# Sufi Cosmology

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# Contents

CHAPTER 12

# The Cosmo-Eschatology of Saints and *Mahdī*s

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## 1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume, Sufi thought on the structure of the cosmos is deeply intertwined with ideas about death, the end of the world, and the afterlife, giving rise to what can be termed a Sufi cosmo-eschatology. Drawing on various aspects of the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth*, including the complex body of apocalyptic logia that emerged from the internecine conflicts of the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsid periods (*malāḥim wa-fitan*, as well as some eschatological *akhbār* of the Shīʿī Imams), Sufi thinkers dwelt frequently on the secrets of the Unseen world(s) (*al-ghayb*) said to underlie the merely apparent reality of this one, urging aspirants on the path to die to this world so as to gain the other. While the "inward turn" of early Sufism—a newfound focus on introspection and personal salvation (Karamustafa, 2, 17, 21)—helped domesticate the theological and political fervor of early Islamic apocalypticism, Sufi thinkers nonetheless retained claims to types of quasi-prophetic/visionary spiritual authority that frequently discomfited and sometimes outraged religious specialists of other stripes, as is most evident in controversies around Sufi notions of sainthood (*wilāya*). Sufi claims of spiritual authority sometimes spilled over into implicit or explicit assertions of divinely granted political authority as well, most dramatically in claims of *mahdī*-ship; that is, of a messianic role of restoring justice to the earth prior to its final destruction.

The two main parts of this chapter explore cosmo-eschatological elements of Sufi sainthood and *mahdī*-ship with a primary emphasis on their this-worldly manifestations. The first addresses the "cult of saints" centered around the tomb-shrines of deceased masters and ways that, with the rise and spread of the Sufi orders from the late medieval period onward, Sufi shrine culture reordered the space-time of daily life across much of the Muslim world in accordance with the deathless powers of the saints. The second addresses various aspects of Sufi *mahdī*-ship, including the apparent emergence of such claims in the sixth/twelfth-century Islamic West, the ever influential Ibn al-ʿArabī's (d. 638/1240) ideas on the topic, Ibn Khaldūn's (d. 808/1406) critique of Sufi mahdism, and various Sufi *mahdī*s from across the early modern, colonial, and postcolonial Muslim world.

## 2      Saint Veneration

Visitation to the tombs of the honored dead is attested from early in the history of Islam, and can be seen as an extension of common practices of visiting the graves of deceased family members to pray for and converse with the dead. It is difficult to discern a specific connection between such practices and early Sufism, though Sufi writers are mostly absent from the ranks of religious authorities who condemned them as being among the pagan impieties of the rabble. No less an authority than Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) seems to have been among the first Sufi authors to actively defend visiting and praying at the tombs of saints (Meri, Ziyāra). By the end of the late medieval period, visiting the tombs of saints to seek the benefits of their *baraka*—their sacred power—and their intercession with God in matters large and small, as well as the erection of shrines for the saints and the establishment of annual festivals in their honor, were integrally associated with Sufism and with the Sufi orders that by then were proliferating across the Muslim-ruled world. Indeed, the shrine culture that grew up around the saints came to be one of the most widespread expressions of Muslim piety throughout most of the Muslim-majority world up into the early twentieth century, before withering in many places under the combined (and interconnected) onslaughts of colonial disapproval and condemnation by the forces of rising reformist/"fundamentalist" (*salafī*) movements. These practices nonetheless remain a vital element of Muslim life in many parts of the globe (on various elements of Sufi shrine culture, see Blair; Bowen; Ewing and Corbett; Gilmartin; Hallenberg; Hodgson, 2:217–18; Meri, *Cult*, 12–58, 120–213; Smith and Ernst, xi–xxviii).

The tomb of a Sufi saint was, as Scott Kugle has written, "a permeable boundary between this world and the next," a place imbued with special potency due to the *baraka* attributed to its inhabitant (Kugle, 46). The close relationship in Sufi thought between the microcosmic body/structure of the human being and that of the macrocosm has been discussed in Chapter 1 with regard to Adam—concepts that, as we have seen, are rife with eschatological and apocalyptic implications. As Kugle notes, this relationship is seen as well in Qurʾānic references to mountains as the *awtād*, "pegs," that hold the world in place (Q 78:7), and the common use of the same term to denote key members of the hierarchy of saints, who, as discussed in Chapter 1, are seen to perform a similar function of stabilizing the world's existence as an abode for humanity through the occasional exercise of their miraculous gifts, beneficent interruptions of the natural order. Just as the mountains are the bones of the earth, Kugle ruminates, so the bones of the saints held in place the social geography

of Muslim life (Kugle, 44–6). The world of the living came to be structured around the remains and remembering of dead saints.

Though the architecture of Sufi tomb-shrines varies in significant ways across different parts of the Islamic world, they were—and in many places still are—one of the most recognizable and consistent elements of the human landscape with regard to their social and religious functions. The shrine serves as a social gathering place, often being one of the few major permanent structures in a given settlement, and helps anchor the local economy due to the travel and commerce that accompanies *ziyāra* (visitation) practices and annual festivals. For many Muslims, the shrine is the most accessible point of contact with the divine, a "privileged interruption of the flat tyranny of distance" from the divine imposed by formal theology (Peter Brown, quoted in Kugle, 46). This is particularly the case for women, who are often excluded from the mosque and certainly from leadership roles there, but who can find opportunities to participate in and lead public religious activities at many shrines (Chaudhry; Mayeur-Jaouen, passim; Pemberton). The shrine is a site for organized, communal Sufi activity (*dhikr, samāʿ,* etc.), but also for private retreat. In the face of personal and family hardships, it is a conduit for appeals to God through the intercessory powers of the saint. Such appeals might be delivered through invocatory prayer (*duʿāʾ*), written requests slipped into the crevices of shrine walls, or practices such as dream incubation, in which the supplicant spends the night at the tomb in hopes of dreaming of the saint, the Prophet, or some other emissary of the Unseen (Katz, 190).

Shrines are vital to the corporate life of the Sufi orders, the living leaders of a given group drawing much of their authority from their initiatic and/or blood-relationship to the entombed. As Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen documents, the maintenance of shrines and the mounting of festivals associated with them could indeed be the foremost raison d'être of a Sufi order, as with the various branches of the Aḥmadiyya Order in Egypt whose activities have long been centered around preparations for the annual cycle of *mawlid*s for Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī (d. 674/1276), the pillar of Egyptian Sufism, and the large cohort of local saints associated with him (Mayeur-Jaouen, 61–108).

