ghazzī’s account offer additional clues to the tenor of Yaḥyā al-Karakī’s ideas. Ghazzī mentioned in passing that al-Karakī claimed that his writings had been penned while he was in a trance (*fī waqt al-ghayba*). Ghazzī also mentioned that some of those who hesitated to denounce the man held that his expressions could be given a charitable, non-literal interpretation (*ta’wīl*). This strongly suggests that Yaḥyā al-Karakī was a mystic of some sort, for it was quite typical of defenders of the ecstatic utterances of mystics to emphasize that they were said while in a state of ecstasy and that it is possible to give them a non-literal and theologically acceptable interpretation. The supposition that al-Karakī’s ideas were rooted in mysticism is supported by additional information that we owe to another scholar involved in the trial and condemnation, Ḥasan al-Būrīnī (d. 1615). Būrīnī, whose account is briefer and at least as hostile and laconic as that of Ghazzī, wrote that Yaḥyā al-Karakī had written that he had seen the Divine Throne (*‘arsh*), and seen God on it, and then a higher god, and a still higher god.⁶ Būrīnī added that Karakī had thereby made explicit a belief in polytheism. Again, it defies belief that a person who was literally and openly a polytheist should have obtained a following in Damascus, preached at the Umayyad Mosque, and entertained hopes of winning over local scholars by writing to them. Būrīnī’s account is almost certainly an uncharitable rendering of the view – familiar from the writings of several prominent Islamic mystics – that there are experientially distinct levels of the Godhead.⁷ Būrīnī also accused Karakī of having written that

5 In his classic studies *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) and *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) Foucault argued that a distinct form of “disciplinary” power appeared in early modern Europe in various institutions such as the military, schools and prisons. He acknowledged that this form of power had precursors in medieval Christian confessional techniques. For a modern study that argues that many features of “disciplinary” power are found in the fourteenth-century Inquisition, see *Inquisition and Medieval Society: Power, Discipline, and Resistance in Languedoc* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

6 Būrīnī, *Tarājim al-a’yān min abnā’ al-zamān* (MS. Vienna: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Mxt. 346), fol. 155r–v. This is reiterated in the later account of Muḥibbī (d. 1699), *Khulāṣat al-athar fī a’yān al-qarn al-ḥādī ‘ashar* (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Wahbīyah, 1284/1868), 4: 478–80.

7 T. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 23–36, 110–15; R. Nicholson,

the Prophet al-Khiḍr had transgressed and that the Prophet Moses was ignorant. This also seems to be an uncharitable rendering of speculations like those of the prominent Egyptian mystic ‘Alī Wafā’ (d. 1405) on Sura 18 of the Quran, according to which al-Khiḍr’s actions would have been transgressive and condemnable had he been subject to exoteric law, and Moses was ignorant of other aspects of al-Khiḍr’s actions until he rose from the level of mere prophecy to the level of a prophet-saint.⁸ Karakī’s criticism of Taqī al-Dīn al-Ḥiṣnī may on this account have been a reaction not to Ḥiṣnī’s criticisms of Ibn Taymiyya but to his stern criticisms of the Sufis of his time, criticisms that were still cited by sixteenth-century Syrian scholars.⁹

Yet another indication of Karakī’s Sufi connections is Ghazzī’s statement that the “heretic” had gone to Egypt in his youth and had probably imbibed his ideas from there. Egypt seems to have been host to a number of Sufi groups that were held in disrepute by mainstream religious scholars, and some of which were accused of believing in “immanentism” and the transmigration of souls. One of the disreputable orders whose existence is attested in Egypt in the early modern period was called the Muṭāwī’a. Significantly, Ghazzī reported that he said to the Chief Judge while they were eagerly awaiting the permission of the Governor for the execution, that the unrepentant heretic “who chants in the manner of the Muṭāwī’a” (*wa-yunshidu ‘alā tariqat al-Muṭāwī’a*) fully deserved to die.¹⁰

The Muṭāwī’a order is little known to modern scholarship.¹¹ However, it must have flourished in Egypt between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, for it is repeatedly denounced by Egyptian religious scholars in that period. Muḥammad al-Ghamrī (d. 1445), Muḥammad al-Dajjānī (d. 1660) and ‘Alī al-‘Adawī al-Ṣāfīdī (d. 1775) all penned tracts denouncing the order, particularly for what the scholars claimed was improper conduct with beardless teenage novices.¹² Such was its reputation in some circles that the Egyptian scholar

Studies in Islamic Mysticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 97–103, 125–30.

- 8 R. J. A. McGregor, *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt: The Wafā’ Sufi Order and the Legacy of Ibn ‘Arabī* (SUNY Series in Islam. New York: SUNY Press, 2004), 132–41.
- 9 For example, Ḥiṣnī’s statement that “The Devil plays with the Sufis of our time like children play with each other” was cited by the Syrian mystic and scholar ‘Alwān al-Ḥamawī (d. 1530); see E. Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Egypte et en Syrie sous les derniers Mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans* (Damascus: Institut français d’études arabes de Damas, 1995), 177. Berger sees Karakī’s hostility to Ḥiṣnī as being due to the latter’s opposition to anthropomorphism; see *Gesellschaft und Individuum*, 292.
- 10 Ghazzī, *Luṭf al-samar*, 2: 706. Berger, who also concludes that Yahyā al-Karakī was a mystic of sorts, does not note or discuss this reference to the Muṭāwī’a.
- 11 Its existence has been noted by Tawfiq al-Ṭawīl, *al-Taṣawwuf fī Miṣr ibbān al-‘aṣr al-‘uthmānī* (Cairo: n.p., 1946), 76, 85; M. Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha’rānī* (Studies in Islamic Culture and History. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 1982), 80–2; Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Egypte et en Syrie*, 206, 340. Winter speculates that it could have been a heretical offshoot of the Aḥmadiyya order. Geoffroy presents this as a settled fact though he only cites Winter in its support.
- 12 See ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha’rānī, *al-Anwār al-qudsiyya fī ma’rifat qawā’id al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. Surūr and al-Shāfi‘ī (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-‘Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 1: 47 (citing an unpublished

and Sufi ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī (d. 1565) urged his readers not to denounce everyone who belonged to that order, since it – like the Aḥmadiyya and Rifā‘iyya orders – contained both “the good and the bad”. Sha‘rānī described the Muṭāwī‘a order as active in Upper Egypt and in the Sharqiyya province (east of the Nile Delta).¹³ The prominent Egyptian scholar and mystic ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Munāwī (d. 1622) apparently agreed with Sha‘rānī that the order included both “the good and the bad”. On the one hand, he devoted a number of sympathetic entries to individuals belonging to the order in his voluminous biographical dictionary of Sufis.¹⁴ These entries suggest that the order’s members tended not to be scholars, were often of rural or lower-class origin, and that they – at least at some times of the year – led an itinerant lifestyle and relied on the charity of laymen. Their religious devotions tended to centre on the charismatic miracle-working saint, visiting shrines and experiencing states of mystic ecstasy. The order also included some “holy fools”, i.e. people who displayed usually mild degrees of mental disorder and were revered as living saints. On the other hand, Munāwī also cited one other Sufi master who condemned the order for its hostility to the class of religious scholars, which supposedly led “some of them” to be utterly ignorant of the stipulations of Islamic law and thus indulge in actions such as prostrating themselves to the sun, and using urine instead of water for ritual purification.¹⁵ From other condemnations of the order by jurists, it would seem that the Muṭāwī‘a were known for wandering in groups with flags, drums, water-pitchers for performing ablutions and large rosaries. During their sessions of mystical chanting (*dhikr*), young beardless novices would wait on them and embrace them from behind if the participating men worked themselves into a trance. This embrace was apparently known as the “repose of the fakirs” (*rāḥat al-fuqarā*).¹⁶

The Muṭāwī‘a was only one of several groups of Sufis that were reckoned problematic by mainstream religious scholars but were nevertheless active in Egypt during the lifetime of Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (1570–1651) and whom he may have had in mind when he claimed that Yaḥyā al-Karakī probably imbibed his ideas from heretics while in Egypt. The Egyptian jurist Manṣūr al-Buhūtī (d. 1641), a contemporary of Ghazzī, wrote that pantheist groups had become “a general scourge” in his time (*wa-qad ‘ammat al-balwā*

work by Ghamrī); Abū al-Faḥḥ Muḥammad al-Dajjānī, *al-‘Iqd al-mufrad fī ḥukm al-amrad* (MS. Princeton: Firestone Library, New Series, 1952); Ṭawīl, *al-Taṣawwuf fī Miṣr*, 112, 176–7 (citing a fatwā by Ṣa‘dī).

