Faithful Dissenters: Sunni Skepticism about the Miracles of Saints

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Abstract
Belief in the miracles of saints (karāmāt al-awliyāʾ) is a requirement in Sunni Islam. Challenges to this position are generally seen as limited to Islamic modernists affected by Western historical criticism. This article demonstrates that there have actually been leading Sunni Muslim scholars from the fourth/tenth century until the modern period who held positions regarding the miracles of saints that were much more skeptical than the mainstream Sunni stance. These ‘faithful dissenters’ were motivated by both theological and social concerns, and the methodologies they presented for sifting true from false miracle claims were based entirely on indigenous Islamic epistemological and textual criticism.

Résumé
Une croyance en les miracles des saints (karāmāt al-awliyāʾ) est une exigence de l’islam sunnite. Les défis encontre de cette position sont souvent compris comme étant limité aux modernistes islamiques qui ont été influencés par la critique historique occidentale. Cette étude démontre qu’il ya eu effectivement été d’éminents spécialistes musulmans sunnites de la ivre/xxe siècle jusqu’à la période moderne qui soutenaient les croyances concernant les miracles des saints qu’ils étaient beaucoup plus sceptiques que la position sunnite dominante. Ces « dissidents fidèles » ont été motivés par des préoccupations à la fois théologiques et sociales, et d’ailleurs les méthodologies qu’ils ont présentées pour différencier les miracles vrais du faux qui ont été basé entièrement sur le épistémologique et critiques textuelles islamiques.

Keywords
al-Dhahabī, al-Ghumārī, historical criticism, Ibn Ḥajar, karāma, karāmāt al-awliyāʾ; miracles, polemic, saints, Sufism

By God, do not deny them, even if transgressors do.
For he who denies them, will flare up . . .
On his body the harbingers of retribution.
And in his well-stoked grave, a fire will be kindled.1

— an eleventh/seventeenth-century Egyptian scholar in response to a layman asking about denying karāmāt

1 Muḥammad b. Ahmad al-Azhari al-Shawbarī (d. 1069/1659), al-Ajwiba ‘an al-as‘īla fi...
Introduction

Believing that God can bestow miracles on his righteous servants is a tenet of faith in Sunni Islam. Even in today’s Sunni scholarly discourse, those Muslims who have at one time or another denied this possibility are either discussed as historical relics in a gallery of faulty opinions, like the Mu'tazila, or dismissed as having been corrupted by Western modernity. Reformist scholars in the Arab world could at most excuse skeptical Muslims from the obligation to believe in miracles not documented with certainty, but they could not deny the possibility that miracles could occur even in our age.2 Eager for Muslims to focus on the rules of nature—not their suspension—as God’s true wonder, Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) could only produce a few tenuous names of classical Sunni scholars who had questioned saintly miracles. None were later than the fifth/eleventh century.3 The Sunni scholarly tradition, it seems, has stood as a block in its belief in karāmas.

Yet this is a deceiving oversimplification. Those Sunni scholars who have challenged the mainstream credence in karāmas from within the Sunni tradition are much more than a dismissable or insignificant minority. In fact, they have often been the tradition’s most respected voices. In describing their perspectives on saintly miracles, I borrow the notion of “faithful dissent” from David Weddle. He defines such internal critics as those individuals within a religious tradition who adopt a skeptical view towards miracles or disclaim them altogether, sometimes for theological and sometimes for moral reasons.4 As we shall see, a selection of committed Sunni scholars from Andalusia to Khurasan, from the fourth/tenth century to the present day, have found compelling theological and social reasons for advocating a vision of the miraculous that is much more limited than that of the Sunni mainstream.

At the root of their motivation lie two major concerns. First, these faithful dissenters desired to close off the possibility that anyone but a prophet could

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produce the type of miraculous proofs on which prophecy depends. This, they hoped, would protect the Muslim umma from false claims to prophecy and from a notion of sainthood that would encroach on the authority and veneration due to prophets alone. Second, they saw the marked proliferation of miracle stories in society as a threat to the very notion of the miraculous. If miracles became routine they would cease to be something that bursts forth from the mundane and truly commanded the attention of the faithful. The faithful dissenters worried that gullibility concerning miracles would leave the Muslim masses easy prey for fraudulent saints or charlatans. Furthermore, the routinization of miracles devalues a society’s understanding of the ordinary. As much as limiting the miraculous preserves its special power, so does protecting our daily reality from excessive miraculous intervention preserve our faculties of reason and self-reliance.