### 2.1     *The* Mawlid *and* ʿUrs *and the Remaking of Time and Space*
The tradition of celebrating a saint's *mawlid* (*mūlid, milād*) emerged in Egypt during the period of the Cairo sultanate (Mamlūk sultanate, 648/1250–922/1517). Celebrations of the birthday of the Prophet, *mawlid al-nabī*, had been popular since the Fāṭimid period, but the festivals devoted to saints—first and foremost the enigmatic Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī—lent a new sense to the term (Kaptein; Mayeur-Jaouen, 37–59). While the word *mawlid* is often translated as

"birthday," it can mean any sort of anniversary, and in the case of saints often marks the day of his or her death. It can nonetheless be considered a birthday celebration in that it celebrates the rebirth of the saints into the world of the Unseen, a transition to the *barzakh* considered to greatly strengthen their powers of intercession. Similarly, on the Indian subcontinent and environs, the festival held annually at a saint's *dargāh* (tomb-shrine) is called an *ʿurs*, a wedding. It too is celebrated on the anniversary of the saint's death, marking his or her joyful transition into a new stage of life through marriage with the divine. The generic term *mawsim*, a "fixed day," is also sometimes used to denote a saint's festival day, as in the famous *mawsim nabī Mūsā* held in Palestine. In Yemen, the word *ḥawl* (pronounced *ḥol*), a "period" or "season," is often used as well.

As it developed across the Muslim-majority world, shrine culture effected a remaking of space and time, one that explicitly bound the manifest world to that of the Unseen, with relations between worlds mediated by the saints and the Sufi orders that functioned to memorialize them. As Mayeur-Jaouen has demonstrated with regard to the Aḥmadiyya Order(s) in Egypt, the calendar of *mawlid*s for al-Badawī and other saints associated with him was a dominant organizing force in the social and economic life of Lower Egypt for centuries, driving the movements of massive numbers of people throughout the region—far greater numbers than the Hajj—and attracting at turns the approval and ire of political leaders and "orthodox" religious authorities. Little wonder, as the powers of the Unseen world were said to emanate from the shrines and festivals of the region, guaranteeing the fertility of crops and women and the maintenance of a just social order, even if some viewed the *mawlid*s themselves as a source of disorder and immorality due to their potent blending of ecstatic devotion and bacchanalia.

As networks and calendars of shrines and festivals grew to be highly complex, a genre of pilgrimage guides (*kutub al-ziyāra*) emerged beginning in the period of the Cairo sultanate, detailing itineraries of visits to shrines in Egypt, the Shām, and the Ḥijāz. Typically focused on a single city, region, or route, such guides offer a combination of practical advice and critical reflection, and aim at least as much at "armchair" pilgrims as itinerant ones. Sufi authors were active in the genre. Shams al-Dīn Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Zayyāt's (d. 815/1412) *al-Kawākib al-sayyāra fī tartīb al-ziyāra fī l-Qarāfatayn al-kubrā wa-l-ṣughrā* (*The Journeying Stars regarding the Organization of Visits to the Greater and Smaller Qarafa Cemeteries*) details tombs in the Qarāfa cemeteries, two of Cairo's largest "cities of the dead," along with advice on specific types of spiritual and earthly benefits to be gained from visiting them. In a combination of *ziyāra* guide and travelogue, the Damascene scholar and mystic ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī's (d. 1143/1731) *al-Ḥaḍra al-unsiyya fī l-riḥla al-qudsiyya*

(*The Intimate Presence regarding the Sacred Journey*) meticulously recounts
"a 44-day journey from Damascus to Jerusalem in which he visited numerous
shrines" (Meri, Ziyāra; cf. Taylor). The genre demonstrates that, for many, the
landscape of the Muslim-majority world was perceived through a topography
of the saintly dead, shrines acting as living points of connection between this
world and the next, pins holding the fabric of the world in place.

The Indian *'urs*—an often multi-day celebration of a dead saint with music,
prayer, sermons, feasts, and other entertainments—is a similarly powerful
institution, on the basis of which Sufi orders in the region have long consoli-
dated and expressed their social-religious authority. As Sarah Ansari notes in
her study of the role of Sufi *pīr*s in British colonial administration of the Sind,
the *dargāh* and *'urs* were, in Weberian terms, key instruments by which the
charismatic authority of a saint was institutionalized following his death, such
that his (spiritual and/or biological) descendants could benefit, "even when
they were not men of the same spiritual calibre as their forebears" (Ansari, 23).
Much like the *mawlids* of Egypt, the *'urs* functioned as a major site of inter-
tribal consultation and trade, with living *pīr*s acting as mediators in disputes
and negotiations—a natural extension of their roles a mediators of the pow-
ers of the Unseen world. This allowed the *pīr*s to play key roles in ideological
conflicts of the colonial period, whether by encouraging or disallowing the
expression of certain views at the *'urs* or negotiating directly with colonial
administrators on behalf of their regions (Ansari, 101–28 et passim). This is
typical of ways that the power of dead saints has continued to interact with
and shape temporal sociopolitical structures.

As Pnina Werbner discusses in her anthropological study of the life, death,
and cult of the modern Pakistani saint Ḥażrat-i Shāh Zinda-pīr, the establish-
ment of a recently deceased saint's *'urs* is a potentially treacherous period of
transition, as it marks "the moment at which the reality of sainthood is pub-
licly proven." While many of the saint's followers insisted to Werbner that they
did not mourn his passing, on the grounds that "[the *pīr* is] a hundred times
more powerful now that he is in the grave," and indeed "is still alive" in the
Unseen world, there was nonetheless significant concern among his family
members and other close associates that a poorly attended first *'urs* would sig-
nal the dissipation of the saint's authority—and thus their own—rather than
its consolidation. A well-attended *'urs* is a sign of the enduring power of the
deceased saint in this world and the next, a power that, so long as the festival is
successfully maintained, also accrues to his living descendants and others who
attend to the *dargāh* (Werbner).

As various studies of hagiographical practices have shown, the establish-
ment of a saint's reputation is a complex process that can differ widely between

cases. For example, in contrast to the process Werbner describes of transferring the authority of a famous living saint to his *khulafāʾ*, Ismail Alatas' study of the identification of saints in central Java focuses on the role of a living Sufi master, Habib Muhammad Luthfi (b. 1947), in using dreams to establish the identity of previously unknown saints interred in unmarked graves. As Alatas argues, this demonstrates the authority a living master can possess over historical matters, as well as over the spiritual and economic benefits that accompany the construction of shrines over newly identified saints' tombs (Alatas). This authority is, of course, grounded in the long-established ability of living saints to navigate the *barzakh* and the secrets it holds. The living saint thus acts as a mediator along numerous vectors: between past and present, the state and the people, and the living and the blessed dead.