13 ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī, *Laṭā‘if al-minan wa’l-akhlāq fī bayān wujūb al-taḥadduth bi-ni‘mat Allāh ‘alā al-iḥlāq* (Cairo: ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Aḥmad al-Ḥanafī, 1357/1938–9), 2: 18.

14 ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Munāwī, *al-Kawākib al-durriyya fī ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. M. A. al-Jādir (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1999), 3: 327–8, 430, 480, 484, 495, 496–7; 4: 99. The last of these entries is devoted to a man with the attributive “al-Abharī”, which suggests Iranian origin (Abhar is a town near Qazvin). However, the other entries clearly indicate that many members of the order were of Egyptian origin.

15 *Ibid.*, 3: 440.

16 See Ṭawīl, *al-Taṣawwuf fī Miṣr*, 85, 176–7; and Dajjānī, *al-‘Iqd al-mufrad*, fols 6r–8r.

bi-hādhihi al-fīraq).¹⁷ Another Egyptian contemporary of Ghazzī, the scholar ‘Umar al-Fāriskūrī (d. 1610), wrote an extant treatise denouncing the ideas of what he called “heretical Sufi-asters” (*zanādiqat al-mutaṣawwifa*).¹⁸ The author was not opposed to Sufism as such – hence the phrase “Sufi-aster” rather than Sufi – but was incensed by what he saw as the widespread circulation of ideas that were beyond the pale of religious law amongst some Sufi circles. These heretical groups based their antinomianism – or so Fāriskūrī wrote – on exaggerated claims of their spiritual station:

They have claimed to reach the ultimate station in the blink of an eye, and that the point of separation (*ghayn*) has been effaced, in addition to a number of other lies and abominations . . . Thus many of the people of this time have been corrupted, and this is all too visible for the eye to see. The disobedience of The Powerful has become their motto, and the rejection of His commands and prohibitions their garment (*dithār*).¹⁹

The root of these heresies – according to Fāriskūrī – was the corruption of their creedal beliefs by the Devil. The Devil succeeds in doing so either because they follow in the footsteps of other heretics, or because they follow their whim and caprice, or because they take certain ecstatic utterances of venerable mystics out of context and mistake their meaning.

Fāriskūrī proceeded to divide his tract into seven sections, corresponding to seven heretical beliefs that he wished to denounce. Parts of the first section, including the section title, are missing from the extant manuscript of the work. It is clear, however, that in the section Fāriskūrī discussed, the controversial idea of the “unity of existence” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and the related claim that God is absolute existence (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) were prevalent in some Sufi circles, particularly those influenced by the prominent mystic Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240).

Ibn ‘Arabī and his ideas had been the source of considerable controversy in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²⁰ The controversy seems to have become less intense after a number of prominent Sunni scholars in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century had pronounced in favour of the mystic, such as the widely respected Egyptian jurist and Chief Judge Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī (d. 1519), the Egyptian scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī (d. 1505) and the Ottoman Grand Mufti Kemālpāṣā-zāde (d. 1534).²¹ The conquest of Syria and Egypt in 1516–17 by the Ottomans – who for a number of reasons tended

17 Maṣṣūf al-Buhūfī, *Kashshāf al-qinā‘ ‘an matn al-Iqnā‘*, ed. Hilāl (Riyad: Maktabat al-Naṣr al-Ḥadīthah, n.d.), 6: 171.

18 ‘Umar al-Fāriskūrī, *al-Suyūf al-murḥafa fī al-radd ‘alā zanādiqat al-mutaṣawwifa* (MS. Berlin Staatsbibliothek, Wetzstein II, 1735), fols 54–71. Copied in 1009/1601.

19 *Ibid.*, fol. 55v.

20 A. Knysh, *Ibn ‘Arabī in the Later Islamic Tradition* (SUNY Series in Islam. Albany: SUNY Press, 1999). Despite its title, Knysh’s work does not cover the period after the Ottoman conquest of the Arab East.

21 Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī, *al-Kawākib al-sā‘ira fī a’yān al-mi’a al-‘āshira*, ed. J. Jabbour (American University of Beirut, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Publications, Oriental series, 18, 20, 29. Beirut: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Amīrkānīyah, 1945–58), 18: 203–4 (on the opinion of Zakariyya al-Anṣārī); Ibn ‘Ābidīn, *Radd al-muḥtār ‘alā al-Durr al-mukhtār*

to have a favourable view of Ibn ʿArabī – also contributed towards the enhanced reputation of the mystic. One of the first actions taken by the Ottoman Sultan Selīm I (r. 1512–20) after his conquest of Damascus was to pay homage to the tomb of Ibn ʿArabī and order a mosque built at the site.²² By the time Fāriskūrī was writing, there were few scholars in the Ottoman Empire who would denounce Ibn ʿArabī outright. However, his ideas continued to elicit anxiety, and often the ideas were pronounced beyond the pale, even while their author was considered a saint. This position frequently resorted to the idea that Ibn ʿArabī’s writings had been corrupted by heretical interpolations, or that they ought to be given a charitable but non-literal interpretation and hence should not be made available to novices and others who were liable to misunderstand their meaning. Fāriskūrī presented the various verdicts of earlier religious scholars on Ibn ʿArabī, ranging from outright excommunication to wholehearted acceptance, and added – tendentiously – that this disagreement only related to the person of Ibn ʿArabī. As for the writings attributed to him, there was no disagreement amongst respectable religious scholars that they should not be given a literal interpretation and that one should not rely in matters of doctrine on what they seem to be saying.²³

In the second section, Fāriskūrī turned to the belief in “immanentism” (*ḥulūl*) – one of the charges brought against Yahyā al-Karakī in Damascus. Following the extremely influential fourteenth-century theologian Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 1390), he wrote that in a sense there could be no “immanence” if – as claimed by the partisans of the “unity of existence” – only God exists. However, he added that in another sense belief in immanentism follows directly from the belief in the unity of existence, for it implies that all perceived phenomena are in fact manifestations and reflections of the one divine substance.²⁴ In support of his argument, Fāriskūrī cited an author whom he claimed was a partisan of the “unity of existence” who had written in a work entitled *al-Mizān* – about which more will be said below – that the “unification” (*ittiḥād*) of God with creation was an idea that was both compelling and abundantly attested in the poetry of Sufis.²⁵ This author cited in support of his contention a number of poems by the prominent Arabic mystical poets of the post-classical age, such as Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235), Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī (d. 1268) and ʿAlī Wafāʾ (d. 1405). Fāriskūrī denounced the idea that “unification” is possible, let alone compelling, and he characteristically added that the cited mystical poets had said these lines in a state of mystic intoxication and as such were innocent of the heretical doctrinal views.²⁶

In the third section, Fāriskūrī turned to the belief in the eternity of the world. This belief was usually associated with the Islamic Aristotelian/Neoplatonist

(Cairo: Būlāq: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Kubrā, 1272/1855–56), 3: 294 (citing the opinion of Suyūṭī and Kemālpāšā-zāde); Winter, *Society and Religion*, 125–7.

22 Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Egypte et en Syrie*, 79–80.