The “criteria of probability”5 employed by these faithful dissenters in their critiques of miracle attributions were entirely indigenous to the Islamic intellectual universe. They ranged from theoretical limitations placed on the degree of miraculousness to the transmission criticism of Hadith scholars and the epistemology of Sunni legal theory.

The Emergence and Importance of Karāmas

There have been many studies on the debates over mu’jīzas, translated as prophetic, apologetic or probative miracles, especially on the intense polemics between early Islamic theological schools from the second/eighth to the fourth/tenth centuries.6 This article will focus on the related topic of the debates over the miracles of the awliyā’ (sing. wali), the “friends” of God or saints.7 Several studies have been devoted to the subject, including one by Maribel Fierro on debates over saintly miracles in the Maghrib. The most comprehensive look

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5 I borrow this term from C.S. Lewis’ excellent book, Miracles (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 100.
at discourse on denying or affirming saintly miracles, however, is Muhammad Amanullah’s impressive overview in *Arab Law Quarterly*. Our present study builds on Fierro’s and Amanullah’s studies, simultaneously widening the scope from the former’s focus on the medieval Islamic West and narrowing it to the intra-Sunni debate from the latter’s catholic overview. This article will not explore in depth those modern Sunni intellectuals who were influenced by Western historical-critical approaches, like Sir Sayyid Ahman Khan (d. 1898) or Rashid Riḍā. Their discourse requires another study altogether.

The *karâma* of a saint has been rendered variously as “wonder/charisma” (after the Greek χάρισμα), “grace”, “favor,” or, more technically, thaumaturgical miracle. As in the Greek idiom of the early Christian tradition, Muslim discourse associates the saint’s miracle with the notion of “wonder (‘ajab)” and the “ennoblement” of the saint by God.

The miracles of saints in Islam have received appreciable attention in Western scholarship. The earliest surviving elaboration of *karâma* discourse, as well as that of sainthood (walâyâ), appears in the works of the enigmatic Khurasanian mystic al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 295–300/905–10) and the laconic Hadith collections of the Baghdad traditionist Abū Bakr Ibn Abī al-Dunyâ (d. 281/894). From their apparent genesis in Khurasanian Sufism, saintly miracles soon emerged as a salient topic in the Sufi treatises of Abū...
Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) and al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021). In fact, the fifth chapter in al-Sulamī’s forty-ḥadīth collection on Sufism, a basic text for the study of the subject in Iran for centuries after the author’s death, takes up “the Possibility of Miracles for Saints.”

In this early period, belief in saintly miracles emerged as a distinguishing feature of the pietism (later, Sufism) of the nascent ahl al-ḥadīth / ahl al-sunna. With the exception of the grammarian Ibn al-Arabbī (d. 231/845), through the fifth/eleventh century every compilation or defense of karāmāt al-awliyā’ was written by scholars deeply ensconced in the Sunni movement (see appendix). As Bernd Radkte notes in his study of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, the mystic’s pioneering discourse on saintly miracles is rooted in a scripturalist pietism rather than discussions of the theological possibility or implications of miracles.

The miracles of saints took on novel importance as the Ashʿari school of theology matured, becoming a major issue of contention between Ashʿaris and Muʿtazilis that lasted through the sixth/twelfth century. Here, as we will discuss below, Muʿtazili theologians found themselves in a new round of debate with a new foe on a familiar topic; Muʿtazili objections to karāmas were but an extension of an earlier debate with Shiite groups over miraculous powers ascribed to imāms. The foundational Sunni defense of the belief in saintly miracles comes from a scholar who wrote fundamental treatises on both Sufism and Ashʿarism, Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) of Nishapur. For the Sufi in al-Qushayrī, saintly miracles were an important proof of the favors God bestowed on his

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15 The Persian epicenter of karāmas is further underscored by Maribel Fierro’s observation that Andalusians were unaware of the genre of karāmas, which were introduced in the fourth/tenth century via contact with the East; Maribel Fierro, “The Polemic about the Karāmāt al-Awliyā’ and the Development of Šūfīsm in al-Andalus (fourth/tenth-fifth/eleventh centuries),” Bulletin of Oriental and African Studies 55.2 (1992): 238. See also, Jürgen Paul, “Au début du genre hagiographique dans le Khorassan,” in Saints orientaux, 15–38.