## 3      Sufi *Mahdī*s

In discussing the pre-Islamic tradition of apocalyptic literature as it developed from ancient Near Eastern and Hellenistic texts to Jewish and Christian ones, John Collins argues that there are two fundamental types within the genre, which he terms "historical" and "cosmic/mystical." The first type, represented most famously by the Christian Book of Revelation, looms largest in the Western popular imagination and is "concerned with the rise and fall of nations and with the end of history and the world." The second, which Collins traces primarily to the Enoch corpus, deals with "the eschatology of the individual and the fate of the soul after death" (Collins, xiv). The two types are non-exclusive, most texts being a blend of both, but a given text will typically emphasize one over the other. Thematically speaking, the Sufi cosmo-eschatological materials discussed in Chapter 1 relate most strongly to Collins' "cosmic/mystical" category, being mostly concerned with the individual's path to salvation and the ability to discern or venture into the worlds of the Unseen and partake of the divine secrets concealed there. With the saints, tomb visitation practices, and the rise of the Sufi orders, however, we have seen that these individual eschatological concerns and spiritual accomplishments can translate into collective action and spatiotemporal transformations of the human world that wed it more closely to the Unseen in the perceptions of believers. What follows addresses more radical attempts by Sufis at remaking the world, ones in which "historical-apocalyptic" concerns come to the fore in the form of "mahdism"; that is, claims that a Sufi leader is *al-mahdī*, the messianic figure whom various early sources promise will arise in the world's terminal period to battle the forces of Antichrist (al-Dajjāl) and restore justice to the world.

Mahdist claims first emerged in early conflicts between pro-ʿAlid forces and the Umayyad caliphate. In Twelver Shīʿism such claims were eventually domesticated and codified under the doctrine that the Twelfth Imam will return as the *mahdī*, while in Ismāʿīlism the idea was revised many times over by various factions, each of which reconciled the concept to their own history and leadership (Daftary; Sachedina). Sunnī thinkers achieved less coherence regarding expectations of the *mahdī*, with some scholars even denying the validity of the *ḥadīth*s that had given rise to the idea; however, the approving speculation of various medieval Sunnī authorities on the topic testifies to its enduring salience (Madelung).

The ambiguity of Sunnī thought on the matter was an opportunity for a wide range of interpretations regarding what sort of person the *mahdī* would be, the precise conditions under which he would arise, and even whether his appearance was a one-time event or a periodic one; that is, something akin to the emergence of a *mujaddid* (renewer [of religion]) at the beginning of each century (Madelung; cf. Jansen; Landau-Tasseron). Without wishing to call into question the sincerity of those involved, it can be observed that the Sufi leaders discussed in this section took advantage of this fuzziness to craft heroic eschatological roles for themselves and their communities of followers. This trend marks, then, a partial reversal of that discussed in Chapter 1 and rehearsed at the outset of this chapter, where the emergence of Sufism played a role in domesticating the apocalyptic discourses that had sprouted from the military-political conflicts of the early centuries of Islam. Unsurprisingly, these later developments also correspond significantly with political upheavals. As with some other paradigm shifts in Sufism from the sixth/twelfth century onwards, Sufi mahdism seems to take shape first in the Islamic West, in the context of the intra-Muslim and interconfessional contests for power that roiled the region in that period. It then moved eastward, gaining considerable strength, as various cataclysms befell those regions in the seventh/thirteenth century and beyond, most notably the Mongol invasion (on the radically altered religio-political landscape of the post-Mongol East, see Melvin-Koushki).

### 3.1    *Mahdism in the Islamic West*

Modern scholarship has noted a particular penchant for "historical apocalypticism" among the religious communities of the medieval western Mediterranean arising from interconfessional and intersectarian contestation, and in Muslim communities this sometimes took the form of mahdism (Akasoy; Fierro; García-Arenal; Green-Mercado; Poole; Williams, 21–2). The paradigmatic episode of mahdism in the Islamic West is the emergence of the Ismāʿīlī Imam ʿAbdallāh al-Mahdī in Sijilmāsa in 296/909, after his emissary Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Shīʿī had routed the last of the Aghlabid emirs (Brett, 100). This successful

seizure of power and the challenge it posed to Sunnī hegemony helped set the stage for many of the unique cultural developments in the West, including the apparent influence of Ismāʿīlī thought among some dissident Sunnī intellectuals. While the immediate eschatological implications of the Imam al-Mahdī's appearance were attenuated all but completely as the Fāṭimid regime was institutionalized in Ifrīqiya, the enduring potency of the rhetoric of mahdism in the West is suggested by Ibn Tūmart's (d. 524/1130) successful harnessing of it in his campaign against the Almoravids roughly two centuries later. Esoteric pro-ʿAlid literature such as the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* had a deep impact on Islamic (and Jewish) mystical-philosophical thought in the West. In their studies on medieval Andalusian thought, Yousef Casewit and Michael Ebstein both suggest that, beyond the *Rasāʾil*, Ismāʿīlī texts on cosmology and related topics must also have been in circulation, given the deep engagement with such topics as emanationist ("Neoplatonic") cosmological models and quasi-cyclical schemes of sacred history in the works of Andalusian mystics such as Ibn Barrajān (d. 536/1141) and Ibn Qasī (d.546/1151), as well as those of Ibn al-ʿArabī and other Westerners of his generation. Elements of mahdism also appear, to varying degrees, in the works of all three.

There is a lengthy history in the Islamic West of mystical-philosophical thinkers with conflictual relationships to the state. The mystical philosopher Ibn Masarra (d. 319/931) pointedly withdrew from public life during the reign of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Nāṣir (r. 300/912–350/961), decamping to a hermitage in the mountains outside Córdoba, and in doing so helped set the stage for an Andalusian trend of renunciant intellectuals (*munqabiḍūn*) disdainful of urban life, the state, and court-oriented culture (Casewit, *Mystics*, 25–39). His ideas and followers were eventually condemned by the authorities due to their *bāṭinī* nature; that is, a tendency toward esoteric readings of scripture that some perceived as too reminiscent of Ismāʿīlī thought and a breeding ground for heresy. Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), for example, alleged that he had heard *masarrī*s of his day advocate that prophethood could be obtained through effort, a contravention of the doctrine that it could only be freely given by God and, in any case, had ceased with Muḥammad. He specifically accuses a *masarrī* by the name of Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbdallāh al-Ruʿaynī of this heresy, stating that al-Ruʿaynī's followers had proclaimed him "an Imam to whom spiritual and temporal obedience were compulsory for all Muslims" (García-Arenal, 131–3). Similar charges of claiming to be an Imam—with the implication that this constituted an extraordinary and unwarranted religious-political claim—would be leveled at later mystics in the region as well.