23 Fāriskūrī, *al-Suyūf al-murḥafā*, fol. 60v.

24 *Ibid.*, fol. 64r.

25 *Ibid.*, fol. 64r–v.

26 *Ibid.*, fol. 65r.

“Philosophers” (*Falāsifa*), but Fāriskūrī pointed out that it was also implied by the pantheism of the heretical Sufis. The doctrine of the Philosophers was, according to Fariskuri, less abominable since they conceded that the world, though eternal, is only possible-of-existence in itself and needs something else (a Necessary Existent, i.e. God) to actualize this possibility. The heretical Sufis, by contrast, were committed to the view that what we take to be the phenomenal world is in fact the uncreated Necessary Existent Himself.²⁷ Fāriskūrī added that this eternity of the world was not only logically implied (*lāzim*) by their doctrines but explicitly endorsed in their discourse, since they often spoke of the uncreated, ideal prototypes (*a’yān thābita*) of created things.²⁸

In the fourth section, Fāriskūrī discussed the belief that God will not fulfil His threats to the unbelievers, and that no-one will suffer eternal punishment. This was obviously a claim that particularly incensed Fāriskūrī, for his tone is particularly acerbic when refuting it. He exclaimed:

They have challenged the Word of God with the swords of falsity and have encroached upon It with falsification and corruption . . . One can only wonder how they clutch at the hems of the Book of God when it so clearly refutes their idea . . . If you cite to them the verses mentioning punishment they shield themselves with the armor of the esoteric sect, and if you mention to them the verses mentioning repentance they hold on to the ropes of the literalists.²⁹

Fāriskūrī distinguished between four different grounds for holding the abominable belief that non-believers will not suffer eternal torment in Hell. One such ground is the view that there is no free will and all actions are predetermined by God. Fāriskūrī countered by expounding the standard view of the prevalent Ash‘arī school of theology that while it is true that God creates all events in the world, there is nevertheless a subclass of behaviour which can be classified as voluntary insofar as it is accompanied by our intentions. Our intentions are – like all things except God – inert and have no causal power, but their accompanying our actions means that we acquire responsibility for these actions.³⁰

In the fifth section, Fāriskūrī discussed another possible ground for denying the reality of eternal damnation: the view that the external rites and regulations of religion are stages upon the path of spiritual progress, and may be discarded once true monotheism and love of God is attained. Fāriskūrī added that “some claim that the external religious obligations no longer apply to him [the accomplished mystic] and his servitude becomes contemplation” (*wa-za‘ama ba‘duhum annahu yasquṭu ‘anhu al-‘ibādāt al-zāhira wa-takūnu ‘ibādātuḥu al-tafakkur*).³¹ Fāriskūrī did not, however, explain how and why this belief leads to a denial of eternal punishment for unbelievers.

27 *Ibid.*, fol. 66v.

28 *Ibid.*, fols 66v–67r.

29 *Ibid.*, fol. 68r–v.

30 *Ibid.*, fol. 68v.

31 *Ibid.*, fol. 69r–v.

In the sixth section, Fāriskūrī discussed yet another ground for denying the reality of eternal punishment: that the seeker can reach such a stage that God becomes united with him and it would be true to say “He is I and I am Him”. At that stage, religious obligations no longer apply.³² Again, Fāriskūrī did not elaborate on exactly how and why this belief in “immanentism” leads to the denial of eternal punishment for unbelievers.

In the seventh and final section, Fāriskūrī discussed once more the belief that God is absolute existence. Fāriskūrī connected this belief with the view that there will be no eternal punishment and damnation, though yet again without making clear the logical connection between the two positions. It is evident that the thrust of this last section is directed at the views of Ibn ‘Arabī, for Fāriskūrī cited several lines of Ibn ‘Arabī’s verse, as well as passages from his famous prose work *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, which express the view that God’s wrath is not eternal, and that God’s “not carrying out the threat” (*khulf al-wa‘īd*) that He made in Scripture in no way implies any imperfection in God, quite the contrary. Again, Fāriskūrī added that Ibn ‘Arabī is innocent of these heretical views, and that the relevant sections of his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* are apocryphal.³³

Fāriskūrī’s work was ostensibly aimed at Egyptian Sufis during his lifetime whose views included a belief that God is the only existent and that the phenomenal world is a substance-less reflection or manifestation of Him, and who were inclined to doubt the prevalent Islamic doctrine that eternal torment would be the lot of unbelievers. The connection between these two ideas is not made clear in Fāriskūrī’s work. Presumably the view that only God exists and the phenomenal world is a mirage, though it does not logically imply any position on the fate of unbelievers, would nevertheless often be associated with the view that the external rites and regulations of religion are merely stages along the path of spiritual enlightenment, and that once that stage is reached these rites and regulations – and with them the distinction between believer and unbeliever – lose their point. Certainly, there is some evidence – to be presented below – that a number of Sufi groups in the early modern Arab–Islamic world embraced such views and thought that they went hand-in-hand with a monistic metaphysics. There is also abundant evidence, however, that a number of Sufis of the period viewed the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī favourably and yet denied that antinomian conclusions follow from them. One such Sufi was the Egyptian ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī (d. 1565). He is the author of the work entitled *al-Mizān* that was cited and refuted by Fāriskūrī. It is surprising that Sha‘rānī should have been cited as an example of a “heretic Sufi-aster”, for he is presented in modern scholarship – with good reason – as a paradigm example of a “moderate” and law-abiding Sufi who shied away from anything that smacked of antinomianism and who – while defending Ibn ‘Arabī as a venerable saint – refrained from explicitly endorsing the more controversial aspects of his teachings.³⁴ Fāriskūrī had in fact clearly removed the passage that he cited from its context, and thus distorted

32 *Ibid.*, fol. 69v.

33 *Ibid.*, fol. 69v–70r. For the relevant discussion in *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, see Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. A. ‘Afīfī (Cairo: ‘Isā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1946), 93–4.

34 See Winter, *Society and Religion*, especially 12–33.

what Shaʿrānī had actually written. In the cited work, Shaʿrānī expounded the standard mystical (and indeed mainstream Islamic) view that God manifests Himself (*yatajallā*), but added explicitly that this does not mean that God becomes immanent in, or united with, worldly things. However, it does mean that belief in divine immanence becomes something of a necessary illusion. A mystic who in a state of ecstasy witnesses God’s epiphanies must willy-nilly express “immanentist” or “unificationist” ideas, even though on closer consideration these ideas are not accurate and in fact self-refuting.³⁵ Fāriskūrī’s discussion of the passage from Shaʿrānī’s book is a disturbing example of wilful misrepresentation followed by condemnation. He would not have been out of place at the trial of Yaḥyā al-Karakī.

Shaʿrānī was in fact eager to dissociate himself from what he saw as heretical Sufi groups active in his own time. In one of his major works, he warned his readers thus:

Be sure you do not associate with the group that has donned the appearance of Sufis in the second half of the tenth century [i.e. second half of the sixteenth century CE] without knowing the stipulations of religious law. They have gone astray and been led astray by reading the books of the Sufis pertaining to divine unity without knowing their meaning. One person of this group came to me while I was sick and there was no one with me. I asked him who he was and he said “I am God”. I said, “You lie!” Then he said, “I am Muḥammad the Prophet of God”. I said “You lie!” Then he said, “I am the Devil and I am the Jew”. I replied, “You are right!” By God, had there been people with me who would testify against him I would have led him to the religious scholars and they would have beheaded him in accordance with the noble Law.³⁶

Incidentally, Shaʿrānī’s statement to the effect that antinomian Sufis appeared in the second half of the sixteenth century can safely be discounted as being in line with the well-known *topos* of “the decline of the times”. There is too much evidence for the existence of antinomian Sufis in Egypt during the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to make Shaʿrānī’s claim even remotely plausible.³⁷ Rather, the comment should be seen as part of a regular and homiletic emphasis in his writings on the supposed deterioration of Sufi life in his own day compared to the exemplary piety of the Sufis of times past.³⁸

The mystical works that Shaʿrānī claimed were misunderstood by these heretical Sufis would seem to be the very same works that he had – just a few lines

35 ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī, *al-Mizān al-dharriyya al-mubayyina li-ʿaqāʿid al-firaq al-ʿaliyya*, ed. Al-Mahdī, Naṣṣār and Mazyadī (Cairo: al-Dār al-Jawdiyah, 2007), 62–82. The passage quoted by Fāriskūrī starts on page 74.