16 The ḥadīth listed in this chapter is the famous story of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb suddenly having a vision while giving a khutba that a Muslim army in Iraq was about to be attacked by surprise and then calling out in warning to the leader, who heard his voice miraculously and was able to save his army; Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, Kitāb al-arbaʿīn fī l-taṣawwuf (Hyderabad: Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1369/1950), 3–4; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, Takhrīj al-arbaʿīn al-sulamiyya fī l-taṣawwuf, ed. ʿAlī Ḥasan ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1408/1988), 43–7; and Radtke and O’Kane, The Concept of Sainthood, 155. For instances of al-Sulamī’s Arbaʿīn being studied in Iran, see ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Muhammad al-Rāfīʿī, al-Tadwīn fī akhbār Qazwīn, ed. ʿAziz Allāh al-ʿUṭāridī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʾIlmiyya, 1987), 2:30, 464, 3:385, also 2:56.

17 Al-Ḥakīm never mentions, for example, the term kharq al-ʿāda, which would later become ubiquitous in discussions of miracles among Ashʿaris; Radtke, “al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī on Miracles,” 297.
friends. For the Ashʿari in him, insisting on God's complete control over creation and his ability to interrupt (kharq) the habitual course of nature was an affirmation of his power. This stood in stark contrast to the Muʿtazili emphasis on confining God by notions of justice and reason.

The miracles of saints expanded in scope and importance dramatically during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. This shift is especially evident in the biographical and, borrowing a term coined by Jürgen Paul, hagio-biographical dictionaries produced in Egypt and the Levant. Eric Geoffroy insightfully observes that the Mamluk period witnessed a society-wide consensus on a belief in karāmas. This corresponds to what Geoffroy describes as Sufism's total penetration of both the curricula and practices of the ulama as well as society as a whole. Beyond their social importance, karāmas became a pillar of Sufi discourse. Geoffroy notes how Sufi hagio-biographies could consist solely of karāma stories. The stunning variety of miracles performed by saints allowed hagiographers to highlight specific themes in the saint's life.

No one testimony demonstrates the essential role of the karāma in proving the legitimacy of the Sufi path in the Ayyubid/Mamluk era better than a statement from the famous Shafiʿi scholar of the Damascus/Cairo circuit, the “Sultan of Scholars” ʿIzz al-Dīn Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām (d. 660/1262). Writing after his embrace of Sufism, Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām states:

Among the things that demonstrate to you that this group (al-qawm) has based itself [truly] on the sharia and that others have based themselves on [mere] superficial observances (al-rusūm) is what miracles (karāmāt) and wonders (khawāriq) occur at its hands. And this does not occur at the hands of any ordinary jurist (faqīh) at all, even if he has reached the pinnacle of knowledge, except if he has trodden [the Sufi] path.
According to the seminal Egyptian jurist and Sufi hagio-biographer ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī (d. 973/1565), witnessing the miracles of Abū l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258) had been instrumental in converting Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām from a leading critic of Sufis' bidʿa to his famous support for Sufism. In this period, Nicholson observed that the accomplishment of miracles was essential for people to believe in a saint. Al-Shaʿrānī's teacher, the great pillar of Cairo's religious community, shaykh al-Islām Zakariyyāʾ al-Anṣārī (d. 920/1526), tells that as a youth he and his classmates set out for the camp where pilgrims left for Hajj to meet the famed saint Ibrāhīm al-Matbūlī (d. 877/1473). A number of the youths remarked that they would not believe in al-Matbūlī's sainthood unless he provided a miracle. This was certainly the criterion for Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 770/1368–9) during his travels. So compelling was a miraculous prediction made by the Delhi saint Kamāl al-Dīn ‘Abdallāh al-Ghārī that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa became his complete devotee. He continued his associations with the saint even as the holyman's political opinions nearly resulted in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's execution by the Delhi Sultan. In the early Ottoman realm, the ubiquity of saintly miracles in the conception of what constituted a true scholar is reflected in the Shaqāʾiq al-nuʿmāniyya of Ṭāshkübrüzāde (d. 968/1561), where identifying scholars as being blessed with karāmas is a topos. In South Asia, the miracles of saints proved integral not only to the spread and primacy of Sufism, but to...
conversion to Islam in general. Interestingly, karāmas seem to have played less of a role in West Africa.