In the Almoravid period, members of the Mālikī *fuqahāʾ* who were embedded within the regime ordered all copies of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) Sufi-philic summa *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* destroyed (Casewit, *Mystics*, 50–6; Garden,

144–89). This apparently was an effort to stave off challenges to their authority from a rising movement of scholars engaging with a potent blend of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, Ashʿarī *kalām*, and Sufism, disciplines that were relatively new to the region and surging in popularity. The destruction of al-Ghazālī's books would loom large in the ideology of the Almoravids' successors, the Almohads, the state that grew out of an uprising instigated by the Berber religious scholar and self-proclaimed *mahdī* Ibn Tūmart (d. 524/1130). Indeed, later Almohad sources have it that a young Ibn Tūmart met al-Ghazālī while sojourning in the East.

When told by Ibn Tūmart at this alleged meeting that the Almoravids had ordered the *Iḥyāʾ* burned, al-Ghazālī is said to have called upon God to destroy the regime and, at Ibn Tūmart's fervent request, prayed that God would allow this to occur by Ibn Tūmart's hand. It is further claimed that Ibn Tūmart received the book *al-Jafr al-jāmiʿ* (*The Comprehensive Prognosticon*) from al-Ghazālī, a divinatory text foretelling the events of the end-times that is often attributed to the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) (Ibn Abī Zarʿ, 180; Gardiner, Jafr). Beyond al-Ghazālī's imprimatur and an aura of preternatural knowledge, this obviously fabricated datum also lent the Berber rebel and the regime founded on his memory a degree of ʿAlid credibility.

The burning of the *Iḥyāʾ* was the beginning of what has been termed an Almoravid "inquisition" against certain mystics and others perceived to threaten state authority (Faure). This occurred in a period in which the Almoravids were already battling the Almohad movement, and in which their northern territories were being lost to the Christian kingdoms of the rising *Reconquista*. Millenarian expectations were reaching a peak, particularly in al-Andalus, though also to the East in the wake of the Crusades. Ibn Barrajān, for example, "expected the coming of the Mahdī to take place within his century." In the same passage in which he famously—because accurately—predicted the reconquest of Jerusalem in 583/1187, he also "tacitly implies that the Mahdī would return" at roughly the same date (Casewit, *Mystics*, 122, 299–306; cf. Bellver). As recounted in later centuries, the central event of the Almoravid inquisition was the summoning to Marrakesh in 536/1141 of Ibn Barrajān, his fellow mystic Ibn al-ʿArīf, and the Granadan Ẓāhirī jurist Abū Bakr al-Mayūrqī. The details of precisely what transpired are lost save that Ibn Barrajān "was perceived as a threat and was interrogated by a jury owing to his leadership role"; that is, there were suspicions that he was gaining a potentially seditious popular following on the basis of his spiritual rank (Casewit, *Mystics*, 123).

According to Casewit's analysis, there is no evidence that Ibn Barrajān called for any sort of uprising against the Almoravids. He was, however, a frequent critic of the regime, and clearly asserted in his writings a principle of "spiritual

supremacy over temporal power" that derived in part from the spiritual adept's ability to discern God's "cycles of determination" (*dawā'ir al-taqdīr*), the cyclical motions of the divine command that are the true engine of history, whatever the pretensions of temporal rulers (Casewit, *Mystics*, 125–6; on "cycles of determination," 266–306). None of the three prisoners survived the encounter to return home, though the exact circumstances of their deaths are hazy. Almoravid authorities disposed of Ibn Barrajān's corpse on a refuse heap with orders that no funeral prayers should be performed for him, but this attempt at posthumous humiliation was met with outright disobedience. At the bidding of a revered Maghribī Sufi shaykh, Ibn Ḥirzihim (d. 559/1164), a large crowd assembled to honor and bury the martyred Andalusian mystic (Casewit, *Mystics*, 122–7). Although, according to Casewit, Ibn Barrajān did not consider himself a Sufi per se, later Sufi hagiographers cast him as a martyred saint, and his ideas took on new life in the works of Ibn al-ʿArabī, Aḥmad al-Būnī, and other Sufis of later generations whose ideas made deep and lasting impacts on Sufi thought.

The Andalusian mystic who in fact was an insurrectionary was Ibn Qasī (d. 546/1151). Roughly a year after the deaths of Ibn Barrajān and company in Marrakesh, Ibn Qasī gathered a contingent of disciples (*murīdūn*, per the sources) and mounted a successful campaign against the Almoravids in the Algarve, where their power was already in serious decline. Ibn Qasī's mahdist claims were entirely explicit. As Ebstein notes, he "claim[ed] to be the *imām* ('leader') who enjoys *walāya* ('friendship with God') and *ʿiṣma* ('infallibility'), the *mahdī* ('the rightly-guided one'), and *al-qāʾim bi-amr allāh* ('he who upholds Allāh's command' and 'he who rises by means of Allāh's command')." The adventure was relatively short-lived. He was unable to make further military gains beyond his initial success and thus allied himself first to the newly powerful Almohads and then to the Christian ruler Alfonso I of Coimbra. In 546/1151 he was assassinated in his residence by some party he had aggravated, whether local notables, his own followers, or the Almohads (Ebstein, 198).

### 3.2    *Ibn al-ʿArabī on the* Mahdī

These events in the sixth/twelfth-century West mark a turning point in Sufi thought that resulted from the blending of a specifically Andalusian tradition of mystical-philosophical thought, stemming from Ibn Masarra and culminating with Ibn Barrajān, with the eastern Sufi tradition, that is, the tradition that runs through Sahl al-Tustarī, al-Junayd, al-Qushayrī, and others. The Andalusian tradition, as noted above, was distinctly inflected by the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* and Ismāʿīlī sources, factors which, along with the religious-political tensions

that pervaded medieval Andalusian life, help account for the strain of mah-
dism there that seems not to have been similarly expressed in eastern Sufism
at this juncture, as well as cosmologies featuring quasi-cyclical notions of
the unfolding of history. The burning of al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyāʾ*, the strife of the
Almoravid inquisition, and the rise of the Almohads helped fuse these tradi-
tions, as demonstrated, for example, by the Moroccan *qāḍī* and hagiographer
al-Tādilī's (d. 627/1229–30 or 628/1230–1) incorporation of the martyred Ibn
Barrajān into the lineage of Sufi saints in the region (Casewit, *Mystics*, 88–90).
From this point forward, elements of mystical speculation inherited from
the Masarran/Barrajānian tradition—e.g. emanationist cosmologies, cosmo-
historical cycles, the science of letters, and mahdism—would become nearly
inescapable elements of Sufi thought and practice. This fusion is evidenced
most famously and voluminously in the writings of Ibn al-ʿArabī, but is also
apparent in the works of other western Sufis of the period, such as al-Būnī,
Ibn Sabʿīn (d. 668 or 669/1269–71), and al-Ḥarrālī (d. 638/1241) (on al-Būnī,
see Gardiner, *Esotericism*; Gardiner, Stars; on Ibn Sabʿīn, see Akasoy; Cook;
Massignon; on al-Ḥarrālī, see Casewit, *Harmonizing*). The curious fact that the
massively influential Maghribī saint Abū l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258) was
once expelled from Kairouan on charges of being a *fāṭimī* may suggest that he
too traded in such ideas (Lory). This possibility is further supported by Ibn ʿAṭāʾ
Allāh al-Iskandarī's (d. 709/1309) assertion that al-Shādhilī's chief disciple, Abū
l-ʿAbbās al-Mursī (d. 686/1287), was a master of "the science of names and let-
ters and cycles" (Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh, 23).