36 Shaʿrānī, *Laṭāʾif*, 2: 29.

37 Shaʿrānī had himself cited the existence of a Qalandarī lodge in Cairo in the time of Aḥmad al-Badawī (d. 1276), and that things apparently contrary to Islamic law were taking place there; see his *Laṭāʾif*, 2: 18. See also Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Egypte et en Syrie*, 175–87.

38 See for example Shaʿrānī’s work *Tanbīh al-mughtarrīn awākhīr al-qarn al-ʿāshir ʿalā mā khālafū fīhi salafahum al-ṭāhir* (Cairo: Mustafā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1937).

earlier – warned the novice to read with caution or avoid altogether. These included the poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235), Muḥammad Wafā’ (d. 1364) and ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 1428), as well as the prose works of the Andalusian mystics Ibn ‘Arabī and Ibn Sab‘īn (d. 1270).³⁹ To this list we can probably also add the writings of Muḥammad Wafā’'s son ‘Alī Wafā’ (d. 1405) and Ibn Sab‘īn's associate and follower Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī (d. 1268), both of whom Sha‘rānī had mentioned elsewhere as expressing “unificationist” ideas in poetry. The mentioned figures were widely believed to have expressed – poetically or in prose – the basic view of the “unity of existence”. Several of these mystics had also expressed other ideas that were deemed problematic from the perspective of mainstream religious scholars. The idiosyncratic views of Ibn ‘Arabī on the fate of unbelievers in the hereafter have already been mentioned. Jīlī, in his major prose work *al-Insān al-kāmil*, seemed to assert that the theological errors of the Christians were instances of mistaken *ijtihād* (independent opinion formed on the basis of scripture) that would – with the intercession of Jesus – eventually be forgiven.⁴⁰ This was utterly out of bounds for many religious jurists, many of whom deemed it apostasy merely to doubt whether Christians and Jews were unbelievers, to say that God is worshipped in churches and synagogues or to say that the prayers of Christians and Jews are acts of piety.⁴¹ Ibn Sab‘īn's circle included both the controversial poet al-Shushtarī and the intriguing figure of Ibn Hūd al-Mursī (d. 1299 or 1300), who taught Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed* to Jewish students, and who reportedly once scandalized a scholar who had asked to be initiated into his order by replying, “Into which order, that of Moses, Jesus or Muḥammad?”⁴² The Egyptian mystic and poet ‘Alī Wafā’ had once been criticized by the well-known scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 1449) for allowing his followers to prostrate themselves towards him during the ritual sessions of music and dance (*samā’*). To this Wafā’ reportedly answered by citing the following verse of the Quran: “Wheresoever you turn, there is the face of God” (2:115), and was duly accused of unbelief (*kufīr*) by some of the people present at the exchange.⁴³

The legacy of such figures was vigorously contested in the Arabic-Islamic world in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It appears that very few religious scholars were prepared to condemn outright these prominent mystics of the past. Like both Fāriskūrī and Sha‘rānī, they were more likely to insist that the words of these venerable saints should not be taken at face-value and were liable to be “misunderstood” by the untrained novice, and were in fact “misunderstood” by groups they deemed heretical. This view was buttressed by various interpretive strategies, such as appealing to the intoxicated state of the author or poet, or postulating heretical interpolations in certain works, or simply explaining away the

39 Sha‘rānī, *Laṭā’if*, 2: 29.

40 ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, *al-Insān al-kāmil fī ma’rifat al-awākhir wa’l-awā’il* (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Azharīyah al-Miṣrīyah, 1328/1910–11), 74–5. The remarkable passage is discussed in R. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 139–40.

41 Buhūtī, *Kashshāf al-qinā’*, 6: 170.

42 Munāwī, *al-Kawākib al-durriyya*, 2: 398–400.

43 Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Inbā’ al-ghumr bi-abnā’ al-‘umr*, ed. H. Ḥabashī (al-Jumhūrīyah al-‘Arabīyah al-Muttaḥidah. Al-Majlis al-‘Alā lil-Shu‘ūn al-Islāmīyah. Lajnat Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-Islāmī, al-Kitāb 16. Cairo: n.p., 1971), 2: 308–9.

apparent sense of a passage. As an example of this last strategy, one may consider the following attack on the class of religious scholars by ‘Alī Wafā’:

The saints are in truth the inheritors of the Prophets. As for those who carry exoteric knowledge and invent issues for mundane reasons and in pursuit of their fancies, they have nothing to do with this rank. Rather, they are like those described [in the Quran (62:5)] as having been made to carry the Torah and then not carrying it out [like a donkey carrying books]. The correct position is to make use of what they carry, but without acknowledging their authority or their opinions and without allowing them to have their way. The donkey is supposed to carry loads and be used, not to rule, nor to be listened to and obeyed.

Sha‘rānī, who devoted to ‘Alī Wafā’ a lengthy and admiring entry in his biographical dictionary of Sufis, commented on the passage thus:

I say: Perhaps the Shaykh intends people who support their fanciful beliefs by lies, such as those who fabricate sayings of the Prophet (*ḥadīth*) to embellish their innovations. The intention is not those scholars whom God has ordained to set up the religious law.⁴⁴

Sha‘rānī’s interpretation is, to put it mildly, far-fetched. Wafā’ obviously cannot have intended fabricators of *ḥadīth*, for he explicitly endorsed “making use” (*al-intifā‘*) of the knowledge borne by the scholars he was comparing to pack animals. On this point at least, it would seem that the Muṭāwī‘a – whose hostility to the religious scholars has been mentioned above – had reason to believe that they, and not Sha‘rānī, were faithful to the legacy of the venerable ‘Alī Wafā’.

II

The Aleppine scholar and mystic of the Khalwatī order Qāsim al-Khānī (d. 1697) was, like Sha‘rānī, both positively inclined towards the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī and eager to reject what he saw as heretical views that could arise from misunderstandings of Sufi writings. In his short treatise *al-Taḥqīq fī al-radd ‘alā al-zindīq* (The Verified Truth in Rebutting the Heretic) he rejected the view that the relationship of God to the world is best compared to the relationship of water to ice, or cotton to cloth, i.e. that God is the underlying reality behind the changeable phenomena that constitute the world.⁴⁵ The rejected view is abundantly attested in Sufi poetry and prose, and closely related to at least one common understanding of the theory of “the unity of existence”. It had already been condemned in the treatise of Fāriskūrī as making God equivalent to the Aristotelian “prime matter” (*hayūlī*) of the universe.⁴⁶ Khānī also

44 ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Sha‘rānī, *Lawāqih al-anwār fī tabaqāt al-akhyār* (Cairo: Sharikat Maktabat wa Maṭba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1954), 2: 57.

45 Qāsim al-Khānī, *al-Taḥqīq fī al-radd ‘alā al-zindīq* (MS. Princeton: Firestone Library) Yahuda 3355: fols. 105–16 and Yahuda 4598.

46 Fāriskūrī, *al-Suyūf al-murhafa*, fol. 66v.

rejected the view, and added that expressions that suggested it in Sufi literature should not be taken at face-value but should be subjected to a charitable reinterpretation (*ta'wīl*). The “heretic” takes their statement literally, and considers his own “filthy” self and identifies it with God. This, according to Khānī, leads him to abandon religious duties and to permit himself what the religious law forbids. “May God kill him and cleanse the countries from him, and killing him is in order to save the weak-minded of God’s servants from him”.⁴⁷ It is clear that the “heretic” here is a pantheist antinomian, though Khānī did not make it clear whether he was thinking of contemporary heretical groups or simply heading off possible misunderstandings of the venerable Sufi masters.