Is Belief in Miracles Required for the Ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamā‘a?

Early Sunni ‘aqīda epitomes like those of al-Muzanī (d. 264/878) and al-Barbahārī (d. 329/940–1) make no mention of karāmas. Near the end of the famous ‘Aqīda of the Egyptian Ḥanafī al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933) (al-Muzanī’s nephew), we find tenets on the status of the saint (wāli) and on karāmas: “[w]e believe in what has come via sound transmission through trustworthy narrators (ṣaḥḥa ‘an al-thiqāt min rwāthihim) from among their karāmas.” Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/935–6) similarly notes in the catechism at the beginning of his Ibāna that Sunnis believe that sorcery (siḥr) exists and that, “It is possible for God to single out the righteous (sāliḥīn) by making signs (āyāt) appear at their hands.” Later theology works, such as the much-commented on ‘Aqīda of al-Nasafi (d. 537/1142), note more succinctly that, “the miracles of saints are a reality (ḥaqq).”

Representing the synthesis of Ash‘ari / Sunni theology and Sufism, al-Qushayrī writes in his Epistle that “believing in the possibility of the miracles of saints is an obligation” according to the vast majority (jumhūr) of scholars. The occurrence of miracles does not contradict reason or fundamental epistemological principles (uṣūl), and reports of them have reached the level yielding certainty (tawātur). A few pages later, amid anecdotes from famous Sufis on karāmas, al-Qushayrī quotes the early mystic Abū Turāb al-Nakhshabī (d. 245/859) asking a companion about people’s belief in saintly miracles: “[w]hoever does...
not believe in them has disbelieved (kafara),” comments al-Nakhshabī.37 This harsh ruling would appear in many later Sunni discussions of miracles, with some scholars, like Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370), arguing that kufr here should not be understood literally but rather as rhetorical flare. Others, like the Cairene Ibn al-Mughayzil (d. 894/1489), insisted that rejecting the possibility of karāmas was indeed actual disbelief.

The great Mālikī jurist Ibn Rushd al-Jadd (d. 520/1126) of Cordoba was asked to give a fatwa on whether the miracles of saints are false or required belief. He replies vehemently that those karāmas that have been established by reliable transmission (ṣaḥha) must be believed, since in the past such miracles have been established by massive transmission (tawātur). Moreover, the possibility of miracles occurring is agreed upon by the consensus of the umma. Reason does not prohibit karāmas, and the Qur’ān includes examples like the miraculous sustenance granted to Mary as she worshipped in the house of Zakariyyāʾ as a child. Since karāmas are possible, one cannot deny a widely reported (istafādat) karāma “without providing some evidence of its falsehood (buṭlānihā)” and a “demonstration of its impossibility (istiḥālatihā).” If one were allowed to reject the miracles of saints based on nothing more than a “claim (daʿwā),” then one could do the same for prophetic miracles, since they are transmitted by the same manner. The denial of karāmas is, Ibn Rushd senior claims, a heresy (bidʿa) invented by misguided folk who deny God’s attributes (taʿṭīl) (a sure reference to Muʿtazilis) in order to deny prophetic miracles as well. Just like saintly miracles, prophetic miracles are kharq al-ʿāda outside of human capability.38 Al-Shaʿrānī summed up the mainstream stance on karāmas succinctly: “Believing in the miracles of saints is a required truth (wājib haqq).”39


