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The Shaykh and the Others

Sufi Perspectives on Jews and Christians in Late Ayyubid and Early Mamluk Egypt

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The Shaykh and the Others

Sufi Perspectives on Jews and Christians in Late Ayyubid and Early Mamluk Egypt

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ABSTRACT This paper focuses on Sufi attitudes towards Jews and Christians in Late Ayyubid and Early Mamluk Egypt, as reflected in hagiographic literature of the time. This will shed further light on interfaith relations in a society where Jews and Christians lived under Islamic rule in the condition of *ahl al-dhimma* (lit. “protected people”), implying an overall condition of social and juridical inferiority. With this in mind, works by four prominent Sufi authors have been analyzed: *al-Risāla* by Shaykh Ṣafī l-Dīn ibn Abī l-Manṣūr (d. 1283), *al-Kitāb al-wahīd* by Shaykh Ibn Nūḥ al-Qūṣī (d. 1308), *Laṭā’if al-minan* by Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 1309), *Durrat al-asrār* by Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh (fl. 1320s). This first survey shows a wide variety of attitudes towards Jews and Christians, ranging from interreligious violence to dialogue for converting and also to mutual respect, while adhering to the principles of *dhimma* and maintaining hierarchical relationships between Islam and other religions.

KEY WORDS Sufism; *Dhimma*; representations of Otherness in medieval Islam; interfaith contact; Jewish-Muslim relationships; medieval Egypt

Sufi Hagiography as Historical Source Material

As is now generally acknowledged, Sufis (Muslim mystics)¹ played important

1 In the last few years, the conventional definition of Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) as “Islamic mysticism” has been challenged by some scholars following “post-colonial” and “anti-Orientalistic” approaches, on allegations that a notion such as mysticism has an outward orientation definitely at odds with the active role that most Sufis played in history; for

roles in the religious, intellectual, and socio-political life of Egypt from Ayyubid times onwards.² Therefore, research on Sufi attitudes towards the so-called “People of the Book” (*ahl al-kitāb*)³ may contribute a great deal to better understanding interfaith relations in a social context where Jews and Christians lived under Islamic rule and where the conditions of *dhimma* (lit.

an excellent presentation of these positions, see Hofer 2015, 3–7. On the other hand, as Sara Sviri pointed out, “modern Arabic has borrowed the term *taṣawwuf* in rendering what in European languages is named mysticism” (2012, 19). So, she argues, what is required is not a “neologism” to define Sufism but a broader understanding of the very notion of “mysticism” as “a current within religions and cultures associated with voluntary efforts aimed at gaining an intensified experience of the sacred” (20). In a similar vein, the prominent Egyptian philosopher and Sufi intellectual Abū l-Wafā l-Taftāzānī (d. 1994), who proudly emphasized the worldly dimension of Sufism as a fundamental and distinctive element of Islamic spirituality, willingly used the word *taṣawwuf* as an equivalent for “mysticism”, including with reference to the non-Islamic context (see in particular 1991, 15–19; 1996, 47). It is on these grounds that I use the definition of Sufism as “Islamic mysticism” in the present paper.

- 2 On quite a general note, if most Western scholars dealing with Sufism from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century were mainly (though not exclusively) focusing on doctrinal issues and history of ideas, the second half of the twentieth century has definitely been marked by a “social” turn in Sufi studies, meaning a growing interest in the multifarious roles played by Sufis as social actors in different times and places of the Islamicate world. The bibliography on this issue being too large to be evoked here, see Knysh 2006 (esp. 217–226) and the references provided there for an outline of the historical evolution of Sufi studies in Western academy (including Russia). With special regard to the social history of Sufis in pre-modern Egypt, I limit myself to mentioning the seminal role of such works as Cahen 1954; Lapidus 1967 (especially 105–106, 180–182); Garcin 1966, 1967, 1972; and Winter 1978. In Russian scholarship, however, a social approach to the history of Sufism is found as early as 1914 in Alexander Shmidt’s pioneering work on Ottoman Egypt Sufi master ‘Abd al-Waḥḥāb al-Sha’rānī (d. 1565), quoted in Knysh 2006, 227–228.
- 3 “This term, in the Qur’ān and the resultant Muslim terminology, denotes the Jews and the Christians, repositories of the earlier revealed books, *al-Tawrāt* = the Torah, *al-Zabūr* = the Psalms, and *al-Indjīl* = the Gospel” (Vajda 2017). From an Islamic perspective, all of the aforementioned books are considered as having been revealed by God but later on corrupted, in form and/or in meaning, by the communities to which they were revealed (see below). For an overall approach to Islamic views of other religions in different epochs and places, see Waardenburg 2003.

“covenant of protection”) thus applied in various forms according to places and times, implying an overall status of social and juridical inferiority vis-à-vis Muslims.⁴

In the last decades, a growing interest in Sufi ideas and practices of interfaith contact in medieval Muslim societies has increasingly benefitted from new approaches to hagiographic literature, which have allowed for the valorization of rich source material previously neglected by most of social historians, as Daphna Ephrat pointed out as early as 2002:

Hagiographic literature, hitherto perceived as entirely devoid of historical value, has [...] attracted the interest of Islamicists as valuable source material. New methods and approaches developed that force scholarship to yield new fruits. At the heart of this growing research lies the assumption that hagiographic texts reflect important features of the societies within which they were composed. These include not only the character and evolution of the phenomenon of Islamic sainthood, but also modes of religious feelings and social practices (Ephrat 2002, 67).⁵

In combining tools and analytical perspectives of philology, literary criticism, social history, and the history of ideas, scholars have been able to produce in-depth analysis of the complex relationships between

4 For a historical introduction to the theme of *dhimma*, see Ashtor 1949 and Cahen 1991. On the origins of this practice, see also Christ 2006. For new interpretations on *dhimma* in early Islam, see Papacostantinou 2008. On varying applications of the rules of *dhimma* in different geo-historical contexts in the Medieval Islamic world, see Fierro and Tolan 2013; Fenton and Littman 2016.

5 For pioneering attempts to valorize hagiographical literature as historical source material in Islamic studies, see Garcin 1979, Ferhat and Triki 1986. In comparatively more recent times, and with special regard to medieval Egypt, see Sabra 2000; Chih and Gril 2000; McGregor and Sabra 2006.

hagiographic representations and social realities, as well as to deconstruct the rhetorical strategies adopted by hagiographers in their efforts to shape a certain spiritual tradition and to influence the social formations within which they lived (see, in particular, Amri 2005, 2008, 2015; Hofer 2013, 2015; Cecere 2013b, 2017).

In particular, this has allowed highlighting the role of hagiography as a powerful tool that Sufi authors had at their disposal in their struggle for “discursive control” (Nathan Hofer) over their own Sufi currents and the social fabric at large.⁶ In other words, as Nathan Hofer pointed out in his studies on the Shādhilī hagiography, in which he combines Weberian views on social organization with Bruce Lincoln’s theories on myth as “ideology in narrative form” (Lincoln 1989, xii), hagiography may primarily be understood as a “mythical construction”, that is to say “a narrative encoding of norms and expectations”:

Myth, it should be remembered, is not a genre of stories that are false or fanciful, but ‘a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it.’ [Doniger 1998: 2]. At a very basic level, then, myth is a narrative encoding of norms and expectations. [...]. In the case of the Shādhilīya, these norms and expectations were inscribed in mythic form onto the life of Abū ‘I-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī through the writings of [Ibn ‘Atā’ Allāh] al-Iskandarī. Hagiography—as myth-making—does precisely this. Myth creates the conceptual space wherein the conditions of social reproduction can be transmitted and recreated from generation to generation (Hofer 2011, 148-149).

6 In Nathan Hofer’s studies, the notion of “discursive control” is based on Bruce Lincoln’s theories on “discourse and social construction” (see particularly Lincoln 1989, 1999). For Hofer’s pioneering application of Lincoln’s analytical perspective in the field of Sufi hagiography, see Hofer 2011 and 2013.

Jews and Christians in Islamic Hagiographic Sources in Ayyubid and Mamluk Times: Some General Remarks

As Eric Geoffroy points out in his comprehensive study on Sufism in Mamluk Egypt and Syria, the dominant attitude on interfaith issues among Sufi masters of the time is apparently one of *rigueur* (1995, 69). If a few shaykhs are attributed with positive interaction with *dhimmīs*, as is the case with such controversial masters as Ibn Isrā'īl al-Dimashqī (d. 677/1278) and Ibn Hūd (d. 699/1300),⁷ this is definitely far from being the general rule. As Geoffroy stresses, the great Sufi master Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), usually thought of as a summit of spiritual interreligious openness, shows very different attitudes in his mystical texts and in his juridical ones: in a well-known piece of legal advice to a Seljukid prince, he advocates for strict implementation of the rules of *dhimma* on Jews and Christians (69–70).⁸ In other words, when it comes to rules and principles governing social intercourse, even the most tolerant Sufi masters pay attention to religious boundaries.

In this framework, hagiographic literature is no exception: although a systematic study of relevant textual evidence is still to be conducted, representations of Jews and Christians in Muslim hagiographic sources from Ayyubid and Mamluk times seemingly tend to follow some stereotyped patterns. As a general rule, Muslim hagiographers willingly present clichés on supposed doctrinal and moral flaws of the followers of the other

7 See Geoffroy 1995, 71. On Ibn Hūd, see Goldziher 1894 and Kraemer 1992. On Ibn Isrā'īl, see Hanif 2002, 67–68.

8 For an in-depth study of this piece of legal advice, see Scattolin 2012.

“heavenly religions” (*adyān samāwiyya*),⁹ or stereotyped anecdotes on Jews and Christians converting to Islam following a miracle performed by a certain *shaykh*, showing the latter’s generosity and devotion as well as his threatening power and attesting to the truth of Islam: “The supernatural favors (*karāmāt*; “miracles”) that Sufis are endowed with are in service of the cause of Islam, by pushing non-Muslims to convert” (Geoffroy 1995, 69–70).¹⁰

In this respect, Geoffroy reports two representative conversion stories based on miracles performed by shaykhs. In these two stories, the respective spiritual heroes are attributed with two opposite attitudes towards non-Muslims, one of kindness and benevolence and one of sheer hostility and deadly violence (67–72).