The Damascene Muṣṭafā al-Bakrī (d. 1749) was another admirer of Ibn ‘Arabī who was eager to dissociate himself from antinomian groups. Bakrī was a prominent and influential mystic of the Khalwatī order who succeeded in spreading the order widely in Syria, western Arabia and Egypt. One of his works is entitled *al-Suyūf al-ḥidād fī a’nāq ahl al-zandaqa wa’l-ilḥād* (The Sharp Swords in the Necks of the People of Heresy and Unbelief).⁴⁸ In it, Bakrī made it clear that he was condemning existing groups in his time which:

collected the ecstatic utterances of the Sufi Gnostics and have made it their way, and have memorized some of their saying . . . They claim to believe in the “unity of existence” and misunderstand the words of the Sufi Gnostics . . . They hold fast to the words of the intoxicated and appeal to the sayings of the perplexed . . . even though these ecstatic utterances must be given a charitable interpretation and must be turned away from the literal meaning towards that which is appropriate.⁴⁹

The theme is familiar from Fāriskūrī’s earlier Egyptian work, though it is noteworthy that Bakrī – in contrast to Fāriskūrī – did not consider the belief in the “unity of existence” to be itself heretical, only misunderstandings of the doctrine. Neither was the aforementioned Qāsim al-Khānī opposed to the idea of the “unity of existence”; he stressed that it should be experienced after extensive spiritual exertions. Merely affirming it theoretically could lead to “heresy” (*al-zandaqa*).⁵⁰ This difference reflects the increasing influence of the idea of the “unity of existence” in the Arab-Islamic parts of the Ottoman Empire. A number of orders which were, on the whole, positively inclined towards the idea, such as the Indian Shaṭṭārī and Naqshbandī orders and the Turkish Khalwatī order, had become increasingly influential in Arabic-speaking

47 Khānī, *al-Taḥqīq*, fol. 107r [Yahuda 3355]; fol. 6v [Yahuda 4598].

48 Muṣṭafā al-Bakrī, *al-Suyūf al-ḥidād fī a’nāq ahl al-zandaqa wa’l-ilḥād*, ed. A. F. Mazyadī (Cairo: Dār al-Āfāq al-‘Arabīyah, 2007). For some reason, the title of the work, clearly indicated by the author in the preface, has been altered in the printed edition to *al-Suyūf al-ḥidād fī a’māq* . . . For the author, see F. de Jong, “Muṣṭafā Kamāl al-Dīn al-Bakrī (1688–1749): revival and reform of the Khalwatiyya tradition?”, in N. Levtzion and J. Völl (eds), *Eighteenth-Century Renewal and Revival in Islam* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 117–32.

49 *Ibid.*, 25–6.

50 See his influential Sufi handbook *al-Sayr wa’l-sulūk ilā malik al-mulūk*, ed. I. Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 2002), 102.

circles in the course of the seventeenth century.⁵¹ Bakrī was himself a close student of one of the most prominent expounders and defenders of monism of his time, the Damascene scholar and mystic ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulūsī (d. 1731).

In the introduction to his treatise, Bakrī wrote that it had been written to counter what he saw as the wide diffusion of antinomian ideas in Damascus in his time, and to prevent individuals with such ideas from seeking affiliation to his Khalwatī sub-order or from corrupting the beliefs of its members.⁵² Bakrī wrote that one of those whose writings were invoked by these heretical groups was Ibn ‘Arabī, “the most dazzling light and the Greatest Master”.⁵³ Bakrī went well beyond the grudging concession of the saintly character of Ibn ‘Arabī made by Fāriskūrī, and considered himself a follower of the Andalusian mystic. Unlike both Fāriskūrī and Sha‘rānī, he did not resort to crude notions of heretical interpolations in the works of Ibn ‘Arabī. Being very well versed in these works – and a student of al-Nābulūsī who was perhaps the foremost commentator on Ibn ‘Arabī of his time – he instead urged that particular passages are liable to be misunderstood when taken out of context, and that their proper meaning only becomes clear when juxtaposed to other passages, such as Ibn ‘Arabī’s repeated insistence on the necessity of following the letter of the religious law. Bakrī accordingly cited copiously from the works of Ibn ‘Arabī in refutation of the views of the heretical groups.

One of the views that Bakrī condemned was that the religious law is the appearance that spiritual truth takes for the sake of commoners, but that for the accomplished mystic:

there is no meaning to prayer except being connected with God, and no meaning to fasting except that of abstaining from seeing what is other than God, and no meaning to pilgrimage except that of turning one’s intent to God, and no meaning to ascending Mt Arafāt [during the pilgrimage] except ascending the mountain of gnosis.⁵⁴

Bakrī also condemned the belief – which he attributed to these heretics – that their spiritual rank was such that the Devil no longer had any means of leading them astray.

I heard one of them say: “We do not know the Devil (*Iblīs*) and there is only God the Exalted”. To him the following should be said: Do you mean that the Devil has ceased to exist, or that he exists but you cannot

51 See D. Le Gall, *A Culture of Sufism: Naqshbandīs in the Ottoman World, 1450–1700* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005); and my “Opening the gate of verification: the forgotten Arabic-Islamic florescence of the seventeenth century”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, 2006, 263–81.

52 Bakrī, *al-Suyūf al-ḥidāḍ*, 26.

53 Bakrī, *al-Suyūf al-ḥidāḍ*, 44.

54 *Ibid.*, 48. The formulation of the position is exploiting the similarity between the Arabic words for “prayer” (*ṣalāt*) and “connection” (*sila*), and the similarity between the name ‘Arafāt and the verb “to know” (*‘arafa*).

see him because of your own limitations? He cannot say the former, for in that case he repudiates the Great Quran.⁵⁵

Bakrī added that the hubristic idea that the Devil no longer posed a threat led these heretics to let down their guard and become infatuated with beardless teen-aged youths, whose beauty they claimed was the beauty of God.

Since they have claimed that they are secure from the Devil and only see God, he [the Devil] has afflicted them – behind their backs – with infatuation . . . and suggested to them gazing at handsome faces which leads to sin and transgression. And they argue that such gazing is licit and appeal to the saying of one of the Sufi Gnostics in colloquial verse: “All beauty is the beauty of God, there is no doubt”.⁵⁶

This is a standard accusation that had been raised for centuries. As mentioned above, the charge of improprieties with beardless teenage novices was repeatedly made against certain Sufis – such as the Egyptian Muṭāwi‘a – by religious scholars and often also by more ascetic and law-abiding Sufis. The underlying idea with which such groups were associated was that human beauty is the most perfect manifestation of divine beauty, and that the Platonic contemplation of this beauty is a means of directly witnessing the overwhelming beauty of God.⁵⁷

The mistake of denying the reality of the Devil was, Bakrī added, symptomatic of the basic error of these heretics. They had not learnt, as his teacher Nābulusī had written, “to see with both eyes”: they had not learnt that the denial of the substantiality of what is other than God is only part of the truth, and should be conjoined to the simultaneous affirmation of creation and its importance. Denying creation was the mistake of heretical mystics, while not realizing the insubstantiality of the phenomenal world and its character as divine epiphany was the mistake of exoteric, anti-mystical scholars.⁵⁸

Like Fāriskūrī, Bakrī also accused the heretics of presuming to interpret the Islamic scriptural texts (the Quran and the canonical sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad) without having the requisite scholarly background for doing so, “for the explication of the Book and the Prophetic Tradition requires [mastery of] several sciences, as well as divine favor”.⁵⁹

Towards the end of the tract, Bakrī reiterated the view that the denial of creation is unbelief (*kufr*) and that venerable mystics who expressed pantheist ideas were in a state of intoxication and would not have affirmed such ideas in a sober

55 *Ibid.*, 91.