Ibn al-ʿArabī devotes considerable attention to the topic of the *mahdī*, one
important locus being chapter 366 of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (*The Meccan
Openings*). As James Morris discusses, Ibn al-ʿArabī focuses in this chapter on
the "helpers" or "ministers" (*wuzarāʾ*) of the *mahdī* mentioned in various apoca-
lyptic *ḥadīth*s, using the topic to explore certain qualities of the saints as well as
the contentious issue of the inspiration-based authority of the saints versus that
of the conventionally educated *fuqahāʾ*. The *mahdī*, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī,
is God's "vicegerent (*khalīfa*) who will come forth when the earth has become
filled with injustice and oppression, and will then fill it with justice and equity …
He will reinvigorate Islam after its degradation and bring it back to life after
its death." As a central part of this process of reinvigoration, "He will eliminate
the different schools [of religious law] so that only the *Pure Religion* (Q 39:3)
remains, and his enemy will be those who follow blindly the *fuqahāʾ*, the peo-
ple of *ijtihād*" (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 3:327, trans. Morris, End of Time, 69). His
statements on the relationship of the *mahdī* to the *fuqahāʾ* entail a cutting cri-
tique of the latter, who he says will obey the *mahdī* outwardly because he bears
the sword of worldly authority but elsewise would issue rulings demanding that

he be killed, as they regard any person claiming divine inspiration on legal matters as being "a madman whose imagination has gone wild" (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 3:336, trans. Morris, End of Time, 84–5). The shaykh confesses that he does not know how long the *mahdī* will rule but insists that this is because he has not sought such knowledge, due to his fear that "during the time when I am asking God to inform me about some engendered or temporal thing I will miss out on some portion of my awareness of Him" (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 3:331, trans. Morris, End of Time, 71). The implication is not to be missed that he surely could divine this information if he so chose.

As for the *mahdī*'s helpers, they will be a group of men whom God "has kept hidden for him in the secret recesses of the Unseen," and whom "God has acquainted, through unveiling and immediate witnessing, with the [Divine] Realities." The *mahdī* "makes his decisions and judgments on the basis of consultation with them, since they are the true Knowers" (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt*, 3:328, trans. Morris, End of Time, 70–1). Indeed, so certain is the divinely given wisdom of the helpers that they are possessed of freedom from error (ʿiṣma), as are most or all of the saints, according to the shaykh (Morris, End of Time, 73). He goes on to discuss further special qualities of the helpers, such as their ability to see into the world of the Unseen, while also discussing in detail the superiority of their knowledge over that of the conventional *fuqahāʾ*. As Morris observes, it is clear that the special qualities of the helpers are already possessed by the highest ranks of the saints, those "who have already reached the end of time" (Morris, End of Time, 67). The authority of the saints is unchanging, and is the same authority by which they will guide the *mahdī*. As with Ibn al-ʿArabī's assertion that the ranks of the blessed dead in paradise can already be seen by those with eyes to see, it is, in a sense, as if the end of time has already arrived—the end, like the beginning, being always already present.

Another issue of relevance to Ibn al-ʿArabī and his school's thinking on the *mahdī* is that of the seal of the saints (*khatm al-awliyāʾ*), that is, a figure who is or will be the last and greatest of the saints, much as Muḥammad was the seal of the prophets. The notion of the seal of the saints seems to have originated with al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. probably 298/910), and Lisa Alexandrin has argued that the idea had clearly messianic/eschatological implications in his writings, but that these were suppressed by later Sufi commentators (Alexandrin). The topic is elaborated upon at far greater length by Ibn al-ʿArabī. While he and most other Sufi authors who broach the topic are adamant that the seal of the saints is not the same person as the *mahdī*, there are still eschatological implications to the arrival of such a figure. As discussed above, it is commonly asserted that the world would cease to exist if entirely bereft of saints, such that the arrival of the final saint would suggest the end was near at

hand. Indeed, for Ibn al-ʿArabī, the seal of the saints to whom al-Tirmidhī was referring is none other than Jesus (ʿĪsā), who will come to seal both sainthood and the "cycle of the Kingdom (*al-mulk*)," that is, the foreordained span of the world's existence. As Jesus is not an Arab, he asserts, he cannot be the *mahdī*, who will be a blood descendant of Muḥammad (Chodkiewicz, 117–18).

Ibn al-ʿArabī further distinguishes, however, between Jesus as the seal of "universal sainthood" and another figure who is the seal of "Muḥammadan sainthood," which constitutes a distinct category. Within Ibn al-ʿArabī's conception of saints being the heirs of specific prophets (see Chapter 1 of this volume), the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood will be the final and greatest saint to inherit directly from Muḥammad. New saints will continue to proliferate after him, but they necessarily inherit from other prophets, and thus only indirectly from Muḥammad. As Chodkiewicz has discussed in detail, it is clear the Ibn al-ʿArabī considered himself to be the seal of Muḥammadan sainthood, as indicated by his (in)famous vision of the missing silver and gold bricks of the Kaʿba, where the silver brick represents Muḥammad's completion and perfection of prophecy and the gold brick Ibn al-ʿArabī's sealing of Muḥammadan sainthood (Chodkiewicz, 122–24, 128–41). While Ibn al-ʿArabī's claiming of this title does not seem to indicate that he felt the eschaton was imminent, it nonetheless marks a significant milestone in the history of the world, a point after which things will never be the same. Chodkiewicz avers that, given the massive influence the shaykh has had on Sufism and Islam, this claim can hardly be disputed. As he puts it, "Through his invisible presence, beyond death itself, he maintains and transmits a spiritual impulse or *baraka* which, when the circumstances require it, comes to quicken individuals and groups, to re-establish the ways of sainthood, and to restore what can be restored of the traditional Islamic order" (Chodkiewicz, 140).