In the first story, narrated by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha’rānī (d. 1565), the Egyptian Shaykh Ḥasan al-Tustarī (d. 797/1394) rescues a Coptic jeweler from quite a risky situation: the jeweler has accidentally broken into two parts a jewel destined to the Sultan’s favorite, and now fears for his life. The shaykh, from the bottom of his cell (*khalwa*), listens to the Christian’s invocation. By his supernatural faculties, the shaykh changes the Sultan’s concubine’s mind, so that she asks the Sultan to divide the jewel into two parts, one for herself and one for the Sultan. Faced with this impressive manifestation of generosity and spiritual power, the Coptic jeweler converts to Islam on the spot.

9 This an Islamic expression cumulatively applying to Islam, Judaism, and Christianity inasmuch as all of these religions are based on books that God revealed, i.e. sent down “from Heaven”. For examples of such flaws, see below with reference to the work by Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī.

10 For updated and penetrating studies on the issue of conversions, see Yarbrough 2012, 2016.

In the second story, narrated by ninth/fifteenth century hagiographer al-Sakhāwī, it is a shocking manifestation of interreligious violence which causes the conversion of a group of Jews in Damascus at the hands of Shaykh Abū Bakr Ibn Dā'ūd (d. 806/1406). The shaykh enters a synagogue during the Shabbat prayers and cries the Islamic profession of faith: "There is no deity but God" (*Lā ilāh illā Allāh*). In that very moment, a tribune collapses and five eminent members of the Jewish community are killed. Seeing this, all the others prostrate themselves in an act of submission (*islām*) (Geoffroy 1995, 71).¹¹

Between the two extreme examples chosen by Geoffroy, a wide range of interfaith attitudes is found in Sufi conversion stories, as Ephraim Herrera (2015) points out in his attempt to draw a typology of narrative patterns of such stories. Based on samples of hagiographic literature spanning from the first centuries of Islam to Mamluk and Ottoman times, Herrera discloses four main patterns governing stories of conversions inspired by Sufi masters:

1. conversion based on a (benevolent or malevolent) miracle (277-283, 505-515);
2. conversion out of simple admiration for a certain shaykh's moral behavior (283-287, 515-516);
3. conversion directly caused by a shaykh's prayers for the concerned non-Muslim (this is considered a kind of miracle, too, however; 273-277);
4. ideological conversion following a controversy between a non-Muslim and a certain shaykh, or the latter's illustration of the principles of Islam (269-273, 495-505).

11 For some similar patterns in Sufi hagiography concerning Mamluk Jerusalem, see Luz 2002 and 2013.

Needless to say, two or more of these patterns may overlap in one and the same story. This is the case, for instance, with a story which recalls the one mentioned above on the conversion of a group of Jews in Damascus, but which has a far less violent outcome. According to a hagiographer of the Persian Shaykh Abū Saʿīd Ibn Abī l-Khayr (d. 440/1049), the shaykh entered a Christian church during Mass and had a theological controversy, as it were, with an image of Jesus: the shaykh asked Jesus about his relationship to God, and suddenly the image fell down to the ground, together with an image of Virgin Mary, both of them pointing in the direction of Mecca. At seeing this miracle, all those present converted to Islam on the spot (Herrera 2015, 278).

If this story implies a somewhat rough attitude on part of the shaykh, some other examples mentioned by Herrera (especially in relation to patterns 2 and 3) attribute the concerned shaykh with a definitely gentle attitude and even positive interaction with Jews or Christians (515–516). Nevertheless, this does not imply any contestation of the established socio-religious hierarchies, nor any questioning of the doctrinal superiority of Islam. In these stories, whatever attitude the protagonist is attributed with towards his non-Muslim antagonists, his final goal is their conversion to Islam, presented as the one and only religion of truth.

Against the background of this general overview, the sources focused on in the present paper appear all the more interesting. In fact, as we shall endeavor to show in the following sections, if most of the interreligious references found in these sources do not depart from the patterns outlined up to this point, a few of them do present some elements which may reveal more complex attitudes, especially with regard to the issue of conversion.

The Sources Focused on in the Present Paper

The present paper focuses on attitudes towards Jews and Christians in four hagiographic works by four prominent Egyptian Sufi authors of the Late Ayyubid and Early Mamluk periods:

1. The *Risāla* (“The Treatise”) by Shaykh Ṣafī I-Dīn Ibn Abī I-Manṣūr (d. 682/1283), presenting an extraordinary gallery of hagiographic portraits of more than one hundred Muslim saints (*awliyā’ Allāh*, lit: “friends of God”) who lived in Egypt or Syria during the author’s lifetime
2. The *Kitāb al-waḥīd fi sulūk ahl al-tawḥīd* (“The Unique Book Concerning the Conduct of People Believing in Divine Unity”) by Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ghaffār Ibn Nūḥ (d. 708/1308), a prominent Sufi master in Qūṣ,¹² providing biographic and hagiographic information on shaykhs living in (or interacting with) Upper Egypt at his time, as well as a full-fledged doctrinal exposition on Muslims’ relationships with Jews and Christians¹³
3. The first hagiographic work on the eponymous master of the *ṭarīqa* Shādhiliyya Shaykh Abū I-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, that is the *Kitāb laṭā’if al-minan* (“The Book of the Subtle Blessings”) by the Egyptian Shaykh Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī (650 ca.-709/1260 ca.-1309), a leading figure of the Shādhiliyya and a prolific writer whose works have had a deep and long-lasting (though not uncontested) impact on self-

12 According to Denis Gril, this shaykh was the spiritual leader (“chef spirituel”) of Qūṣ in the early eighth/fourteenth century (1980, 241).

13 On this work, see Gril 1980a and Geoffroy 1995, 51-73.

representations and historical developments of this Sufi current and of Sufism at large, up to the present time¹⁴

4. The second hagiographic work on Shaykh Abū I-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, that is the *Durrat al-asrār* (“The Pearl of Mysteries”) by the Maghrebian shaykh Muḥammad Ibn Abī I-Qāsim al-Ḥimyārī, known as Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh (d. 724/1324 or 733/1333).

As I shall endeavor to demonstrate in the article, a wide variety of attitudes can be detected in references to Jews and Christians in the abovementioned sources, sometimes even (at least apparently) in one and the same source. The analysis of such references will therefore provide some significant insights into the inner diversity of Egyptian Sufism of the time with regard to doctrines, representations, and practices concerning the “People of the Book”.

Sufis, Foreign Christians and Local Dhimmīs in the *Risāla* by Shaykh Ṣafī I-Dīn

Introductory Remarks

A well-reputed spiritual master in his own right, Ṣafī I-Dīn Ibn Abī I-Manṣūr lived a long and active life and was acquainted with some of the most influential Muslim mystics of the seventh/thirteenth century in Egypt and Bilād al-Shām (Greater Syria). In his *Risāla* he drew impressive hagiographic

14 For sources and updated bibliographical references on Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī, see Cecere 2013b, 89, n. 2 to 4. On competition for spiritual authority in the early Shādhiliyya, see below.

portraits of more than one hundred of them, showing the great diversity of Sufi personalities, doctrines, and practices in that time. As far as Egyptian Sufi attitudes towards non-Muslims in particular are concerned, four of these portraits are particularly worth mentioning here: those of the shaykhs ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nuwayrī (d. 616/1219), Abū l-Ḥajjāj Yūsuf al-Mughāwir (d. 619/1222-1223), Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl (d. 616/1219), and Majd al-Dīn al-Akhmīmī (d. 653/1255).

In fact, only the portraits of al-Ṭawīl and al-Akhmīmī directly concern attitudes towards local *dhimīs* (Christians and Jews living under Muslim rule), whereas the first two (l-Nuwayrī and al-Mughāwir) concern warfare against European Christian armies either in Egypt or on the Iberian Peninsula. Nevertheless, I analyze all four portraits here as they provide us with valuable insights on the representations of the relationship between spiritual election and military commitment in the period under consideration.

Ṣafī l-Dīn’s Portrait 1: Shaykh al-Nuwayrī, or ‘Miracles at War’

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nuwayrī is described as a Sufi master and a jurist (faḳīh) who directly engages in military jihad. In 616/1218, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān and his sons leave the town of Nuwayra in Lower Egypt for Damietta in order to fight against the Crusaders. There, the shaykh dies as a martyr and performs a posthumous miracle, thus causing the Frank soldier who had killed him to become Muslim on the spot. By resorting to a common rhetorical device in hagiographic texts, Ṣafī l-Dīn even provides a constructed dialogue in which the Frank soldier himself

reports the shaykh's miracle to a merchant from Nuwayra whom he incidentally meets in Acre during a truce:

The Frank (...) said to him: 'O Muslim, don't be afraid! I am a Muslim like you!', and pronounced the profession of faith (*al-shahāda*). Then, he added: 'I am the one who killed Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nuwayrī. I entered his tent, and hit him on his neck until he died. Then (after he died) I insulted him by saying: 'O priest of the Muslims (*yā qissīs al-muslimīn*), you say in your Qur'an: *Never think of those who have died in the cause of Allāh (fi sabīl Allāh) as dead. Indeed, they are alive with their Lord, who provides them.*'¹⁵ But the *faqīh* (= Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥmān) opened his eyes and said in a loud, powerful voice: 'Yes, *they are alive with their Lord who provides them*'. Then he turned silent. When I saw and heard this, disbelief (*kufr*) was torn from my heart, and I converted to Islam at the shaykh's hands. And I hope that God will forgive me thanks to the shaykh's blessing and my conversion at his hands. (Gril 1986, Arabic text: folios 127 b-128)

Here, sanctity goes hand in hand with *jihād*. Indeed, the shaykh's spiritual election turns his apparent individual defeat (his being surprised and killed by the enemy) into a victory for Islam: the "unbeliever" who killed the shaykh becomes a Muslim, potentially acting as an infiltrator among his fellow Crusaders. In line with common conversion story patterns, in this anecdote the conversion process is triggered by a Muslim shaykh's display of piety and miraculous powers before a non-Muslim, showing the truth of Islam and the shaykh's spiritual election, thus pushing the non-Muslim to embrace Islam "at the shaykh's hands" (*'alā yaday al-shaykh*, a typical formula in such stories).