56 *Ibid.*, 105.

57 A classic study of this theme that focuses on the earlier Persian tradition is H. Ritter, *Das Meer der Seele: Mensch, Welt, und Gott in den Geschichten des Fariddudin ‘Attar* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 434–503, translated into English as *Ocean of the Soul: Men, World and God in the Stories of Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār*, trans. J. O’Kane, ed. B. Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 448–519. A shorter discussion that focuses on the later Arabic tradition is included in my *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36–9, 95–110.

58 Bakrī, *al-Suyūf al-ḥidāid*, 100.

59 *Ibid.*, 80.

state. The person who insists on denying creation and who attributes his heretical views to these mystics commits a heinous error on both counts. “The one who kills him and restrains him and punishes him does a meritorious deed”.⁶⁰

Bakrī’s treatise clearly indicates the existence of pantheist and antinomian groups in Damascus during his lifetime. It is unlikely that this was a new phenomenon, for we have evidence of antinomian Sufis in the city from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁶¹ This means that such groups probably existed in Damascus at the time of the trial and execution of Yaḥyā al-Karakī. This situation may at first sight seem odd, but is presumably also related to the non-existence of anything like the Inquisition in early-modern Syria and Egypt. People who in word or deed openly and loudly challenged the prevalent scholarly interpretation of Islam could be, and sometimes were, tried and executed. Yet, there appears to have been no systematic attempt to search for such heretical groups, or to instigate investigations of the beliefs of individuals and groups who maintained a low profile. This was in line with a deep-rooted ethos amongst the scholarly class, well-attested in matters relating to the enforcement of morality, according to which vice should be repressed when it appears in a flagrant manner, but should not be actively sought out.⁶² Again, the contrast with the “disciplinary” power so memorably discussed by Foucault is striking.

III

As sources for heretical ideas and practices, the tracts of Fāriskūrī, Khānī, and Bakrī leave much to be desired. The vehemence with which they condemned heretical ideas seems to have precluded lengthy and dispassionate exposition. Nevertheless, they provide evidence for the existence of Sufi groups in the early-modern Arab-Islamic Middle East that were deemed heretical by contemporary Islamic religious scholars, and the basic contours of their world view can be inferred from their writings. The remarkable work *Hazz al-quḥūf fī sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf* (The Nodding of Heads in Commenting on the Ode of Abī Shādūf) by the Egyptian scholar Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī (*fl.* 1664–87) offers a lively but satirical portrait of some of these groups in seventeenth-century Egypt.⁶³ Shirbīnī’s work is an extended satire on the coarseness of Egyptian rural life, in the course of which the author gives rare glimpses of the elusive world of the pre-modern Islamic village, far removed from the urban, literary culture to which Islamic authors normally belonged. The author devoted a section of his work to the rural dervishes, whom he saw as overwhelmingly ignorant and inclined to heretical views and antinomian and sexually licentious behaviour. The topic of several of Shirbīnī’s anecdotes was the rural dervishes’ utter ignorance of the basic tenets of Islamic law: one of them could not read the opening verse of the Quran

60 *Ibid.*, 299.

61 A. Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period, 1200–1550* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 52–6.

62 See M. Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 479–82.

63 Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī, *Hazz al-quḥūf fī sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf*, ed. H. Davies (Leuven: Peeters, 2005).

properly,⁶⁴ another was ignorant of the conditions of ritual purity,⁶⁵ and yet another prayed to the famous thirteenth-century Egyptian saint Aḥmad al-Badawī, instead of to God.⁶⁶ The overall picture that emerges from Shirbīnī's satirical account is of a form of religiosity far removed from that of the religious scholars. The Islamic scriptural texts appear to have played a marginal role in the religious life of these rural groups, which seems instead to have been centred on the charismatic spiritual master and saint, on miracles (*karāmāt*), ecstatic states and speaking in tongues (*tarjama bi'l-lisān*), and on activities such as visiting shrines and participating in saints' festivals and sessions of mystical music and dance. These groups were nominally Muslim, and did not normally challenge outright the sanctity of the sacred texts. However, their critics repeatedly denounced them for in effect ignoring these texts in favour of the maxims and ecstatic poetry of the Sufis, and for rejecting the authority of the class of religious scholars whose legitimacy was based on the ability to interpret and expound the scriptural texts and the religious law. According to Bakrī, the heretical groups had no "proof" (*dalīl*) for what they claimed, and merely engaged in "babble" (*shaqshaqat al-lisān*). It is clear that Bakrī was not incensed by a lack of rational argument on the side of the "heretics", but by what he saw as their disregard for proof-texts from scripture (i.e. the Quran and the canonical sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad). He cited an earlier scholar who had said in verse:

If you say: "God has said, the Prophet has said", they sneer at you with murderous disapproval

And say: My heart relates to me, from its secret core, from the secret core of my secret core, from the purity of my states;

From my spiritual level, from my thought, from my spiritual retreat, from my transfiguration, from my witness, from my state;

From the serenity of my time, from the truth of my wisdom, from the essence of my essence, from the attributes of my deeds; [...]⁶⁷

Shirbīnī also wrote in the opening passages of the section in his work dealing with rural dervishes:

As for their fakirs, they have no path except the nodding of heads and the clapping of hands and jumping and shouting and the rosary and the water-jar ... and ignoring the teaching of the basic conditions of obedience to God ... and chattering with their tongues and saying: The saint so-and-so

64 *Ibid.*, 177.

65 *Ibid.*, 180–1.

66 *Ibid.*, 195.

67 Bakrī, *al-Suyūf al-murhafa*, 33–4. The lines are from a poem by Ibn Ghānim al-Maqdisī (d. 1279) included in his *Ḥall al-rumūz wa fath al-kunūz*. See the undated edition of the work printed in Tanta, Egypt by al-Maṭba'a al-Yūsufiyya (which falsely attributes the work to Ibn 'Abd al-Salām (d. 1262)), 91. On Ibn Ghānim and his works, see the editor's introduction to Ibn Ghānim al-Maqdisī, *Dīwān*, ed. M. 'Abd al-Qādir (Publications de l'IFEAD, 190. Damascus: al-Ma'had al-Faransī lil-Dirāsāt al-'Arabīyah bi-Dimashq, 1993), esp. 44–5.

has related. They do not defer to the people of excellence and talk only as the ignorant do. They do not know any issue in religion, and have no certitude in their path. They commit the most heinous sins, and their status is that of brutes.⁶⁸

This charisma- and saint-oriented Islam seems sometimes – to judge from Shirbīnī’s account – to have been based on sheer ignorance of an alternative. He related a number of instances in which the dervishes were amenable to being “corrected” once scholars – the author or some of his acquaintances – pointed out the corrupt nature of their beliefs and practices. One presumes that there were also dervishes who respected the basics of Islamic law but rejected the authority of the religious scholars on matters that can be described as non-basic: for example, in the juridical responses (*fatāwā*) against the Muṭāwī‘a order cited by Muḥammad al-Ghamrī in the early fifteenth century, the order is not charged with, for example, not praying or fasting. Rather, they are accused of insisting that their mixing freely with women and beardless youths, and allowing them to participate in mystical sessions of music and dance, is permissible, and that dancing, singing and the accompanying clapping of hands in mosques is also permissible. The jurists’ response was that anyone who insists that something is licit when the religious scholars agree that it is not licit is thereby an unbeliever.⁶⁹ This was of course a serious charge, but the Muṭāwī‘a order can hardly on that account alone be described as antinomian. Shirbīnī, however, described dervish groups that apparently rejected the authority of Islamic law in a more radical manner in his work. One such group he called the “Khawāmis”, a term that does not seem to be attested elsewhere. He described them as not distinguishing between the religiously prohibited (*ḥarām*) and the religiously licit (*ḥalāl*), and as freely indulging in fornication and the drinking of wine and ignoring the prescribed fast during the month of Ramadan:

An upright person has related that he saw a group of them eating during Ramadan without a legally acceptable excuse. He asked them about this and they said: “We are a people no longer bound by religious-legal regulations for we are in the station of witnessing God the Exalted and are in the state of self-annihilation in God, and if a person’s self is annihilated religious duties cease to apply to him”.⁷⁰

Another story had a Sufi acquaintance of the author host members of this group in his lodge, only to throw them out when they expressed their surprise at his praying even though “you have reached a stage of freedom from religious obligations (*wa-anta qad saqata ‘anka al-taklīf*)”.⁷¹

The sexual improprieties of the Khawāmis was the topic of several of Shirbīnī’s anecdotes, some of which clearly sacrifice any concern with

68 Shirbīnī, *Hazz al-quḥūf*, 164.

69 Muḥammad al-Ghamrī, *al-Ḥukm al-maḍbūt fi taḥrīm fi’l qawm Lūt* (Cairo: Dār al-Ṣaḥābah lil-Turāth, 1988), 111–14.

70 Shirbīnī, *Hazz al-quḥūf*, 165.

71 *Ibid.*, 180.

verisimilitude to the aim of satire: for example, we are told of these groups holding music sessions during which the fakirs enter a trance and are considered “dead” and to have entered “paradise” and hence offered either handsome youths or beautiful women, as the Quran promises paradisiacal youths and beautiful *houris* to male believers in the Hereafter. Those who divulge these secret rites are killed and sometimes cooked and eaten.⁷² We are told of a woman of this group who was seen fornicating during Ramadan and said that it was merely her vagina that had broken the fast.⁷³ We are told two anecdotes of dervishes who sodomize teenage boys with the pretence of wishing to transmit their supernatural powers by means of “the miraculous drop” or “the water of life”.⁷⁴ We are even told a story of a son who discovers that his father – a reputed saint – was actually worshipping a genie in the cellar of his house and that the genie in return gave the father extrasensory information that could be used to impress others and buttress the father’s saintly reputation.⁷⁵ Despite the author’s lack of concern with verisimilitude, it would nevertheless be too hasty to dismiss his work as having no connection to actual beliefs and practices. The stories of dervishes sodomizing boys as a means of transmitting miraculous abilities, though doubtless embellished for good effect, may for example have had some basis in views that circulated among some dervish groups. The Finnish anthropologist Edward Westermarck noted a widespread belief in early twentieth-century Morocco that the blessings (*baraka*) of a saint could be transferred though homo- or heterosexual intercourse.⁷⁶ E.W. Lane, in his magisterial description of Egypt in the 1830s, also noted, while speaking of the “holy fools” that were widely venerated in the pre-modern Islamic world, that “the women, instead of avoiding them, sometimes suffer these wretches to take any liberty with them in the public street; and, by the lower orders, are not considered disgraced by such actions”.⁷⁷

Other anecdotes related by Shirbīnī about the Khawāmis are of particular interest since they purport to be based on first-hand experience. For instance, he once overheard “a man from this group” discuss his views with “one of the notable people”. The dervish supposedly told the man that there is no need to pray and fast since “you are Him and He is you, thus you are God and you are the Provider and the Living One and the Throne and the Chair and the Tablet and the Pen”. He supplemented this view by citing lines from the poetry of Ibn ‘Arabī and ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī. Furthermore, the dervish told the man, the creation of humans is from earth and there is nothing illicit in earth touching earth. Hence, there is nothing prohibited in fornication or sodomy, for it is merely the rubbing of physical bodies and the mixing of dust. Shirbīnī related that at this point he took a knife and approached the dervish with the intent

72 *Ibid.*, 167–8.

73 *Ibid.*, 166.

74 *Ibid.*, 183–5, 196–8.

75 *Ibid.*, 173–4.

76 E. Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 1: 108.

77 E. W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: J. Murray, 1860), 228. Leo Africanus reported an incident of this nature in sixteenth-century Egypt, see M. Dols, *Majnūn: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 413–14.

of killing him for apostasy, and the dervish fled from the scene. Shīrbīnī explained to the dervish's interlocutor that the statements amounted to unbelief and that the dervish could therefore be killed with impunity. He then expounded to the man the correct view on these matters, thus saving him from the influence of the heretic. Shīrbīnī added that he had heard others relate of the very same dervish that he had led many people astray, and that he – when he saw a bull or cow – would exclaim, “You are God! You are He!” and would recite:

My beloved pervades existence,
And appears in White and Black,
And in Christians and Jews,
And in dogs and cats.

The lines were obviously by some respected mystical poet, for Shīrbīnī added that the heretic did not know the meaning of these words, nor the intentions behind them. Shīrbīnī went on to relate gleefully that the dervish in question died poor and blind and was buried in a ground that was later discovered to be an old cesspit. Like the Damascene prosecutors of Yaḥyā al-Karakī, Shīrbīnī thought that burial “in shit” was the appropriate end for heretics.⁷⁸

Shīrbīnī also related a number of anecdotes featuring what he described as “clean-shaven dervishes”. He seems to have considered this group to be distinct from the “Khawāmis”, for at one point he noted that an adolescent boy who becomes a dervish is liable to be sexually exploited “by some of the fakirs or the sect of heretics who shave their beards or the sect of the Khawāmis”.⁷⁹ He related, for example, that he had once hosted a dervish generously, and that the dervish, wishing to return the favours, invited him to a private home. Shīrbīnī soon discovered that the meeting featured a number of clean-shaven dervishes and a woman. The woman sat on the laps of the men in turn, and responded passionately to their kissing and fondling. When they noticed Shīrbīnī's discomfört, they became worried that he was not “on their path” (*laysa ʿala madhhabinā*) and threatened to kill him unless he fornicated with the woman in front of them. The of course virtuous Shīrbīnī managed to escape, and just outside the house had the fortune of running into a police lieutenant (*muqaddam al-darak*) who knew him well and who duly arrested the entire gang. Shīrbīnī added that the woman was later set free since it transpired that she was the wife of a notable man.⁸⁰ Shīrbīnī's testimony should be approached with caution, especially in light of the lack of concern with accuracy that he so clearly exhibits elsewhere in the work. However, his story receives some support from the travel account of James Silk Buckingham in the early nineteenth century. Buckingham's guide

78 Shīrbīnī, *Hazz al-quḥūf*, 168–71. Note that the line of verse by Jīlī is misattributed to “al-Jabullī” in the edited text (p. 169). The line in question is from the well-known *ʿAyniyya* of Jīlī; see Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 143 (line 9).

79 *Ibid.*, 198. The edited text has: *jamāʿatun min al-fuqarāʾ aw min ṭāʾifāt al-mulḥidīn al-muḥallaqīn al-dhuqūn aw al-ṭāʾifa al-khawāmis* [sic]. The last words are grammatically corrupt, and there are several variants in the extant printings and manuscripts, some of which do not mention the “Khawāmis”.

80 *Ibid.*, 171–3.

“Ismael”, an Afghan he met in Baghdad, was a dervish whom Buckingham described as having abandoned belief in any particular religion, and combined hedonism with an itinerant lifestyle as a dervish. He and his associates in Baghdad had, Buckingham wrote, formed a secret society consisting of freethinking Christians, Shiis and Sunnis, who were “in agreement in philosophy” (*muttafiqūn bi’l-falsafa*) and devoted themselves to pleasure. They had, or so “Ismael” claimed, the financial means to purchase the sexual services of daughters and wives of notables in the city. Buckingham wrote:

During the late Ramadan, nearly a thousand pounds sterling was expended, among this knot of philosophers, for women only; by which, however, they procured those of the first distinction in the place, both wives and daughters of those high in office and in wealth. That such things are practicable and practised, is beyond a doubt.⁸¹

Despite Buckingham’s assurances, the truth of such reports is certainly not beyond doubt, but it also cannot be excluded *a priori* that such circles and activities existed in the pre-modern Middle East.