From the fifth/eleventh century until the modern period, Sunni discussions of karāmas have affirmed their possibility and historical occurrence. As we shall see, even those who produced the most skeptical discussions of saints' miracles upheld their possibility. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1920), usually assumed denies the possibility of kharq al-ʿāda, karāmas or muʿjizas, has left Islam (ʿAlī al-Ṭanṭāwī, Fatāwā ʿAlī al-Ṭanṭāwī, ed. Mujāhid al-Dayrāniyya [Jedda: Dār al-Manāra, 1405/1985], 20).


to be a great critic of karāmas, actually states that those who deny them altogether are misguided. He has been followed on this by Salafi scholars today.41

Since the mid-fifth/eleventh century, Sunni theological excursions into the topic of karāmas have generally touched on the distinction between the miracle of a saint and that of a prophet, addressing fears that belief in saintly miracles threatens the probative power of prophetic ones.42 An important distinction made by Sunni theologians from this point onward (although it exists in non-technical terms in pietistic and mystical works like the Qūt al-qulūb of Abū Ṭalib al-Makki [d. 386/996] and the Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfīyya of al-Sulamī) was the difference between kharq al-ʿāda and karāma. The former was God’s act of interrupting the habitual course of reality, which could be done for any sort of person regardless of their piety. A karāma, however, was a kharq al-ʿāda specifically given by God to a person of appreciable piety, a saint. As the famous Levantine scholar ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulsī (d. 1143/1731) defined karāma, it was “an instance violating the habitual course of nature, not connected to any challenge [made by a prophet], appearing at the hands of a person of evident righteousness, following a prophet and demonstrating correct belief and goodly deeds.”43

The more involved scholastic treatments of theologians like ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037) and Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftazānī (d. 793/1390) stressed this distinction. Critics of popular Sufism like Ibn Taymiyya made it a central plank

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41 Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-fatāwā, ed. Sayyid Ḥusayn al-ʿAffānī and Khayrī Saʿīd, 35 vols. (Cairo: al-Maktabat al-Tawfīqiyya, n.d.), 11:68. Contrary to what some assume, traditionalist Salafis affirm the existence of awliyāʾ and karāmas. The Salafi schools rely on ʿaqīda works like that of al-Ṭaḥāwī, which clearly affirm saintly miracles. Their concern centers on outrageous or antinomian miracles. Salafi scholars generally take the same tack as Ibn Taymiyya (and Sufis like al-Suhrawardi), namely insisting on righteousness and rectitude (istiqāma) as the true criterion for sainthood while warning against charlatans and their false miracles. See al-Albānī, ed., Sharḥ al-ʿaqīda al-tahāwīyya, 494–5; and Yāsir Burhāmī, al-Minna sharḥ iʿtiqād ahl al-sunna, 2nd ed. (Alexandria: Dār al-Īmān, 2000), 384. Much as Ibn Taymiyya was, al-Albānī is described as unmasking false saints by discovering the trick behind the miraculous claims (Muḥammad Hāmid ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, Ḥadāth muthira fi ḥayāt al-shaykh al-ʿallāma al-Albānī [Alexandria: Dār al-Imān, 2000], 33). For more on the topic of ḥarām or foul miracles, see note 150 below.