A final aspect of Ibn al-ʿArabī's thought on the seals, and one that drives home the point about the necessity of the saints to the world's continued existence, is the haunting notion of the "seal of children" (*khatm al-awlād*), that is, the last person born to the human race. This person, who will be born in China as a twin, his sister emerging just before him, will also be the last saint born, an inheritor from the prophet Seth (Shīth). His mission on earth will apparently be fruitless, and his death will be followed by the swiftly descending twilight of human history. Ominously, the very humanity of humanity, as represented by reason and religion, will predecease its namesake:

> He will call people to God and they will not respond to his call. When God takes his soul and the soul of the believers of his time, those who live after him will be like beasts … They will obey only the authority of their animal

natures, and will follow only their passions, deprived of all reason and all sacred law. And upon them the Hour will dawn.

IBN AL-ʿARABĪ, *Fuṣūṣ*, 1:67, trans. CHODKIEWICZ, 126

### 3.3    *Mahdism and Critiques of Sufism*

Critics of Sufism counted the current of mahdism in the thought of Ibn al-ʿArabī and others of that cohort among the many dangers they attributed to them. Ibn Khaldūn offers a particularly vehement critique in his famous *al-Muqaddima*, various parts of which are devoted to excoriating the Sufis of his day (Gardiner, *Ibn Khaldūn*; Morris, Arab Machiavelli). He includes a section on Sufi *mahdī*s, prefacing it with a discussion of *ḥadīth*s about the *mahdī*—"the Fāṭimid," as he calls him—and various weaknesses in their chains of transmission, with the seeming intent of calling into question the fundamental validity of the figure. The "ancient" Sufis, he avers, never broached the topic; rather it was the Shīʿa who were most concerned with it early on. This is typical of his polemic on Sufism, which tends to uphold the Sufism of the early centuries of Islam as ideal and then use it as a foil against which to unfavorably compare Sufis of his own period. It also sets the stage for the accusation that follows: that contemporary Sufism is essentially a form of crypto-Shīʿism. As later Sufis came to be centrally concerned with *kashf* "and matters beyond the veil of perception," he argues, they increasingly spoke of union with the divine and the incarnation of divinity, much like some Imāmī and "extremist" (*ghulāt*) Shīʿa "believed in the divinity of the imams and in the incarnation of the deity in them." This, he implies, is the source of the notion of the hierarchy of saints: "The Sufis also came to believe in a 'pole' (*quṭb*) and in 'saints' (*abdāl*). This [belief] looked like an imitation of the opinions of the extremist Shīʿah concerning the imam and the ʿAlid 'chiefs' (*nuqabāʾ*)." He further links this to Sufi pro-ʿAlidism generally, and specifically to the practice of investing Sufi initiates with the cloak (*khirqa*), "based … on the [alleged] fact that ʿAlī clothed al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī in such a cloak and caused him to agree solemnly that he would adhere to the mystic path." In Ibn Khaldūn's estimation, this positioning of ʿAlī at the head of Sufi initiatic chains "smells strongly of pro-Shīʿa sentiment." Later Sufi literature is "full of ideas concerning the expected *Fāṭimid*," he asserts, just like the books of "the extremist Ismāʿīliyya" (Ibn Khaldūn, trans. Rosenthal, 2:186–7); there is, of course, a long tradition of Sufi claims on the Shīʿite Imams (Algar, Sunni Claims).

Ibn Khaldūn specifically names Ibn al-ʿArabī's *ʿAnqāʾ Mughrib* (*The Griffin of the West*) and Ibn Qasī's *Khalʿ al-naʿlayn* (*The Shedding of the Two Sandals*, itself an allusion to the seen and Unseen worlds) as discussing the *mahdī* (Ibn Khaldūn, trans. Rosenthal, 2:187–91). He is particularly critical of the former

author's vision of the gold and silver bricks, though it seems obvious he read little or nothing of Ibn al-ʿArabī's writings, as he mistakenly states that the gold brick represents the Prophet (Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabī*, 193). An important part of his discussion rests on a commentary of *Khalʿ al-naʿlayn*, since lost, by an otherwise unknown individual named Ibn Abī Wāṭīl, allegedly a disciple of Ibn Sabʿīn. Along with prognostications of the date of the eschaton attributed to Ibn al-ʿArabī and others, Ibn Khaldūn claims, the book discusses a cycle of historical periods in order to predict an overthrow of the current political order at the hands of the saints. According to this cyclical scheme, the age of Muḥammad's prophecy was followed by that of the caliphate, which in turn was succeeded by the age of royal authority—being the era in which Ibn Khaldūn was writing. Ibn Abī Wāṭīl's prediction was that, as the era of royal authority degenerated inevitably into one of "tyranny, presumptuousness, and worthlessness," it would be overthrown by a revival effected by the saints, giving rise to the caliphate of the *mahdī* and, eventually, the rise of Antichrist in the final days (Ibn Khaldūn, trans. Rosenthal, 2:188). For Ibn Khaldūn, predictions of this sort from Sufi sources plainly indicated the threat that recent forms of Sufism posed to the established order—that is, the rulers for whom he worked and wrote (Gardiner, *Ibn Khaldūn*, 31–3). He goes on to give some examples of minor mahdist movements in the Islamic West from the late seventh/thirteenth and early eighth/fourteenth centuries, though much of this section devolves into fretting about the backwards and treacherous bedouin of the region, who he feels are the most susceptible to manipulation and military mobilization by Sufi (and Shīʿite) pretenders to the office of the *mahdī* (Ibn Khaldūn, trans. Rosenthal, 2:196–200).

### 3.4 *Mahdism in the Early Modern and Modern Periods*

Although Ibn Khaldūn's polemics had a negligible impact on his own era, he was quite correct about the rising tide of Sufi mahdism and other expressions of apocalypticism. The popularity of these sentiments in the late Cairo sultanate and early Ottoman realms is captured most voluminously in the writing of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Bisṭāmī (d. 858/1454), an Antioch-born Sufi, occultist, *ḥadīth* specialist, and littérateur who circulated among the courts and salons of Egypt, Syria, and Anatolia, and whose works were widely copied until long after his death. His summa on the science of letters, *Shams al-āfāq fī ʿilm al-ḥurūf wa-l-awfāq* (*The Sun of the Horizons regarding the Science of Letters and Magic Squares*), for example, claimed to reveal the mysteries of that science of the saints to the educated public in a coherent and accessible form, an unveiling he justified on the grounds that such knowledge was necessary to face the challenges of the imminent end-times. His *Miftāḥ al-jafr al-jāmiʿ* (*Key to the Comprehensive Prognostication*) is a large compendium of eschatological