Shirbīnī related that he heard another clean-shaven dervish say that there is no resurrection and afterlife, and that hell and heaven are within us, and that the world does not end. The dervish cited in support of his view a short poem by the renowned sceptical poet Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d. 1057). He also expressed belief in the transmigration of souls – one of the beliefs attributed to Yaḥyā al-Karakī in Damascus.⁸² Shirbīnī also related that a group of dervishes once challenged one of his acquaintances about the Quran and denied that it is the Speech of God, insisting that it instead contained what the Christian monk Baḥīra had taught Muḥammad.⁸³ Shirbīnī did not explicitly state what kind of dervishes these were, but the anecdote immediately followed that of the clean-shaven dervish who denied the afterlife.

Shaving the beard is a familiar characteristic of antinomian dervish groups attested in earlier centuries, such as the Qalandariyya, a name that does not appear in Shirbīnī’s work.⁸⁴ Judging from Shirbīnī’s anecdotes, the “clean-shaven dervishes” may have been closer to the sceptical “free-thinking” associated with earlier figures like Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī than to the monistic mysticism of Ibn ‘Arabī and the charisma- and ecstasy-centred outlook of the Khawāmis.⁸⁵ However, this is a preliminary impression that will need to be substantiated by future research. Shirbīnī’s work certainly raises a number of issues that cannot be adequately addressed given the present state of scholarship. It is

81 J. S. Buckingham, *Travels in Assyria, Media, and Persia* (London: H. Colburn, 1829), 84.

82 Shirbīnī, *Hazz al-quḥūf*, 193–4.

83 *Ibid.*, 194.

84 See Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends*, which deals with the Qalandariyya and related groups from the thirteenth century to the early sixteenth. On their shaving the beard, see p. 19.

85 For a study of non-mystical religious scepticism in earlier periods of Islamic history, see S. Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rawāndī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and Their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

intriguing, for example, that in a source that – unusually – gives us some insight into rural dervish movements in seventeenth-century Egypt, we do not encounter any of the orders well known to modern scholarship on Sufi orders, nor do we encounter familiar terms for antinomian groups such as “Qalandariyya” and “Malāmātiyya”. There are not even any references to the “Muṭāwī‘a”, perhaps because the author was not writing in Upper Egypt or in the Sharqiyya province where that order was active. Instead, we encounter unfamiliar designations such as the “Khawāmis” and vaguely familiar terms such as the “clean-shaven dervishes”, both terms with which the author expected his readers to be familiar. The similarities and differences between these groups are not made explicit in Shirbīnī’s work, and their relationship to orders and movements that are more familiar to modern scholarship is not clear.

IV

Some of the ideas and practices described by Fāriskūrī, Bakrī and Shirbīnī were unambiguous and conscious rejections of Islamic law and dominant interpretations of Islamic doctrine. Yet, the boundaries of heresy were for a number of reasons not always so clear-cut. This was partially due to disagreements internal to the class of religious scholars. The status of Ibn ‘Arabī, for example, was – and still is – a heatedly debated topic amongst religious scholars. It has already been mentioned above that Fāriskūrī seems to have considered ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī to be a “heretical Sufi-aster”, a view that was far from being standard amongst his scholarly contemporaries. Even Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī – one of the Damascene prosecutors of Yaḥyā al-Karakī – included a sympathetic entry on Sha‘rānī in his biographical dictionary of Muslim notables who died in the tenth century of the Islamic calendar (1495–1592 CE).⁸⁶

Another factor that tends to blur the boundaries of heresy is that the mainstream or majority opinion among Islamic scholars on particular issues was liable to change over time. By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, prominent members of the scholarly establishment were endorsing views that Fāriskūrī had condemned as heretical in the late sixteenth century. For example, ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731) – one of the most prominent scholars of Damascus in his lifetime – explicitly defended the idea of the “unity of existence” and also endorsed Ibn ‘Arabī’s views on the fate of unbelievers in the hereafter.⁸⁷ Al-Bakrī – who counted some of the most prominent Egyptian scholars of the eighteenth century as his disciples – also considered himself a follower of Ibn ‘Arabī and would almost certainly have dissented from Fāriskūrī’s view that sections of the work *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* were pure heresy that should therefore not be attributed to Ibn ‘Arabī.

An additional factor that complicates the simple juxtaposition of “orthodox” and “heretical” Islam is the well-attested fact that scholars – particularly those of

86 Ghazzī, *al-Kawākib al-sā‘ira*, 3: 176–7.

87 See ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, *al-Wujūd al-ḥaqq*, ed. B. ‘Alā’ al-Dīn (Publications de l’IFEAD, 153. Damascus: Ma‘had al-‘Ilmī al-Faransī lil-Dirāsāt al-‘Arabīyah, 1995); M. Winter, “A polemical treatise by ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī against a Turkish scholar on the religious status of the *Dhimmīs*”, *Arabica* 35, 1988, 92–103.

a mystical bent – would sometimes publicly condemn views that they themselves would express in more esoteric writings. A case in point is Mustafa al-Bakrī's condemnation of heretical Sufi groups for admiring and loving handsome beardless youths as manifestations of divine beauty. Bakrī mentioned that they would invoke the saying that “all beauty is the beauty of God, there is no doubt”, but did not mention that the words were those of Ayyūb al-ʿAdawī (d. 1660), a prominent Damascene mystic of the same Khalwatī order as Bakrī. Ayyūb was in his day well known for his fondness for handsome beardless youths, an inclination that is mentioned even in sympathetic accounts by his contemporaries.⁸⁸ Bakrī could also hardly have failed to know that his teacher ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī had vigorously defended the mystical adoration of handsome male youths both in poetry and in prose. He himself had described without any trace of disapproval Nābulusī's passionate love for Muḥammad al-Dikdikjī (d. 1719), a student of Nābulusī and later one of the teachers of Bakrī.⁸⁹ It would seem that Bakrī – like his mentor Nābulusī – considered this particular aspect of mystical love to be permissible and even praiseworthy, but not something that should be divulged to all and sundry.

Yet other factors that blurred the boundaries of heresy were the notions of “ecstatic utterances” (*shaṭaḥāt*) and “holy fools” (*majādhīb*). The hermeneutic principle that the poetry and ecstatic utterances of venerable mystics of the past should not be taken at face-value seems to amount to the view that a saint or venerable mystic could at times make statements that would be heretical if taken literally. It was also a well-established juridical principle that adults who were not fully sane were not subject to religious stipulations. Many such “fools” were venerated as living saints in the pre-modern Islamic world, by both commoners and scholars, despite the fact that they often behaved in a manner that flouted religious law.⁹⁰ Both of these concepts were brought into play in the case of Yaḥyā al-Karakī in Damascus in 1610. His initial placement in a hospital suggests that it was not a foregone conclusion that he would be prosecuted as a heretic rather than venerated as a holy fool. However, the fact that he had written a number of works seems to have tipped the scales in favour of prosecution. The accused tried to defend himself by saying that his writings had been composed in a state of ecstasy, and his supporters in the city reportedly held that his utterances could and should be given a charitable and non-literal interpretation. His prosecutors almost certainly recognized the “charitable, non-literal interpretation” of “ecstatic utterances” as an interpretive strategy that was legitimate in principle. However, they refused to apply it to the case at hand. Unless spectacular new evidence comes to light, we will not know for certain why they refused. Presumably, exoteric scholars were prepared to condone the ecstatic utterances of long-dead mystics whose stature tended to be enhanced by the very passage of time. It was another thing entirely when an outsider arrived in their city, openly engaged in daring theosophical speculations and challenged their position as the repositories of religious knowledge and authority.

88 See my *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800*, 99–100.

89 *Ibid.*, 100–4.

90 See Dols, *Majnūn*, 366–422; Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Egypte et en Syrie*, 309–33; Berger, *Gesellschaft und Individuum*, 306–20.