42 See note 40 above.

in their call for reform. By the ninth/fifteenth century, a clear typology\textsuperscript{44} had emerged for the varied types of \textit{kharq al-ʿāda}: 1) the \textit{maʿūna}, which answers the prayers of normal folk, like rainful during a drought; 2) the \textit{karāma} of a wali; 3) the \textit{istidrāj}, granted to an iniquitous or unbelieving person to further their misguidance, like the magic of Pharaoh's sorcerors; 4) the \textit{irhāṣ}, demonstrating a prophet's special status but preceding his call, like miracles that accompanied Muhammad's birth; 5) the \textit{muʿjīza}, connected to a prophetic call or challenge; 6) and the \textit{ihāna}, which God ordains to humiliate a false prophet like Musaylama.\textsuperscript{45} As we will see, this qualifier of “a challenge” for the \textit{muʿjīza} resulted from Muʿtazili/Ashʿari debate over a prophet's opponents being unable to match the challenge of his miracle.\textsuperscript{46} Even as early as the fourth/tenth-century Ashʿari theorist Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015), however, this “challenge” clause was often conflated with a “claim of prophecy.” In other words, from this perspective it was the absence of a claim to prophecy, not the absence of a challenge to match a miracle, that distinguished a \textit{karāma} from a \textit{muʿjīza}.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{44} This typology of \textit{kharq al-ʿāda} instances systematized a concept long present in Sufism and Ashʿari theology. Early Sufis like al-Kalābādhī stated explicitly that God cannot give illuminatory miracles (\textit{mukāshafāt}) to non-saints nor can he try these saints with \textit{kharq al-ʿāda} designed to mislead them (\textit{istidrāj}) (al-Kalābādhī, \textit{al-Taʿarruf}, 95–6). Al-Subkī claims the consensus of all Muslims that \textit{karāma}s cannot happen to wanton sinners (\textit{fasaqa fajara}), though he exempts instances in which an iniquitous or misguided person receives a \textit{kharq al-ʿāda} to guide him to rectitude—an effective \textit{karāma}. Similarly, centuries earlier, al-Ḥakīm had mentioned the idea that saints can suffer “stumbles (\textit{ʿatharāt}),” which God transforms for them into \textit{karāmas}, as He did with David and his realization about his sin (Qurʾān 21:79) (al-Kalābādhī, \textit{al-Taʿarruf}, 95–6; al-Subkī, \textit{Ṭabaqāt}, 2:320; and al-Ḥakīm, \textit{Nawādir al-uṣūl fī maʿrifat aḥādīth al-rasūl}, ed. Ahmad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Sāyiḥ and al-Sayyid al-Jamīl, 2 vols. [Cairo: Dār al-Dayyān, 1408/1988], 2:47).


\textsuperscript{46} The isomorphic relationship between the “challenge” and “prophetic claim” is clearly evident in al-Qushayrī’s work on \textit{uṣūl}; see Nguyen, \textit{Sufi Master and Qurʾān Scholar}, 241–2. Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftazānī was astute enough to remark on the distinction between the two requirements, concluding that both were necessary for the proper understanding of \textit{muʿjīsa}. He added, however, that a challenge and prophetic claim were intrinsically linked; a challenge must be based on some claim of being a prophet, while a miracle that simply befell someone claiming prophecy would have no meaning without some announcement. His own definition of \textit{karāma} in his famous \textit{Sharḥ al-maqāṣid} only notes “no claim of prophecy” (al-Taftazānī, \textit{Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid}, 5:12, 72).
Sunni Attitudes and Approaches to Karāmas

The tenet affirming a belief in karāmas in al-Ṭaḥāwī’s influential ʿAqīda included a requirement that these miracles be reliably reported by trustworthy transmitters. It was not a license to indulge legend. Early works on karāmas and Sufi hagio-biographical dictionaries did indeed provide isnāds for the reports, as is evident in the topical Hadith works of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, the voluminous Karāmāt al-awliyāʾ of al-Lālakāʾī (d. 418/1027–8) and the Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ of Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣbahānī (d. 430/1038). Drawing consciously from the ahl al-ḥadīth’s requirement to provide chains of transmission for all material, Sunni defenders of Sufism like al-Sulamī dutifully offered isnāds for as many reports as possible in works like his Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfijiyya.

In these works we find traces of skepticism towards outrageous claims of the miraculous. In Abū Nu‘aym’s biography of Manṣūr b. Zādhān, he provides an isnād from Makhlad b. ʿAbī Ḥusayn, from Hishām b. Ḥassān, who had been a friend of Manṣūr’s. Hishām recounted how Manṣūr used to complete reading the Qur’an with miraculous speed, finishing it in its totality between the sunset and night prayers. Makhlad added, “[i]f anyone other than Hishām had told me this, I would not have believed him.”