15 It is a quotation from Qur'an, 3, 169.

Şafī I-Dīn's Portrait 2: Shaykh al-Mughāwir and the Fifth Column Saint

The association between spiritual election and military *jihād* is all the more evident in Şafī I-Dīn's portrait of Shaykh Abū I-Ḥajjāj Yūsuf, significantly nicknamed *al-Mughāwir* ("the one who frequently takes part in military expeditions"). He was an Andalusian mystic who settled in Egypt and became a disciple of Şafī I-Dīn's master Shaykh Abū I-Ḥasan Ibn al-Şabbāgh.¹⁶

According to Şafī I-Dīn, Shaykh al-Mughāwir spent many years "either on military expeditions (*mughāwir^{an} bi-l-ḥarb*) or in spiritual peregrination (*siyāḥa*)." However, it is the military side of al-Mughāwir's activity that Şafī I-Dīn focuses on in his portrait. The author willingly emphasizes Shaykh al-Mughāwir's contribution to the fight against the Christian *Reconquista* of Spain. Shaykh al-Mughāwir's spiritual election is presented as being in direct service of the war against "unbelievers" (*kuffār*); in fact, on his numerous missions in the enemy's lands, he freely uses his faculty of making himself invisible in order to perform his military tasks. In this framework, Şafī I-Dīn reports an anecdote in which the "fifth column" *topos* plays a structural role. One day, a divine order (lit., "a true order coming from the True One", *amr ḥaqq min al-Ḥaqq*) enjoins Shaykh al-Mughāwir to go to the "country of Unbelief" (*bilād al-kufr*; probably referring to some Christian kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula) for a meeting with an unknown *şiddīq* (lit., "strictly veracious", which in Sufi jargon denotes one of the loftiest degrees of Muslim saints). There, al-Mughāwir discovers that this *şiddīq* is the very king of the country, who secretly converted to Islam and who acts as a

16 On this well-known Sufi master, who died in 614/1215, see Gril 1986, French section, 217. He is not to be confused with Muḥammad Ibn Abī I-Qāsim Ibn al-Şabbāgh, a Maghrebian Shādhilī shaykh who was the author of *Durrat al-asrār* (see below).

“fifth column” inside his own Christian kingdom. In addressing the shaykh, the crypto-Muslim king enumerates the many advantages he has due to his condition, both on spiritual and military grounds:

I am enjoying such benefits (*fawā'id*) among them (the “Unbelievers”) that I would never have had if I were among Muslims. [...] My affirmation of divine Oneness (*tawḥīdī*), my submission to God (*islāmī*), my deeds (*a'mālī*) are purely consecrated to God only (*khāliṣat^{an} lillāhī*), since no one knows of it. My food is (always) lawful (*ḥalāl*) because it has the status of a war booty (*fay'*), on which there is nothing to suspect. Finally, I am serving Muslims much better than if I were the greatest of their kings, because I have the power to protect them against the hostility of the Unbelievers, of whom I have many executed, and whose state I am constantly spoiling. (Gril 1986, Arabic text: folio 67b)

Then, the king proves his assertion by having some clerics beheaded under the pretext of their alleged negligence in serving the church of which they are in charge.

Şafī I-Dīn's Portrait 3: Piety, Violence, and Political Activism in Shaykh Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl

Shaykh Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl, whom Şafī I-Dīn presents as an accomplished juridical scholar and a great spiritual master, is apparently committed to fighting against both external and internal threats (be they real or perceived) to the socio-political order of Islam. On the one hand, Şafī I-Dīn reports that Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl died in Damietta “in the year the city was under siege”, that is 616/1218, although he does not say whether the shaykh was

actually killed by the enemy or whether he died of natural causes (Gril 1986, Arabic text: folio 55). On the other hand, the shaykh's hagiographical notice is focused on an episode of "moral regulation" against local *dhimmi*s. In fact, Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl is presented as inciting "the commoners" (*al-ʿawāmm wa-l-jumhūr*) of Fuṣṭāṭ (Old Cairo's) to uprising against the Ayyubid Sultan al-Malik Al-Kāmil in protest against a Coptic church being built on the alleged site of an ancient mosque. Quite interestingly, far from criticizing the shaykh's behavior on that occasion, Ṣafī l-Dīn presents this episode as a demonstration of Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl's spiritual election; more precisely, he mentions it as one of the many "miracles/wonders" (*karāmāt*) of the shaykh:

He was credited with many miracles (*karāmāt*). Among these, it is said that the shaykh once undertook to uncover a mosque which had been covered by the construction of a church. The Christians plotted to prevent him from it. (The Sultan) Al-Malik al-Kāmil bent on their side, but all the commoners (*al-ʿawāmm wa-l-jumhūr*) rose up (*thārat*) with Shaykh Ḥasan (Gril 1986, Arabic text, folios 53 b-55).¹⁷

Things went so far that the Sultan himself, while walking on the banks of the Nile, was fiercely contested by the populace and feared being stoned (Gril 1986, Arabic text, folio 54). Surprised by the intensity of that protest, the Sultan resorted to the highest representative of "institutionalized" Sufism, the *shaykh al-shuyūkh* Ṣadr l-Dīn (d. 616-617/1218-1219),¹⁸ who

17 For Denis Gril's tentative datation of this episode to the period 604-609 AH, see Gril 1986, French section, 127.

18 For biographical information on this jurist and Sufi master, see Gril 1986, French section, p. 234.

was the master of the *khānqā* Sa'īd al-Su'adā'.¹⁹ The Sultan hoped that the latter's spiritual authority might counterbalance that of Shaykh Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl. Thus, the *shaykh al-shuyūkh* and one of the Sultan's viziers were sent to inspect the site of the contested church in order to investigate the alleged presence of an ancient mosque. Once there, however, they found themselves surrounded by a threatening mob and could only act as if the church were a mosque, thus implicitly approving the protesters' assumption:

The *shaykh al-shuyūkh* had no alternative but to extend his prayer mat (*sajjāda*) and pronounce the *takbīr* in order to perform the prayer that is prescribed upon entering a mosque (*taḥiyyat al-masjid*). As soon as he was out, the whole church was thrown down (by the mob). If the shaykh and the vizier had not acted like this, they would have remained under the (church's) rubble until the Day of Resurrection. (Gril 1986, Arabic text, folios 54–54b)

The Sultan, feeling that he had been cheated and coerced, decided to exile Shaykh Ḥasan. Such a reaction, however, only resulted in confirming the shaykh's sanctity and reasserting the preeminence of spiritual power over political power. The night after the shaykh left the city, the Sultan had a frightening dream (*manām*): he saw the shaykh and he found himself

19 This was the first "state-run" Sufi hospice in Egypt. Endowed by Saladin in Cairo in 569/1173, the *khānqā* Sa'īd al-Su'adā' was designed for use by foreign Sufis coming to the city, and included a stipendiary position of Chief Sufi Master (*shaykh al-shuyūkh*; lit. "Master of Masters"). While very little is known about the exact attributions of this office in its first period, it was surely thought of by Saladin as an elite position implying some prestige over other Sufi masters in Egypt. This was very much in line with Saladin's politics aiming at spreading State-controlled Sufism among the masses as a tool of Sunni revival after the Shī'i Fatimid Caliphate (969–1171). On the office of *shaykh al-shuyūkh*, see Hofer 2014. On the history of *khānqā*-s in Egypt, see Fernandes 1988.

surrounded by the guardians of Hell (*al-zabbāniyya*), who threatened him: “If you do not call Shaykh Ḥasan back, we shall make you die.” So the Sultan finally resorted to a vizier who was in good relations with local Sufi networks and asked him to persuade the shaykh to come back.

Shaykh Ḥasan’s return, however, marked the Sultan’s final humiliation: once back in Fuṣṭāṭ, Shaykh Ḥasan was summoned by the Sultan but refused to meet him, saying that they had already met (in line with a narrative pattern often recurring in medieval Arabic sources on scholars and saints alike).

In reporting this complex affair, Ṣafī I-Dīn not only represents a scholar rebuking political authorities for being too soft towards *dhimmi*s (indeed a commonplace in medieval Arabic sources, even beyond hagiography). More precisely, this account shows how inter-faith tensions might interact with intra-Muslim competition between spiritual and political authorities for discursive control over Egyptian Muslims and, by extension, over Egyptian society at large.

Also, this episode is important for at least two other reasons:

1. It is an example of a popular and spontaneous act of destruction of a non-Muslim place of worship, even in opposition to “state” powers, occurring in the Ayyubid period, in which such practices of “moral regulation” are apparently less documented than in Mamluk times.²⁰
2. The crucial role played by a Sufi master as a leader and source of legitimacy of the riot is an important example of interaction between Sufi piety and political activism in the Ayyubid period.²¹

20 For several examples dating from the Mamluk times, see the references below, and especially El-Leithy 2006. For an example from the Fatimid period, see Cahen 1954.

21 On Sufi attitudes towards political engagement in Fatimid and Ayyubid period, see Lev 2006.

Şafī I-Dīn's Portrait 4: Shaykh al-Akhmīmī: Love Across Religious Boundaries?

While Shaykh Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl does not refrain from violence in order to reassert the socio-political hierarchies established by Islamic jurisprudence among different religious communities, another spiritual master from Fuṣṭāṭ, namely Shaykh Majd al-Dīn al-Akhmīmī, is credited with a much more open attitude towards others.