texts, including Prophetic *ḥadīth*s; texts attributed to the Israelite prophets, especially Daniel; and various works attributed (spuriously in some cases) to Ibn al-ʿArabī, including ones labeled as his *Malḥama* (*Apocalypse*) and *Jafr* (*Prognosticon*), as well as *Ṣayḥat al-būm fī ḥawādith al-Rūm* (*The Cry of the Owl on the Roman Events*) (Gardiner, Jafr). As Cornell Fleischer puts it, the *Miftāḥ* "effectively codified all that al-Bisṭāmī's generation did know, and that several subsequent generations would care to know, of apocalyptic prophecy" (Fleischer, Mediterranean, 44–8). Per Fleischer, it and other of al-Bisṭāmī's works would go on to be influential in the formation of the imperial ideology of the Ottoman sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (r. 926/1520–964/1566), who, early in his reign, was positioned as a sovereign destined to rule until the eschaton, in keeping with anticipation of the *hijrī* millennium (1591–2 CE). The writings of figures at Süleyman's court such as the Khalwatī shaykh and judge Mevlānā ʿĪsā and the geomancer Ḥaydār are rife with Sufi terminology in describing the sultan's role at the end of time, framing him as a disciple of al-Khiḍr and the *quṭb al-aqṭāb* (pole of poles, i.e. head of the hierarchy of saints) as well as the *ṣāḥib-qīrān* (master of conjunctions, an astrological-eschatological title) and possibly even the *mahdī* himself (Fleischer, Ancient Wisdom; Fleischer, Mahdi and Millennium; Fleischer, Mediterranean; cf. Chahanovich). Süleyman was hardly the first or only ruler lavished with titles indicating an eschatological role, as a Sufism-inflected apocalyptic fervor had taken hold in much of the late medieval/early modern Islamic east in that period.

The ninth/fifteenth century saw various Sufi shaykhs making explicit messianic claims, sometimes going beyond claims of *mahdī*-ship to ones of outright self-divinization. The Kubrawī shaykh Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh (d. 869/1464), for example, eponym of the Nūrbakhshiyya Order, either proclaimed himself the *mahdī* or was appointed to the role in a dream by his *pīr*, Isḥāq Khuttalānī (d. 826/1423). He seems to have rescinded the claim after some abortive attempts to establish himself politically, along with resultant bouts of imprisonment at the hands of various Tīmūrid authorities, but he nonetheless left a rich corpus of poetry and theoretical writings that weave together Sufi and Twelver Shīʿī thought on the *mahdī*, the hidden Imam, and related topics (Algar, Nūrbakhshiyya). As Shahzad Bashir discusses, Nūrbakhsh argued that "the bodies of the elect among prophets and saints can contain multiple spirits simultaneously," and that his own was "host to the spirits of Jesus, Muhammad, the expected messiah, and many great Sufi masters of the past." Earlier Sufi thinkers, such as Ibn al-ʿArabī, had largely confined their interactions with discarnate prophets and saints to the realm of interior experience, discussing them primarily in relation to their own spiritual advancement. Nūrbakhsh, however, "thought that his physical work in the world was

an exteriorization of all the spiritual work carried out in the imaginal sphere in previous times," God having "decreed this transfer of salvation from the interior to the exterior world as the mark of the end of time" (Bashir, 40). Sayyid Muḥammad b. Falāḥ al-Mushaʿshaʿ (d. 870/1465–6) was another Shīʿī thinker who laid claim to being both the *mahdī* and "the greatest Sufi master of his age," and, unlike Nūrbakhsh, he successfully established a small state in Khūzistān (Luft). His theoretical writings depict the prophets and Shīʿī Imams as "veils for the presence of God's essence," and his own incarnate being as "a veil over the veil of the messiah" and thus the divine essence as well. As Bashir observes, such ideas were "the ultimate inversion of the normative pattern since divinity and spiritual entities of the higher spheres were seen to descend into the material sphere rather than spirits imprisoned in material bodies using corporeous bodies to ascend the cosmic hierarchy to reach higher levels" (Bashir, 40–1).

Messianic claims also permeate the rise of the Ṣafawiyya, the Turkic-Persian Sufi order-cum-religio-political movement that eventually became the Safavid dynasty. The order took its name from Ṣafī al-Dīn Ardabīlī (d. 735/1334) who, along with his son Ṣadr al-Dīn (d. 794/1391–2), transformed a small Sufi order in Gīlān into a religious movement that spread its *daʿwa* across much of post-Mongol Persia, Anatolia, and Syria, growing large enough to attract both patronage and persecution from the Mongols and other political actors. It is with Shaykh Junayd (d. 864/1460), the successor to Ṣadr al-Dīn in leadership of the order, that apocalyptic/messianic elements akin to the ideas of Nūrbakhsh and Mushaʿshaʿ become apparent, including the taking up of arms to accomplish religio-political ends. Junayd gained numerous Turcoman disciples who waged war on his behalf, and who openly referred to him as "God" (*ilāh*) and his son Ḥaydar (d. 893/1488) as "son of God" (*ibn Allāh*). The order's teachings also came to incorporate elements of Twelver Shīʿism during this period, including veneration of the Imams, which soon became central to the group's identity. Ḥaydar's grandson Shāh Ismāʿīl (d. 930/1524) would later write poetry that was "unequivocal on the subject of [his own] divinity," thus placing the movement squarely within the current of Shīʿī "extremism" (*ghuluww*) that was a prominent feature of the post-Mongol religious landscape of the region (Savory). With the establishment of the Safavid dynasty under Ismāʿīl and his descendants, the rulers often portrayed themselves as the representatives of the Twelfth Imam, that is, the *mahdī*, thus affirming their own status as eschatological actors. Historians have noted numerous other instances of Sufism-inflected mahdist claims among leaders and polities across the early modern Islamic world, in settings ranging from small tribal groups to empires. Each one is tuned to its specific time and place, demonstrating the utility and

flexibility of mahdist claims as a resource in times of sociopolitical and/or environmental upheaval (e.g. DeWeese; García-Arenal, 193–351; Melvin-Koushki; Thomas).