During the Mamluk period, however, chains of transmission for authenticating karāma reports became rarer. Such reports were accepted prima facie amongst the ulama class and the devotees of Sufi shaykhs. This resulted from both the theological dominance of Ashʿarism and the prevalent reverence for Sufi saints and their miracles. Abū Turāb al-Nakhshabī’s terrifying warning about denying saintly miracles had strong basis in Ashʿari theology. What reason could a person have for denying God’s power to act as he chose in creation? Abū Ḥafṣ al-Suhrawardī (d. 632/1234), the Baghdad Sufi whose presence in Cairo had helped inspire Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām to Sufism and whose Sufi treatise ʿAwārif al-maʿārif became a common textbook in Mamluk-era curricula, explained, “[t]here are some people of the Muslim community (milla) who deny the miracles of saints, but belief in them is belief in [God’s] power

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49 An interesting reaction to this comes from a Sufi scholar from the revivalist atmosphere of eighteenth-century Zabid, al-Zayn Muḥammad Bāqī al-Mizjājī (d. 1138/1725–6). Although his biographer claims that his many karāmas would have filled two large volumes, he refused to allow any of them to be recorded. He warned his students, “[i]ndeed these biographies (tarājim) are never free of carelessness (mujāzafa) and lack authentication (tathabbut)” (ʿAbd al-Khāliq b. ʿAli al-Mizjājī, Nushat riyād al-iyāz al-mustatāba, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb and ʿAbd al-Īlāh Muḥammad al-Ḥibshī al-Yamanī [Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1418/1997], 185).
The Shādhilī Sufi master of Cairo, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh (d. 709/1309) similarly wrote, “[d]isbelieving in the miracle of a saint is disbelieving (jahd) in the capacity of the Most Powerful (qudrat al-qadîr).”51

Al-Shaʿrānī reports that Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥanafī of Cairo (d. 847/1443–4), a famous saint and scholar who had been a childhood classmate of Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, used to warn disciples: “[b]eware of denying the miracles of saints, for indeed they are established (thābita) by the Book [of God] and the Sunna. And breaking the habitual course of nature by way of a karāma for saints (ahl al-walāya) is possible according to the People of the Sunna and the Collective.”52

Furthermore, indulging any suspicion of a saint’s miracle contradicted a core ethos of Sufism. For one granted special status by God, even the most astounding miracle is of no significance. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī emphasizes this theme in his Qūt al-qulûb, underscoring the total otherness of the realm inhabited by the gnostics (ārifūn). The famous Sufi Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), he reports, would visit a mysterious city containing innumerable prophets’ graves every day. Another mystic could see Noah’s ark plainly before him. All these “signs (āyāt)” are easy for God’s power.53 Al-Sulamī quotes Abū l-ʿAbbās al-ʿAṭāʾ that, for one who truly grasps God’s message, “it would not be astounding (ajib) for him to walk on water or in the air; and every command of God is wondrous, and no wonder should result from it (kull amr Allāh ʿajab wa-laysa shayʾ minhu bi-ʿajab).”54 Al-Shaʿrānī tells that his teacher, Zakariyyāʾ al-Anṣārī, would encounter a beggar from Upper Egypt every day. The beggar would solicit charity from al-Anṣārī while relating fantastical stories of his daily visits with dead saints in far-off lands, such as the tomb of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī in Baghdad. When al-Shaʿrānī asked his teacher why he humored such obvious fabrications, since the man clearly could not have gone to those places, al-Anṣārī replied, “[i]t’s possible that he’s telling the truth, as the facts (al-amr) are conceivable, since the whole world is but a footstep for a true believer.”55