Şafī I-Dīn represents Shaykh Majd al-Dīn as being tirelessly committed to the good of every human being, beyond all social and religious cleavages, to such an extent that “he was loved by (people of) all groups and denominations” (*tuḥibbu-hu sā'ir al-ṭawā'if wa-l-milal*). Such description is all the more interesting in that Shaykh Majd al-Dīn is not presented as a marginal or “unruly” figure but as a full-fledged representative of the cooperation (and at times overlap) between mystical and juridical milieus which marked Egyptian society throughout Ayyubid and Mamluk times. According to Şafī I-Dīn, the shaykh was largely appreciated for his moral virtues and his excellence in Qur'anic reading and reciting. For these reasons, the official preacher (*khaṭīb*) of the Great Mosque in Fuṣṭāṭ (i.e. the mosque of 'Amr ibn al-Āṣ), the pious jurist Taqī I-Dīn Abū I-Ṭāhir al-Maḥallī, wanted Majd al-Dīn to marry his daughter and to succeed him in his prestigious task:

This shaykh Majd al-Dīn was highly reputed for his dignified poverty (*al-faqr al-naẓīf*) and his gentle sense of superiority vis-à-vis worldly things (*al-ṣalaf al-laṭīf*) as well as for his excellence in Qur'anic reading and reciting (*al-qirā'a al-ḥasana wa-l-tajwīd*). Therefore, [all] hearts were attracted to him, to such an extent that the learned and observant (*'ālim 'āmil*) imam, the jurist Taqī I-Dīn Abū I-Ṭāhir, [who was] the preacher of [the

Great Mosque in] Fustāṭ (*khaṭīb Miṣr*) and a companion (*ṣāḥib*) of Shaykh al-Qurāshī,²² desired to associate with him. With this aim, he married Majd al-Dīn to his daughter, and appointed him to the office of preaching (*khiṭāba*) at [the Great Mosque of] Fustāṭ. Majd al-Dīn succeeded him in this task in a very good way. He attracted all hearts towards him. He had very good character and morals (*kāna ḥasan al-akhlāq*), and was deeply committed to the needs of [all] persons (*kathīr al-māshī fī ḥawā'ij al-nās*) and willing to intercede for their [legitimate] interests. For this reason, he was [much] sought-for (*marghūb*) to intercede for the needs of the rich and the poor (*al-kabīr wa-l-ṣaghīr*), the free and the slave (*wa-l-ḥurr wa-l-'abd*), the Muslim and the Unbeliever (*wa-l-muslim wa-l-kāfir*). Therefore, [people from] all social and religious groups loved him (*tuḥibbuhu sā'ir al-ṭawā'if wa-l-milal*). (Gril 1986, Arabic Text: folios 97 b–98)

Quite interestingly, no mention is made of any conversion to Islam as a result of the shaykh's commitment to the needs of non-Muslims. In this, the story apparently departs even from hagiographic narratives on so tolerant a Sufi master as Ibn Hūd, whose positive interaction with the Jews of Damascus was finally justified, in the eyes of his supporters and his critics alike, with the many conversions he was able to cause.²³

Indeed, far from molding his portrait of Shaykh Majd al-Dīn on conventional patterns of conversion stories, the author shows the possibility of mutual respect—and even affection—between Muslims and other

22 Shaykh al-Qurashī, who died in 599/1202, was a highly reputed Sufi saint in his time, as is attested by the notice Ṣafī al-Dīn bestowed to him (see Gril 1986, Arabic text: folios 34b–41b). For biographical information on Shaykh al-Qurashī, see Gril 1986, French section, 232.

23 On doctrinal criticism against Ibn Hūd, see in particular Geoffroy 1995, 70. On historical sources on Sufis' attraction on some Jewish environments and individuals, see especially Goitein 1953, 1988; Fenton 1986; Zsom 2015.

members of the Islamic social fabric. Such attitude of mutual respect, however, does not imply any questioning of the many inequalities of that social fabric, Shaykh Majd al-Dīn being clearly depicted as fully complying with the requirements of the Islamic law and with his exoteric office as a preacher.

If Majd al-Dīn is not attributed with any activity of conversion, neither is he attributed with any critical attitude towards canonical hierarchical relationships between Islam and other religions or between Muslims and other religious communities. On the contrary, the shaykh's benevolence and sense of justice towards non-Muslims are to be understood in the light of conventional views on asymmetrical socio-religious relationships; in a sense, he may be described as a prominent Muslim social actor playing a paternalistic role towards non-Muslim "protected people".

In this, Majd al-Dīn's attitude is not unlike that of some prominent Sufi masters, such as Ibn 'Arabī and Rūmī, whose well-known expressions of spiritual openness to the Other, as Herrera rightly points out, are actually contextualized within a clearly Islamo-centric vision, proclaiming the undisputed superiority of Islam over all other religions. According to Ibn 'Arabī, other revealed religions are to Islam as starlights are to the sunlight (Herrera 2015, 100); in a similar vein, Rūmī states that "All roads lead to the Kaaba" (meaning that the Kaaba, i.e. Islam, is the ultimate goal of mankind; 263).

In addition to this, it is worth noting that according to sources other than the *Risāla*, Shaykh Majd al-Dīn did not refrain from engagement in military *jihād*: Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī, in *Laṭā'if al-minan*, reports that Majd al-Dīn was present at the Battle of al-Manṣūra (647/1250) under the same tent as Shaykh al-Shādhilī and other prominent Sufis (*fuqarā'*: lit., "poor [in God]") and jurists (*fuqahā'*) of the time (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 2005, 51–52).

Indeed, one should not overlook the fact that Ṣafī I-Dīn, the author of the *Risāla*, expresses his admiration for both Shaykh Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl and Shaykh Majd I-Dīn. This suggests that, however different their spiritual temperament may be, the two masters' fundamental views are not really at odds (at least in the author's eyes). Ultimately, both Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl and Majd al-Dīn act within the "logics of *dhimma*", so to speak: If the former intervenes to restore socio-religious hierarchies threatened by unsubmitive *dhimmīs*, the latter works for maintenance of those hierarchies by ensuring respect of the (asymmetrical) rights of the various actors in the unequal socio-religious fabric.

Excursus: On Violence and Mystics in Medieval Sufism

Until recent times, drawing connections between Sufi mystics, politics, and violence was not usual in Western scholarship.

However, it is worth noting that the first known occurrence of the word *ṣūfī* in an Egyptian source is related to an event in which mystics is actually intertwined with politics and violence, and which dates back to the very beginnings of the third/ninth century. In his *Kitāb Ta'rīkh Miṣr* ("Book on the History of Egypt"), the historian al-Kindī (283–350/897–961) says that in the year 200/815–816 in Alexandria, a *ṭā'ifa* ("sect", "group") of ascetic-minded warriors called "the Sufis" (*al-ṣūfiyya*) and led by someone called 'Abd al-Raḥmān "the Sufi" (I-Ṣūfī) emerged from among the volunteers engaged in jihad against the Byzantine Empire. These *ṣūfiyya* made themselves known in the city for "commanding good and forbidding evil" (i.e. enjoining other Muslims to act in accordance with religious law). Indeed, they went so far in this commitment that they joined forces with other groups of fighters in

revolting against the governor of the city and killing him.²⁴ Moreover, the same al-Kindī reports that another group of *ṣūfiyya*, also committed to “commanding good and forbidding evil”, were active in Fustāṭ (Old Cairo) in the first decades of the third/ninth century and were deeply involved in political life, though apparently not resorting to violence (Tillier 2012, 33).

On a more general note, according to medieval hagiographic traditions an association between inward and outward jihad was found in several major figures that Sufis eventually regarded as their forerunners, such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), ‘Abd al-Wāḥid Ibn Zayd (d. ca. 133/750), Ibrāhīm Ibn Adham (d. 160/777), and ‘Abd Allāh Ibn al-Mubārak (m. 181/797) (Bonner 1999, 107–134; Knysh 2000, 19; Chabbi 1997). On each of these supposed proto-Sufis, many biographical traditions, often legendary and sometimes contradictory, have developed over the centuries. In fact, some of these narratives were more likely retrospective justifications of later ideas or practices than historically accurate accounts on the lives and deeds of the concerned figures. However, these traditions are of great interest to social and religious history as well. In fact, they show which representations of origins and ideal forerunners of Sufism have been produced by Sufi theorists and historiographers from the third to fourth/ninth to tenth centuries onward in their efforts to define a Sufi collective consciousness and to set out doctrinal and moral standards for their contemporaries and next generations.

As far as especially the Ayyubid and Mamluk times are concerned, interfaith violence enacted and/or theorized by Sufis has been paid increasing scholarly attention in the last decades (Gril 1980b; El-Leithy 2006;

24 Muḥammad Ibn Yūsuf Ibn Ya‘qūb al-Kindī, *Kitāb fī ta’rīkh miṣr wa-wulāti-hā*, in Guest 1912, 162 of the Arabic text. On this episode, see also Knysh 2000, 39. On the crucial issue of commanding right and forbidding wrong in the history of Islamic thought, Cook 2010 is an ineludible reference.

Scattolin 2012; Herrera 2015). In this framework, it is worth mentioning Tamer el-Leithy's analysis of some important waves of anti-Coptic violence promoted by Sufis in Mamluk Upper Egypt: against the background of ideological and juridical views fully formulated in a significant body of anti-*dhimmī* literature, he convincingly interprets such violence in terms of "moral regulation".²⁵

Within a much broader framework, polemic and even violent attitudes towards Jews and Christians have been taken into due consideration by Ephraim Herrera (2015) in his attempt of a systematic study of Sufi doctrines and practices concerning the "People of the Book" based on impressive textual evidence spanning from the beginnings of Islam to the symbolic date 1856, the year in which the rules of *dhimma* were officially abolished in the Ottoman Empire.

Among other things, all this has contributed to better understanding the well-known Sufi saying according to which "greater" (or "true") jihad (*al-jihād al-akbar*) is one's inner fight against one's own ego (*nafs*), whereas the military fight against a physical, external enemy is just a "minor" form of jihad (*al-jihād al-aṣghar*). Far from implying an opposition between these two kinds of jihad, such a saying rather intends to highlight the correct hierarchy between them, in line with typical Sufi views on the relation between the outward (*ẓāhir*) and inward (*bāṭin*) dimensions of life (Herrera 2015, 372–388).

25 In adopting the notion of "moral regulation" from Alan Hunt's theoretical studies (see Hunt 1999), El-Leithy explains it as follows: "By 'moral regulation', I understand a series of discourses and practices whereby some social agents problematize the beliefs and practices of others on moral grounds and seek to impose limitations upon them. It is important to note here that moral regulation is not a strictly top-down process." (El-Leithy 2006, 77)

Ibn Nūḥ al-Qūṣī: Egyptian Jews and Christians Are No Longer Entitled to Protection

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ghaffār Ibn Nūḥ (708/1308), in his *al-Kitāb al-waḥīd fi sulūk ahl al-tawḥīd*, focuses on the conflictual dimension of interfaith contact.

In this work the “spiritual leader of Qūṣ at the dawn of the 8th/14th century” (Gril 1980b, 241) provides information on mystical doctrines and masters of his time (Gril 1980a, 458–497), but also clearly states his views on the status of Christians and Jews in Muslim societies. This issue is especially developed by Ibn Nūḥ when commenting on a wave of anti-Coptic violence which had broken out in Qūṣ in the year 707/1307 and had resulted in the destruction of an impressive number of churches in one day.