Much as living saints and their communities of followers were often portrayed or perceived typologically as echoing the Prophet and his Companions (see Chapter 1), movements centered around Sufi *mahdī*s specifically elicited images of the Prophet at war against the forces of paganism and the immorality of *al-jāhiliyya*, the pre-Islamic age of ignorance. Such sentiments were particularly salient in anti-colonial mahdist movements of the modern period, when communities were facing non-Muslim invaders and/or their Muslim imitators or clients. Among the most successful of these was that led by the Sudanese *mahdī* Muḥammad Aḥmad b. ʿAbdallāh (d. 1302/1885), a leader of the Sammāniyya Sufi order—a branch of the Turkish Khalwatiyya then well established in the Sudan and Ethiopia (Knysh, *Mysticism*, 267). As P. M. Holt discusses, Muḥammad Aḥmad was one of a handful of *mahdī*s who arose in the Sudan and Egypt in the face of various social and political upheavals that wracked the region in the late twelfth/eighteenth and early thirteenth/nineteenth centuries—such as Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, the rise to power of the modernization-minded Muḥammad ʿAlī Pasha (r. 1220/1805–1264/1848), and the British occupation of Egypt in 1882—and who embodied a rising "popular consciousness that traditional Islamic society was threatened both by infidels from without and despots within." As Holt further notes, the goals of the Sudanese *mahdī* were not entirely dissimilar to those of the firebrand Ḥanbalī fundamentalist of the previous century, Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792), in the sense of a notional return to the ways of the Prophet and the original Muslim community. Unlike the Arabian reformer, however, who targeted Sufism as a prime cause of Islam's alleged deterioration, Muḥammad Aḥmad's thinking was thoroughly invested in Sufi paradigms, such that he conceived of his movement "not merely as the revival of Islam, but as … a divinely ordained correspondence between *Urzeit* and *Endzeit*"—that is, a conjunction of the historical advent of Islam with its apocalyptic conclusion, a typological fusion of beginning and end (Holt). His soldiers were thus his *anṣār* and the strategic withdrawal to Jabal Qadīr his *hijra*. Upon his death soon after establishing a sizeable territorial state, his followers applied the same logic of typologization in likening his successor, *khalīfat al-mahdī* ʿAbdallāh b. Muḥammad (d. 1317/1899), to Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (d. 13/634). Such ideas resonate with those on the Day of Covenant and the Day of Judgment discussed in Chapter 1, though, much as Bashir observes with regard to Nūrbakhsh and al-Mushaʿshaʿ, the emphasis is shifted from the non-time of those metaphysical events to

the historical time of the manifest world. Modern reform and militant movements, including certain "Neo-Sufi" movements, arguably carry this shift in emphasis forward, *mutatis mutandis*, into the modern period (see Weismann's compelling discussion of the Sufi characteristics of some modern Salafi militant movements; Voll).

In many respects, the colonial period indeed did spell "the end," or at least the beginning of the end, of the Islamic world in which Sufism had come to be ascendant, transmogrifying the long-term political and economic frameworks within which the Sufi orders had become powerful institutional mediators between humanity and the Unseen, the living and the dead, the rulers and the ruled, humanity and the natural world, and so on. Diverse "fundamentalist" movements with anti-Sufism agendas, emerging largely in reaction to colonization and despotic post-colonial states, combined with the tendency of modernization-minded Muslim thinkers to regard Sufism as representative of the "*ancien régime*" standing in the way of progress, have helped speed a decline in the socioreligious authority and visibility of Sufism in many parts of the Muslim-majority world (Knysh, *Sufism*, 180). Fundamentalist critiques of Sufism, and violence against Sufis by extremists, have often been leveled at saints' shrines and practices centered around them, a dismantling of the sacred geographies and temporalities with which Sufi shrine culture had suffused the manifest world since the late medieval period.

Sufism has adapted and survived, of course, as has Sufi engagement with ideas about the *mahdī*. Marcia Hermansen notes that modern Sufi groups and thinkers of a Perennialist outlook "are characterized by an anti-modern and somewhat millenarian vision," in keeping with the ideas of René Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, and others of that twentieth-century intellectual tendency (Hermansen, 156). She further notes that, hewing more closely to traditional eschatology, the leaders of the Naqshbandī-Ḥaqqānī order place a distinctive "emphasis on the imminent coming of the Last Days of the world and the appearance of … the Mahdi." While based in Lebanon during that nation's sprawling civil war (1975–90), the order's Turkish Cypriot founder, Shaykh Mehmet (Muḥammad) Nāẓim ʿĀdil al-Qubruṣī al-Ḥaqqānī (d. 1340/2014), claimed to be in contact with the *mahdī*, an individual who he said had been born in 1941 and, since the age of fifteen, had resided in a cave guarded by angels in the Arabian desert region known as the Empty Quarter (*al-rubʿ al-khālī*), where he was prepared to publicly assume his role following an inevitable Cold War nuclear conflict (Filiu, 168–71; Habibis, 604–6). The anthropologist Daphne Habibis, who interviewed a number of Shaykh Nāẓim's followers in the early 1980s, noted that not all of the shaykh's followers attached literal meaning to such messages, and that they were not central to his teachings.

According to her analysis, Shaykh Nāẓim seemed to allow that the primary value of such teachings lay less in their prognosticative value than in encouraging adherents to be "ready" for the *mahdī*'s arrival, forsaking their connection to this world and focusing their energies on that to come (Habibis, 617–18). The failure of nuclear cataclysm to appear has not harmed the fortunes of the Naqshbandī-Ḥaqqānī Order founded by Shaykh Nāẓim in the decades since. As Knysh has discussed, it "boasts a truly international outreach" and has "gained a large and diverse following in the West," particularly in England, Germany, and the United States (Knysh, *Sufism*, 110).

## 4      Conclusion

Every cosmology is a bid for power in some respect, a pretension to having already encompassed the world(s). The claims of Sufi masters and orders to have knowledge and experience of the deathless world of the Unseen was a cornerstone of their social and religious authority, one they sometimes deployed to great effect in reshaping the social and political environments in which they lived and died—or died only to become more powerful, as the case may be. The tomb-shrines of dead saints, manned by their living disciples as points of contact with the divine, were the physical manifestations of this authority, nodes about which massive numbers of people and goods circulated according to regional calendars of pilgrimage and celebration. Sufi claims that their visible or invisible masters were the "pegs" (*awtād*) that held the fabric of the world in place were thus far more tangible and plausible in landscapes defined by networks of shrines than they might now seem from reading dusty hagiographies. Indeed, Sufi shrines and lineages retain at least a trace of that power in many parts of the Muslim-majority world today, posing a tenuous and enchanted counter-reality to that of post-colonial states, Salafī "orthodoxy," and the behemoth of globalized Western modernity with its multifarious tendrils of suasion and compulsion.

Sufi mahdism arguably was a natural outgrowth of the burgeoning power of Sufi communities and leaders from the seventh/thirteenth century onward. As heirs to creative and flexible exegetical and theological traditions, Sufi leaders were able to draw on the deep well of Islamic apocalyptic materials to craft powerful narratives of divine election and map contemporary events onto well-known salvation-historical templates, and to thus mobilize popular support for their military-political exploits. Though only a few such adventures led to the establishment of enduring polities, Sufi mahdism reshaped the lives of countless people, deeply influenced the ideologies of early modern Muslim rule, and proved a key vehicle of anti-colonial resistance.

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