The Mamluk authorities had accused Shaykh Ibn Nūḥ and his followers of inspiring this riot. In responding to these allegations, the shaykh takes a twofold attitude on the issue. On the one hand, he firmly refuses all allegations, proclaiming that neither he nor any of his followers had left their hospice (*ribāṭ*) on the day of the riot. On the other hand, far from condemning the riot, he vehemently attacks *dhimmīs* and provides a full-fledged legal justification for the destruction of non-Muslim places of worship in the whole country, far beyond the episode of Qūṣ.

In his work, Ibn Nūḥ accuses Christians and Jews all over Egypt of exceeding the limits imposed on them by the rules of *dhimma* and tirelessly plotting against “the party of believers in divine unity” (Muslims) with the complicity of (false) new converts (*muslimānīs*) and the connivance of emirs and other corrupt authorities (Gril 1980b, 246–259).

In doing this, the shaykh proves fully aware of the long-lasting juridical debate on the specific condition of Jews and Christians in Egypt. This debate, which resurfaced repeatedly over the centuries, mostly revolved around the *vexata quaestio* as to whether Muslims had conquered Egypt by

force (*'anwat^{an}*) or by a peace treaty (*ṣulḥ^{an}*) in the year 21/642.²⁶ Indeed, the thesis of conquest by treaty (*ṣulḥ^{an}*) prevailed in the very first decades after the conquest, but it was soon questioned. In fact, since the early second/eighth century Muslim jurists and authorities started supporting the thesis of conquer by force, which granted conquerors more favorable conditions both with regard to taxation and to land ownership.²⁷

All this had very important implications, too, on the status of non-Muslim Egyptians. As is well known, the “Pact of ‘Umar”, the traditional and undisputed reference for *dhimma*, only applies to countries which are submitted by treaty. Therefore, some *'ulamā'*, relying on the thesis that Egypt had been conquered by force, argued that *dhimma* did not apply to Egyptian Jews and Christians, and thus called for the demolition of all churches and synagogues and for the removal of all protection for non-Muslims.

Such a trend seems to have been particularly vigorous in the Early Mamluk times, probably in connection with a new wave of Islamization of Upper Egypt.²⁸ In this debate, Shaykh Ibn Nūḥ takes quite a tough stance, based on a twofold argument:

1. Egypt was conquered by force (*'anwat^{an}*), so local Jews and Christians have never really been entitled to the status of protected people (*ahl al-dhimma*). As a consequence, their places of worship and all

26 On this debate in the Mamluk period, see in particular: Gril 1980b, 242-244; El-Leithy 2006, 77-119; Dridi 2009, 112-163. On the historical roots of this debate in the Late 'Umayyad and Early Abbasid period, see Noth 1984, 223-228; Frantz-Murphy 1991, 11-12; Sijpesteijn 2007; Hurvitz 2008.

27 “Between ca. 97-122 / 715-740, jurists introduced a whole new series of traditions [...] to assert that Egypt had been conquered ‘by force’ (*'anwatan*) as opposed to ‘by treaty’ (*ṣulḥ^{an}*), and hence all of its land was *kharāj* land, i.e. presumably subject to double the rate of taxation.” (Frantz-Murphy 1991, 11-12)

28 On the revival of the process of Islamization of Upper Egypt in early Mamluk times, see El-Leithy 2006, 104-109.

of their goods should have fallen to Muslims since the very time of the conquest. In this, Ibn Nūḥ's view coincides with one of the key arguments of the famous *fatwā* that his contemporary jurist (*faqīh*) Najm al-Dīn Ibn Rif'a had issued in 701/1301 in the wake of a series of anti-*dhimmi* riots in Cairo: "When a country is conquered by force (*'anwat^{an}*), then churches, synagogues, lands, money and mobile goods, all of this is the property of Muslims."²⁹

2. However, even if one admitted that Egypt was conquered by treaty (*ṣulḥ^{an}*), the rules of *dhimma* should be considered as repealed in the country. The reason is the lack of renewal of the pact over time and the numerous infringements that Christians and Jews allegedly committed. In the shaykh's eyes, the construction of new places of worship is the most blatant of these infringements.

So, far from proposing any positive view on interfaith contact, Shaykh Ibn Nūḥ advocates for the repeal of any protection of Jews and Christians on the grounds that their allegedly unsubmitive attitudes deprived them of the status of *dhimmi*s. In this light, Ibn Nūḥ's work may well be classified, as suggested by El-Leithy (2006, 76, n. 5), as a particular sub-genre of anti-*dhimmi* literature which considerably developed in Late Ayyubid and Early Mamluk times. This manifold literary production, ranging from sermons to *fatwās* to actual treatises, was characterized by mixing doctrinal and social arguments of interreligious polemics with special focus on the alleged empowerment of Coptic bureaucracy as a threat to the supposedly divinely-ordered social hierarchies between religious groups.³⁰

29 Quoted and transl. in S. Ward, "Ibn Rif'a on the Churches and Synagogues of Cairo", *MedEnc* 5, 70-84 (here, 81), quoted in El-Leithy 2006, 116.

30 El-Leithy (2006, 76, n. 6) mentions seven of such works, including that of Ibn Nūḥ, for the period 640s-750s/1240s.-1350s.

Jews and Christians in the Early Literature of the Shādhiliyya

Introductory Remarks

A wide range of meaningful if often indirect references to Jews and Christians are found in the foundational narratives of the *ṭarīqa* Shādhiliyya. This Sufi group began in Tunis in the second quarter of the seventh/thirteenth century, around the Maghrebian Shaykh Abū l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258), and fully flourished in Alexandria, where al-Shādhilī settled with his favored disciple Abū l-‘Abbās al-Mursī (d. 686/1287) and some other followers in the mid-640s/1240s. Thanks to their relentless efforts to conjugate the outward and inward dimensions of the Islamic faith, this Sufi current rapidly gained ground throughout the whole of Egypt and North Africa.

In early Mamluk Egypt in particular, the Shādhiliyya soon emerged as a catalyzer of different spiritual trends in Sunni Islam at the intersection of various juridical, mystical, and even philosophical milieus (Cecere 2013a; Cecere 2014a). For these reasons, the Shādhiliyya played a major role in shaping Egyptian Sufism and broader Muslim Egyptian culture in that time and in the following centuries.

Since both al-Shādhilī and al-Mursī left no written legacy, our analysis will focus on the works by their earliest hagiographers, namely the *Kitāb laṭā’if al-minan* by the Egyptian shaykh Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1309) and the *Durrat al-asrār* by the Maghrebian shaykh Muḥammad Ibn Abī l-Qāsim al-Ḥimyārī, also known as Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh (d. 724/1324 or 733/1333).

A comparative analysis of interfaith references in these two works is quite interesting for more than one reason. In fact, the production of two distinct biographies of the eponymous master of the Shādhiliyya in the same period (roughly half a century after this master’s death) is probably to be explained against the background of the competition that broke out over the Shādhilī spiritual heritage after the death of Shaykh al-Mursī (d. 686/1287). Such competition seems to have led to the formation of at least three collateral lines of spiritual authority: two of them developed in Egypt—one around Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh (seemingly prevailing in Cairo and southern Egypt) and the other one around Yāqūt al-Ḥabashī (based in Alexandria)—, whereas the third line developed in Tunis under the authority of the Masrūqī brothers.³¹

In this framework, the hagiographical works by Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh and Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh, who was a disciple of the Masrūqī brothers, might be seen as two conflicting narratives on the origins of the Shādhiliyya (Hofer 2015, chapter 4 and 5). On the one hand, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, through several allusions skilfully scattered throughout the text, presents himself as the true “heir” of al-Mursī and then of al-Shādhilī, thus implicitly claiming spiritual authority over the Shādhilī network and the sublime rank of Pole of His Time (*quṭb al-zamān*).³² On the other hand, the North African Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh, writing his *Durrat al-asrār* soon after 718/1318 (Amri 2013, 14), i.e. a few years after Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s death, draws a completely different picture of the Shādhiliyya. He emphasizes the high spiritual rank of the Tunisian line and describes intense contact between this group and the Alexandrian masters al-Mursī

31 On this competition, see Cornell 1998, 150–154; Geoffroy 2002, 173, 178; McGregor 2004, 29–33, 172 n.8, 175 n.36; Hofer 2013, especially 398–399; Hofer 2015, especially chapter 4 and 5. On the Tunisian line of the Shādhiliyya, see Amri 2013, especially 15–19.

32 On the rhetorical strategies Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh sets out in his *Laṭā’if al-minan* in order to draw his own “self-hagiographical” spiritual portrait, see Cecere 2013b, 69–77.

and Yāqūt, whereas he mentions Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh only once. Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh thus presents a multipolar view of the nascent Shādhilī community as a network whose two main hubs, Tunis and Alexandria, enjoy equal spiritual authority. This is totally at odds with Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s Egypto-centric view of the Shādhiliya as a group coherently organized around the spiritual lineage al-Shādhilī > I-Mursī > Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh.³³

In this light, one may wonder whether these two authors (and maybe their respective circles) had conflicting views on interfaith issues as well. Indeed, the first findings of our survey seem to indicate that this was precisely the case. On the one hand, both works do not provide full-fledged doctrinal expositions concerning Jews and Christians, and attitudes towards these religious communities are to be gleaned from reports on al-Shādhilī’s and/or al-Mursī’s deeds and teachings. On the other hand, it is not difficult to see that the two works differ in quantity and quality of references to Jewish and Christian elements (individuals, traditions, doctrines), which might indicate different attitudes on this subject by the two authors (a point that I will try to elucidate in the next sections).

A Conventional Conversion Story in Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh

The main interreligious reference found in Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh’s work is quite a conventional conversion story, enhancing Shaykh al-Mursī’s spiritual

33 As far as one can judge from representations of the origins in later Shādhilī sources, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s narrative soon surpassed the Tunisian one and turned into what may be called a Shādhilī official historiography. As for Yāqūt, he did not leave any written work; following the example of both al-Shādhilī and al-Mursī, he relied only on oral and living transmissions of his teachings. As a consequence, however, Yāqūt was gradually written out of the competition for discursive control over the nascent Shādhilī community.

virtues. Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh reports this story on the authority of Shaykh Yāqūt al-Ḥabashī, one of al-Mursī's closest disciples in Alexandria:³⁴

He [Shaykh Yāqūt al-Ḥabashī] also informed me: “[One day] I was at Nastaraq, outside Alexandria. Fish there were [usually] plentiful [...]. [That day, on the contrary,] I searched for one but I failed to find even a single one. I met the captain of the fishing crew and asked him about fishing: “With this wind” he replied, “not one fish can be caught”. This person was a Christian. So I said: “Enter [the sea] with the blessing of God, for the shaykh (al-Mursī) enjoys favor with Him”. [...] I gave him the money, and he entered the sea, spread the net, drew it in to the shore and he took from the net an abundance such as they had ever seen. The people present were astonished at that. [...] Among the fish [...], one was bigger than any I had never seen. A Jew came up [...] and he sought to buy it. I prevented him from doing so, and sent all the fish to the shaykh (al-Mursī). When he was given the fish, he ordered: “Pick out that [big] fish and bring it to Yāqūt to give to the Jew, for he has a wife with a child who is hungry for fish. There is none today, and he had his eye upon it”. So I took the [...] fish and gave it to the Jew and informed him of what the shaykh had said. He became a Muslim, together with a group of Jews, the captain of the fishing crew, and a number of Christians. (Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh 1887, 52, our translation; see also Douglas 1993, 208–209)

Shaykh al-Mursī's generosity towards the Jewish family as well as the supernatural support that he gives through Yāqūt's intervention to the Christian fishermen should not lead us to read this story as an example

34 It is the same Shaykh Yāqūt that I mentioned above in relation to the competition for spiritual authority on the Shādhiliyya after Shaykh al-Mursī's death.

of a purely ecumenical attitude fostering cooperation and mutual respect between followers of different Abrahamic religions and to consider them on equal footing. Indeed, the Shaykh's kindness likely must be understood as a manifestation or proof of his spiritual faculty of *kashf* (that is, knowledge/perception of invisible things): just as he is aware, by preternatural means, that the Jew has a child who is hungry for fish, so he is probably aware that his own act of kindness will induce the Jew and his family to convert out of admiration for the generosity and the miraculous powers of a representative of the Islamic religion. In the same vein, the support that Shaykh Yāqūt—in the name of his master Shaykh al-Mursī—offers to the Christian fishermen is subordinated to their invocation of a Muslim saint: the ensuing miraculous fishing is meant to show the superiority of Islam over Christianity and make the Christian fishermen recognize which is the “true” religion of God. This anecdote thus fits perfectly into typical narrative patterns of conversion stories, combining hagiographic and apologetic motifs that were apparently common in Sufi literature of the Mamluk period. Here, as in many such narratives, a Muslim shaykh's display of miraculous powers and extraordinary kindness towards non-Muslims testifies to the “truth” of Islam and the shaykh's spiritual election, thus pushing the concerned non-Muslims to embrace Islam.

In the light of the evidence provided by this first survey, Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh's hagiographic work on the founding masters of the Shādhiliyya does not seem to provide any original perspective on Jews and Christians. Conversely, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's narrative on the origins of the Shādhiliyya presents a quite more nuanced spectrum of references to Jews and Christians, ranging from purely polemical to more complex ones, as we shall see in the next section.

Complex Interreligious Dimensions in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh

In his *Kitāb laṭā’if al-minan*, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī does not express any explicit position on relationships with Jews and Christians. In particular, although he eulogistically mentions both Ṣafī l-Dīn’s and Ibn Nūḥ’s works as authoritative sources on Shaykh al-Shādhili’s spiritual election (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 1999, 75), Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh does not show any interest in the interreligious aspects of these two works and does not even hint at the debate on *dhimma* that was so relevant to Ibn Nūḥ. Indeed, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s views on such issues must be gleaned from the rare but all the more interesting references to Jews and Christians scattered throughout the *Kitāb laṭā’if al-minan*, the meanings of which are not always obvious or unambiguous.

On the grounds of a first survey of relevant textual material, we have adopted a provisional division of these texts into three groups, ranging from more conventional to more complex and to potentially open-minded attitudes:

1. Conventional apologetic attitudes and stereotypes;
2. Ambivalent attitudes towards the Other’s religion and spiritual powers;
3. Possible attitudes of mutual respect in interfaith contact situations.

The Conventional Dimension in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s Interreligious References

Moral and Doctrinal Flaws of Non-Muslims and the Divinely-ordered Hierarchy Among Religions

As a matter of fact, most mentions of Jews and Christians in *Kitāb laṭā’if al-minan* seem to be in line with apologetic stereotyped views based on Qur’anic interreligious polemics which highlight the others’ alleged moral and/or doctrinal flaws.

For instance, Jews are presented as the scriptural model of hypocrisy. In a crucial theoretical passage on sanctity (*walāya*) and divine love (*maḥabba*), Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh recalls the well-known Qur’anic allegation that Jews’ love for life indicates their insincerity in love for God: “Say: ‘O you who are Jews, if you claim that you are the friends of Allah (*awliyā’ Allāh*), excluding the [other] people, then wish for death, if you should be truthful’.” (Qur’an 62:6). In another passage, the author presents al-Mursī as conflating false Sufis with Jews and asserting, in line with traditional exegesis, that the Qur’anic phrase “avid listeners to falsehood, devourers of [what is] unlawful” (Qur’an 5:42) was revealed with reference to Jews (*nuzilat fī l-yahūd*) (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, 108).³⁵

In an equally apologetic vein, al-Mursī is reported as saying that Jesus was “worshipped instead of God” (or at least along with him; Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, 108), thus confirming Islamic traditional representations of Christians as polytheists (*mushrikūn*).

35 On Qur’anic representations of Jews as hypocrites, see Stillmann 2002 and Urvoy 2007.

As far as actual relationships between Muslims and followers of the other “heavenly religions” are concerned, the following anecdote attributed to the eponymous master al-Shādhilī seems to confirm conventional views on what were considered as the proper socio-religious hierarchies:

Shaykh Abū I-Ḥasan [I-Shādhilī] said: “Once, during my (spiritual) wanderings (*siyāḥāt*), I found shelter in a cave (*maghāra*), close to a city inhabited by Muslims. I remained there (in the cave) during three days without having anything to eat. After these three days, some Christians (*nās min al-Rūm*)³⁶ passed by, as they had landed from their ship close to the place where I was. Where they saw me, they said: - ‘A priest (*qissīs*) of Muslims!’³⁷ Then, they gave me some food and left abundant provisions with me. I was astonished at receiving this support from the hands of the unbelievers (*kāfirīn*), where Muslims had refused (not offered) it to me. And just then, a [preternatural] voice (*qā’il*, lit. “someone who spoke”)³⁸ said to me: “The [accomplished spiritual] man (*al-rajul*) is not the one who is given support for victory (*nuṣīra*) by his friends! Verily, the [accomplished spiritual] man is the one who is given support for victory (*nuṣīra*) by his enemies (*a’dā’*).” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, 55)

36 In Medieval Egyptian texts, the term *rūm* often applies to foreign Christians in general, both Eastern and Western. In Ṣafī I-Dīn, for instance, the expression *sariyya min sarāyā al-Rūm* indicates a raiding party of Christians in Castilla (*fī al-arḍ al-tāwīl*) and *bilād al-Rūm* designates “the lands of Christians”. See Gril 1986, Arabic section: folios 70 and 99, respectively.

37 In this anecdote, we find the same expression (“priest of Muslims”) that a Christian soldier used (albeit with the intention of insult) in Ṣafī I-Dīn’s account on Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nuwayrī. See above.

38 Arabic: *qā’il*, lit. : “someone speaking”. Here, it means a voice of divine origin, i.e. a *hātif* (“communication from God”).

Since the author does not specify whether these Christians were soldiers (Crusaders), pilgrims, or merchants, it is not easy to assess the exact meaning of the word “enemies” (*a’dā’*) in this narration. However, the fact that they are qualified as *kāfirūn* (“unbelievers”) indicates a negative attitude towards Christians as such, no matter the specific condition of the group evoked in the anecdote. Indeed, the story embodies a twofold symbolic meaning. Hagiographically, the miraculous support that al-Shādhilī receives from God through such unexpected intermediaries confirms and “magnifies” the shaykh’s divine election. In terms of interreligious polemics, the reverent homage of those Christians to a “priest of the Muslims” implies their recognition of the spiritual and moral authority of a representative of Islam, thus confirming the hierarchy of values between the three “heavenly religions” established by Islamic law.

Quite interestingly, this interpretation is supported, in my opinion, by comparison with a slightly different version of the same anecdote that Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh presents in another work of his, the *Tāj al-‘arūs li-tahdhīb al-nufūs* (“The Bride’s Crown. On Discipline of the Souls”; Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2010, 63). This version differs from the other in only a few details, which, however, appear to be quite significant as they make the story more indefinite and therefore more exemplary. In this version the scene is placed not in the surroundings of a Muslim town but in a totally indeterminate desert. More importantly, the “enemies” (*a’dā’*) who feed the shaykh are not designated here by the term *Rūm*, which would have qualified them as *foreign* Christians, but by the general term *naṣārā* that applies to *all* Christians (as followers of *al-Nāṣirī*: “the Nazarene”). This seemingly gives a universal

scope to such enmity, thus further stressing the apologetic dimension of this story.³⁹

Muslim Saints and the Prophets of Israel

In addition to the examples above, a polemical and apologetic attitude can easily be identified behind other inter-religious references, which are linked in various ways to a key concept in Muslim prophetology: Muḥammad's superiority to all previous prophets, all of them being considered *Muslim* prophets, however, in the framework of the full Islamization of Jewish and Christian sacred history.

Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh insists on Muḥammad's preeminence from the very beginning of the book. In particular, in his theoretical introduction to notions of sanctity (*walāya*) and prophecy (*nubuwwa*) in Islam he mentions some well-known hadiths proclaiming Muḥammad's superiority over all prophets and focuses on the Hadith of Intercession (*ḥadīth al-sha'āfa*), which he quotes in the following version on the authority of one of his exoteric teachers, the Shāfi'ī jurist and *muḥaddith* (hadith scholar) Sharaf al-Dīn al-Dimyāṭī:

The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said: "On the Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāma*), [all] human beings (*al-nās*) [...] will go to Adam, peace be upon him, and say: 'Intercede for [us, who are] your

39 On a more general note, the early masters of the Shādhiliyya seemingly paid much attention to food practices, both as markers of religious identity (what Michel Foucault called "dividing practices") and for supposed relations between licit food habits and one's physical and spiritual health. On these two aspects, see Cecere 2013a and Cecere 2014, respectively. On preoccupation with licit food in Medieval Islam, see Reid 2013, especially 97-143. On the Foucauldian notion of "dividing practices", see Foucault 1982.

progeny. But he will say: ‘I’m not fit for such a task (*lastu la-hā*), but you should go to Abraham, peace be upon him. Indeed, he is the intimate friend of God (*khalīl Allāh*)!’ So, they will go to Abraham, peace be upon him, but he will say: ‘I’m not fit for such a task, but you should go to Moses, peace be upon him. Indeed, he is the one to whom God spoke directly (*kalīm Allāh*)!’ So, they will go to Moses, peace be upon him, but he will say: ‘I’m not fit for such a task, but you should go to Jesus, peace be upon him. Indeed, is the Spirit of God (*rūḥ Allāh*) and His knowledge (*ḥikma*)!’ So, they will go to Jesus, peace be upon him, but he will say: ‘I’m not fit for such a task, but you should go to Muḥammad, peace and blessings be upon him!’ So they will come to me and I will say: ‘I am (the only one) fit for this task.’” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, 12-13).

As Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh convincingly argues, even the structure of this narration is intended to emphasize Muḥammad’s preeminence: the reason why Adam does not directly indicate Muḥammad as the only one who can intercede for humankind, he infers, is that “if the indication of turning to Muḥammad had been given from the beginning, this hadith would not have made it sufficiently clear that no other prophet was granted such a rank (*rutba*)” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, 13-14).

A few lines afterwards, still dealing with sanctity and prophethood, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh comments on the well-known hadith “Those who have science are the heirs of the Prophets (*al-‘ulamā’ wirāthat al-anbiyā’*)” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, 16). Far from taking the word ‘*ulamā’*’ in its usual sense of “experts in (outward) Islamic sciences”, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh brings it back to its etymological meaning (“sages”, “people who have knowledge/science”) and argues that with this word Prophet Muḥammad was indeed referring to saints (*awliyā’ Allāh*, lit. “friends of God”), because they are the ones who have true science (*‘ilm*): the science that comes from God and guides human beings

towards God. In other words, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh endeavors to demonstrate that only saints are the true ‘*ulamā*’ and thus the only legitimate heirs of the prophets. In this framework, he quotes another hadith, which has an important interreligious dimension: “Muḥammad [...] said: ‘Those members of my community who will have [true] science (‘*ulamā*’ *ummatī*) will be like the Prophets of Israel (*anbiyā’ banī Isrā’īl*)’”.⁴⁰

The meaning of such reference seems to be quite complex. On the one hand, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh does not quote this hadith here for interreligious polemical purposes, but only to support his claim that saints, as they are the true ‘*ulamā*’, are entitled to guide “the community of Muḥammad” (the Muslim community), just as previous prophets were entitled to guide the people of Israel. On the other hand, in light of Muḥammad’s preeminence this hadith has a most important doctrinal implication: if Muslim saints, being the true ‘*ulamā*’, are Prophet Muḥammad’s heirs, they not only inherit the same function that the Prophets of Israel had but somehow enjoy spiritual preeminence vis-à-vis those prophets. Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh does not express such an idea in a theoretical form. However, he clearly illustrates it through an anecdote which precisely concerns a miraculous meeting between a Muslim saint and a prophet of Israel taking place in contemporary Egypt. The latter should be identified either as Prophet Jeremiah or as the author of the Book of Daniel. In fact, according to local traditions both of them rest in Alexandria, their tombs having been integrated into mosques.⁴¹ As for

40 ‘*ulamā*’ *ummatī ka-anbiyā’ banī Isrā’īl* (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, 16; on sources for this hadith, see n. 2)

41 On the one hand, Geoffroy (1998, 172) suggests identifying the unnamed prophet in this passage as Jeremiah, based on *Kitāb al-Ziyārat* by Abū I-Ḥasan ‘Alī Ibn Abī Bakr al-Harāwī (d. 611/1215). See also Sourdel-Thomine 1957, 111. On the other hand, on a contemporary Shadhili website the same passage of the *Kitāb laṭā’if al-minan* is quoted according to an otherwise unknown version in which the prophet is not unnamed but explicitly identified as Daniel: *dakhaltu masjid al-nabi Dāniyāl bi-l-Dīmās bi-l-Iskandariyya* (“I entered the

the Muslim saint, it is one of the most prominent spiritual masters in the early Shādhiliyya: Shaykh Makīn al-Dīn al-Asmar, who had followed both Shaykh al-Shādhilī and Shaykh al-Mursī but whose spiritual degree was so high that he was considered to be under Prophet Muḥammad’s immediate direction (see Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, 64). According to Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, he was told the story by the saint himself:

Shaykh Makīn al-Dīn (al-Asmar) informed me: “I entered the mosque of the Prophet (Jeremiah or Daniel) in Alexandria, in (the area of) al-Dīmās (*masjid al-nabī bi-l-Iskandariyya bi-l-Dīmās*), and I found the Prophet who is buried there. He was standing (*qā’iman*) [i.e., he had risen from his grave] and was praying, wearing a striped cloak (*‘abā’a mukhaṭṭa’a*). He said to me: ‘Go before (me) and direct the prayer’. But I replied: ‘You (should) go before (me) and direct the prayer’. [That Prophet replied]: ‘Indeed you (Muslims) belong to the community of a Prophet on whom nobody can have precedence (*taqaddum*).’ I insisted: ‘In the name of this Prophet, [I will not be satisfied] unless you go before [me] and direct the prayer.’ But he replied: ‘[...] In the name of this same Prophet, I will not [be satisfied] unless (you do it)’. [...]. So, I went before him and directed the prayer.” (2005, 98)

mosque of Prophet Daniel that is in the area of Dīmās in Alexandria”). Unfortunately, no indication is provided on which manuscript or printed edition of the *laṭā’if al-minan* has been used for this quotation. (See <https://www.msobieh.com/akhtaa/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=16197>, accessed February 23, 2018)

A slightly different version of this meeting between Prophet Daniel and Shaykh al-Asmar is found on another Sufi website. Although the relevant source is left unmentioned, the story is clearly based on that of Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh. (See <http://cb.rayaheen.net/showthread.php?tid=24907>, accessed February 27, 2018)

In this scene, thus, one of the Prophets of Israel is presented as taking a Muslim saint as an imam for prayer, claiming that the latter (though not being a prophet himself) belongs to the community of the most eminent among all Prophets, Muḥammad. In doing this, Jeremiah/Daniel not only acknowledges Muḥammad's superiority over all previous prophets but extends this hierarchical relationship to their respective communities. Along with supporting Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's views on the relationships between sanctity and prophethood, this narrative thus addresses a powerful polemical message to Jews and Christians of the time. In other words, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh implicitly invites Jews and Christians to acknowledge Muḥammad's prophetic message and his superiority over all previous prophets and to embrace Islam or at least to accept the superiority of Muslims over other religious communities (in line with the logics of *dhimma*).

Ambivalent Attitudes Towards the Other: the Magic of Jews

Quite an ambiguous attitude is to be detected behind a tale in which Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh presents a Jewish rabbi (*ḥabar min aḥbār banī Isrā'īl*) at the crossroad between religious knowledge (which allows him to understand the logics of the relationships between God and the human being) and magical arts (by which he tries to exploit such logics for the sake of a human being). Such representation is all the more interesting in that Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh narrates this tale in a highly sensitive doctrinal framework, namely his discussion on how the righteous should or should not react to offenses (see Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 2005, 91-92). In this story, a man robs a poor and righteous woman of her only hen. She does not invoke any punishment for the thief, instead relying entirely on God. When the thief starts plucking

the hen, all the feathers stick to his face and no one can take them away. The thief consults a rabbi, who provides him with the solution: “I see no remedy for you except that the woman [...] invoke God against you: if she does so, you will be healed.” Such remedy proves successful, and the rabbi comments: “The woman, when she was robbed of the hen, did not invoke God against the thief, but she handed the whole thing over to God, and God helped her. But when finally she invoked God, she wanted to help herself, and (this is why) the feathers fell from the face of the thief” (Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh 2005, 92).

As mentioned above, the figure of the rabbi is presented here under an ambivalent light: on the one hand, he proves fully aware of the logics of the relationship between God and the human being. On the other hand, he makes use of this awareness to help a sinner and, as it were, to cheat God Himself. In contrast to the woman’s mystical attitude of *tawakkul* (“totally relying on God”), the rabbi is thus attributed with a negative theurgical attitude: indeed, the author presents him as being endowed with religious knowledge and spiritual power but using them for distorted aims. In other words, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh both acknowledges and demonizes the Other’s religious knowledge and spiritual power.

All this seems quite significant in terms of social representations of Jews and Judaism in the author’s environment and in the Egyptian Muslim collective imagery of the time. In particular, this story might be linked to seemingly widespread narratives connecting Jewish culture and religion to the sphere of magical sciences such as those recently studied by Dora Zsom (2013). Though partly inspired in Midrashic stories as reworked in Islamic narratives on Prophets who came before Muḥammad (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*), such representations were far from promoting positive views on Jews and Judaism among Muslims. Rather, they contributed to strengthening an ambiguous attitude of demonization and instrumentalization of actual or

supposed Jewish magical crafts. On the one hand, these crafts were seen as proofs of Jews' allegedly defective love for God (as is the case with the story analyzed above). On the other hand, however, some elements of Jewish magic were at times smuggled into some Muslim circles and reused as parts of practices that were represented as fully Islamic. Quite significantly, an example of such "reuse" is to be found, according to Dora Zsom, precisely in the environment of the Shādhiliyya. As she convincingly argues, Jewish influence may in fact be detected behind a Shādhilī talismanic practice called *ḥizb al-dā'ira* (lit., "The Litany of the Circle"), which combined "a magical invocation and the figurative representation of a circle" (2013, 275) and was intended to protect the practitioner from death. If sources inside the tariqa attribute the *ḥizb al-dā'ira* to the eponymous master al-Shādhilī and make no mention of any possible Jewish model or influence, Zsom suggests that the background of such practice can be found in certain Midrashic stories about Moses fighting against death. In this light, how to explain the silence of relevant Shādhilī sources on the possible "Jewish dimension" of this practice? Were these authors merely unaware of such Jewish background (the relevant motifs having perhaps been absorbed and reworked in Islamic traditions prior to the emergence of the practice of the *ḥizb al-dā'ira*)? Or did they deliberately choose to obliterate an origin they felt was embarrassing? At the present state of research, any answer to such questions (and possibly the questions themselves) would be far too speculative.

That being as it may, it is worth noting that Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh for his part is not completely silent on contacts between the early Shādhiliyya and Jewish learned environments. In fact, he narrates only one—quite significant—anecdote on this issue, seemingly crediting the eponymous master al-Shādhilī with an unusually open-minded attitude. This anecdote is analyzed in the next section.

Shaykh al-Shādhilī and the Jewish Ophthalmologist: A Surprisingly Friendly Attitude

A Non-polemical Hagiographic Story?

If most passages from the *Kitāb laṭāʾif al-minan* examined up to this point have an apologetic purpose, the following anecdote apparently has no apologetic meaning at all. Here, Ibn ‘Atā’ Allāh says:⁴²

I was told that Shaykh Abū I-Ḥasan (I-Shādhilī) - may God be satisfied with him - asked a Jewish ophthalmologist (*yahūdī kaḥḥāl*) to heal one of those who lived with him (*ba‘ḍ man ‘indahū*; i.e. one of the shaykh’s disciples or family) but the Jew said to him: “I am not allowed to heal (anybody). In fact, a decree (*marsūm*) has been issued in Cairo, stipulating that no physician may practice [medicine] without a special permit (*idhn*) by the supervisor of medicine (*mushārif al-ṭibb*) in Cairo”. As soon as this Jew went out [from the shaykh’s house], the shaykh ordered his servants (*khudamā*): “Prepare what is required for travel”. He immediately set off and he did not stop until he was in Cairo. There, he obtained a permit for that physician (*ṭabīb*), and he [immediately] went back to him [in Alexandria], without even spending a single night in Cairo. As soon as he arrived at Alexandria, he summoned that doctor. The latter excused himself for the same reason he had excused himself before. Then, the shaykh showed him the paper with the permit, and the Jew was greatly astonished (*akthara l-yahūdī min al-*

42 It is Paul Fenton who first called for scholarly attention to this episode from the viewpoint of the history of Jewish-Muslim relations in Medieval Egypt (see Fenton 2006, 124).

ta'ajjub) at the shaykh's noble and generous nature (*min hādihā l-khalq al-karīm*) (Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh 2005, 152-153).

In this story, al-Shādhilī is attributed with a confident and respectful attitude towards a Jewish physician: the shaykh asks the *kaḥḥāl* to heal someone from his closest entourage and goes so far as to solve the physician's bureaucratic problem with the Mamluk medical administration.

Though the shaykh's generosity might seem to be in line with the common pattern of conversion stories, the outcome of the story is totally unexpected: the Jewish physician shows his gratitude and admiration for the Muslim shaykh's generosity, but no mention is made of any conversion.

In contrast to conventional apologetic stories, Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh shows the possibility of an attitude of mutual respect between Muslims and non-Muslims. Without crediting Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh with a pluralistic attitude *avant la lettre*, the importance of such anecdote in terms of practices of interfaith contact should not be overlooked.

Polemical Attitudes Against Non-Muslim Physicians

The attitude attributed to al-Shādhilī in the anecdote mentioned above is decidedly at odds with deep-rooted attitudes of caution or even of sheer hostility towards non-Muslim physicians expressed by several Muslim thinkers, including some prominent Sufi masters, in different times and places.

On the one hand, Jewish and Christian doctors were numerous and highly appreciated in Medieval Egypt and their services were much sought-after by Muslims of all social backgrounds, as is well exemplified by the

famous relationship between Saladin and Maimonides (Ashtor 1956; Mazor 2014).

On the other hand, however, the practice of resorting to non-Muslim doctors did not cease to arouse vocal criticism in several juridical and mystical milieus over centuries.

As Paulina Lewicka (2012) argues in her study on medical culture and inter-faith antagonism in Egypt and Syria, such criticism apparently grew stronger throughout the Mamluk times. Although Lewicka explicitly mentions only one Sufi master (Shaykh al-Shaʿrānī) among the supporters of this trend (22), it is quite probable that juridical advice against resorting to non-Muslim physicians might have a large circulation in Sufi environments of the time.

Beside this, some significant examples of polemical attitudes against non-Muslim doctors analyzed by Herrera (2015) are directly relevant to the purpose of the present paper:

1. One of the most revered *auctoritates* for the early masters of the Shādhiliyya, the fifth-sixth/eleventh-twelfth-century theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), whom they also considered as one of the highest saints in history, overtly complained that only a few Muslims embraced the study of medicine, as this compelled Muslims to resort to Jewish and Christian physicians (100).
2. In the same vein but with a much more hostile attitude, one of the most renowned Sufi masters in Ottoman Egypt, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī (d. 973/1565), affiliated with the Shādhiliyya, enjoined Muslims not to take Jewish or Christian physicians. This was because only Muslim physicians were credited with relying on God's assistance, which was considered the indispensable condition for true healing. In case one could not find a Muslim doctor, one had to patiently wait for God's help instead of addressing a non-Muslim

doctor in any way. Also, in a move that speaks volumes about this Sufi master's views on other religions, Shaykh al-Sha'rāni went so far as to say that resorting to Jewish physicians was even worse than resorting to Christian ones because Jews were "morally depraved" (385).

3. Along with overtly polemical texts, Herrera identifies a special sub-genre of conversion narratives in which a righteous Muslim seeks the help of a Jewish or Christian doctor against a bodily disease, but this is actually an excuse to heal the non-Muslim from his spiritual disease, the therapy being, of course, the doctor's conversion to Islam (383 ff.).

In the light of these remarks, however fragmentary they may be, the conduct that Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh attributes to Shaykh al-Shādhilī appears exceptional or at least rather unconventional, especially because the shaykh's addressing of a Jewish doctor is not even justified by the purpose of converting the latter to Islam.

From Physical to Spiritual Contact?

In consideration of the key role usually attributed to sight (both physical and spiritual) in Sufi literature, al-Shādhilī's choice to entrust a person from his closest entourage to a Jewish ophthalmologist might indicate a special degree of openness to interfaith contact, especially with regard to Jewish learned environments. The fact that medicine was often practiced by rabbis in medieval Egyptian Judaism might further corroborate this assumption.⁴³

In this framework, it is worth noting that the earliest treatise on the Sufi practice of *dhikr* (invocation of God's name), composed in the milieu of the Shādhiliyya, the *Miftāḥ al-falāḥ* ("The Key to Salvation"), traditionally

43 For an overview on this topic, see Isaac 1990.

attributed to Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh himself,⁴⁴ provides an indirect but quite interesting indication of possible contacts between the early Shādhiliyya and some Jewish circles in such an intimate sphere as spiritual practices. In fact, the author describes a special meditative posture otherwise known as *tazyīq*, which consists of putting one’s head between or on one’s knees in association with recitation of *dhikr* formulas implying the evocation of God’s names. As first noted by Paul Fenton (1990; 1991; 1992), the same association between the “head between knees” posture and the evocation of the Divine Name characterized some Jewish mystical traditions, especially in the circle of the so-called “Jewish Sufis” which developed in Ayyubid Cairo around Avraham Maimonides (d. 1237) and lasted for more than one century well into the Mamluk era.⁴⁵

However, at the present state of research it would be too daring to speculate on the possible meaning of the simultaneous presence of this practice in both Muslim and Jewish spiritual circles. In particular, as I pointed out in a previous study, no clear indication has yet been found on whether this was simply the effect of parallel historical developments in the respective traditions or if both groups mutually influenced each other in keeping such practice (Cecere 2016, especially 285–286). In this respect, a specific difficulty is to be remarked concerning Islamic Sufi literature. In fact, whereas Jewish sources provide explicit mention of contact with Muslim Sufis, and further evidence in this sense is found in some of the Cairo Genizah documents (Fenton 1986; Zsom 2015), Muslim Sufis are apparently silent about Jewish Sufis.

44 On the attribution of *Miftāḥ al-falāḥ*, see Russ-Fishbane 2013, 308, and 328 n. 4.

45 Among the most recent works on the complex historical experience of Jewish Sufism, see Fenton 2003, 2006; Hofer 2013, 2015; Loubet 2013; Russ-Fishbane 2015.

Mutual Respect and Hierarchical Relationships

For all of the reasons discussed above, I argue that in the anecdote about the Jewish doctor Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh attributes the eponymous master al-Shadhili with an attitude implying mutual respect and even cooperation between a Muslim and a Jew.

On the one hand, such attitude appears exceptional compared to other textual material analyzed in the present paper, a possible parallel (for some aspects at least) being found only in Ṣafi I-Dīn’s portrait of Majd al-Dīn al-Akhmīmī (see above). On the other hand, as is precisely the case with Majd al-Dīn, one should not overestimate the innovative potential of such open-minded attitudes towards interfaith contacts. In other words, mutual respect between Shaykh al-Shādhilī and the Jewish ophthalmologist does not justify a claim for questioning hierarchical relations between their religious communities. Indeed, the ideological meaning of this anecdote is to be understood in the theoretical framework consistently evoked by the many other passages directly or indirectly concerning Jews and Christians in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s *Laṭā’if al-minan*, all of them ultimately supporting conventional views on non-Muslims and hierarchical relationships between religions.

Conclusion

In this paper, I analyzed direct and indirect references to Jews and Christians in the hagiographic production of four prominent Sufi masters who lived or were active in Egypt in the Late Ayyubid and/or Early Mamluk period.

Although further inquiry is of course required, the first findings of this analysis show a wide variety of attitudes towards Jews and Christians

among Egyptian Sufis as well as contacts between Sufis and *dhimmīs* ranging from interreligious violence to dialogue on conversion to actual tolerance, albeit in the framework (for of all of these authors) of unshaken adherence to the principle of hierarchical relations between Islam and the other “heavenly” religions.

In particular, it is worth noting that the authors under consideration do not seem to share any specifically “Sufi” attitude on this topic. In other words, the mere fact of being a Sufi did not imply adherence to any specific set of principles or views on interfaith issues that would be common to all (or most) Sufis.

Indeed, the only common denominator that seems to emerge from the textual evidence analyzed above is constant reaffirmation of the religious hierarchies established by Islamic law. Different interpretations of this shared reference might however have quite different impacts on social representations of non-Muslims and on actual social intercourse, as is easily seen when contrasting Ibn Nūḥ’s and Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh’s attitudes.

In other words, one should rely precisely on different authors’ individual approaches to this common reference framework and not on retrospective or metahistorical notions of “Sufi tolerance” in order to develop further research on attitudes towards Jews and Christians in medieval Egyptian Sufi circles.

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