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52 Al-Shaʿrānī, Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, 430.
53 Al-Makkī, Qūt al-qulûb, 269–70.
Denying karāmas was the embodiment of the lack of vision and demented perspective of those who failed to recognize the saints. In his biographical entry on one Abū Muḥammad al-Lahḥām (d. 333/945), a respected faqīh and Sufi of Qayrawān, Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ (d. 544/1149) reports how one person used to criticize and cast doubts on him. One night this skeptic entered al-Lahḥām’s chamber and saw that his lamp had gone out. When he offered to light it again, it suddenly illuminated itself. Al-Lahḥām explained to the perplexed visitor that it had been lit by “your anger, O you who denies karāmas.”⁵⁶ In his Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn, al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) explains that, “[i]f no one believed in anything except what he had witnessed with his own benighted soul and his own harsh heart, the realm of faith would be constricted for him.” He further explains that denying karāmas is like denying one’s image in a mirror, an object that is but a piece of iron that has been forged and polished. The denier looks at a rusty and dirty piece of iron in his hand and denies that it could even reflect some essence. The true “ruling (ḥukm)” of those who deny karāmas, al-Ghazālī concludes, is that they will be denied their likes.⁵⁷ ‘Abd al-Raʿūf al-Munāwī (d. 1031/1621), an accomplished student of al-Shaʿrānī in Cairo, similarly comments that only a “deprived person (maḥrūm)” denies the miracles of saints.⁵⁸ In a rumination on his own spiritual elevation and on the many miracles he had experienced, Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi (d. 1762) observes how, for saints, karāmas are just as much an example of “God’s Sunna” as growing stronger by eating meat. It is only because of most people’s failure to advance beyond an elementary spiritual state, one dominated by a mundane preoccupation with ʿāda, that such people considers miracles unusual.⁵⁹

Muʿtazili Polemics over the Miraculous

Debates over who could perform miracles, what constituted miracles and what these miracles meant were legion in the intellectual centers of the Nile/Oxus region from the second/eighth to the fourth/tenth century. As the primary

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actors involved in this debate predated the gelling of Sunni Islam in its institutional form, we will provide only outlines of their debates because they include concerns and ideas that would resonate with later Sunnis.

In the third/ninth century, Muʿtazilis in both Baghdad and Basra were occupied with Christian polemicists who based their attacks on Islam partially on a claim that Muḥammad had failed to provide miracles matching those of Jesus. This was an argument based on the crucial assumption that miracles were the essential proof of prophecy.60 Into the fourth/tenth century, the Basran and Baghdad schools of Muʿtazilis diverged over questions like the nature of the Qur'anic miracle. The Baghdad school, soon adopted by Imāmi Shiites like al-Sharīf al-Murtada (d. 436/1044), held that it was well within human means to replicate a text like the Qur'an, and that Muḥammad's miracle consisted of God preventing (ṣarfa) the Meccans (and anyone since) from doing so. The Basrans, elaborating what would become the Sunni doctrine of iʿjāz al-Qurʾān, argued that the holy book possessed an inherently unmatchable—and thus miraculous—eloquence.61 The master of the Basran school, Abū ʿAli al-Jubbārī (d. 303/915), clearly denied the possibility of miracles for anyone other than prophets.62

The attribution of miracles to the imāms by Imāmi Shiites in order to argue for their authority similarly attracted the polemic attention of the Basran school.63 Richard Martin contends that Muʿtazilis like al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025) of Rayy were even more alarmed by the rise of Bāṭini Shiism and the use of false miracles by Fatimid propagandists to seduce followers.64

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60 For the Muʿtazili attention to polemics with other religions, see Sarah Stroumsa, “Signs of Prophecy: The Emergence and Early Development of a Theme in Arabic Theological Literature,” Harvard Theological Review 78.1–2 (1985): 109. In a series of Christian-Muslim polemics that supposedly took place in the court of al-Maʾmūn, the Christian ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī argues that one of the proofs that Muḥammad was not a prophet was that he did not predict future events and that he had no miracles. He asserts that the Qurʾan mentions none and that reports from other sources are just fables that most Muslims “possessed of knowledge” reject as such (Georges Tartar, Dialogue Islamo-Chretien sous le calife al-Maʾmûn [Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1985], 158–62, 165).


Such concerns formed the contours of the discourse on miracles in the Basran school, which would produce Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī and whose heritage informed the lingering bastions of Muʿtazilism in Rayy and later Khwarazm through the eighth/fourteenth centuries.65

This is most evident in the Mughnī, the *summa theologica* of the Muʿtazili Shāfiʿi al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār. The bulk of the author’s energy in his chapter on *muʿjizas* is spent undermining Imāmi Shiʿite claims that someone other than a prophet could receive miracles.66 His arguments, however, trace the outlines of the theological anxieties and polemical tools that would provide the basis for intra-Sunni debates over *karāmas* as well. ʿAbd al-Jabbār cites a pillar of the Basran school, Abū Hāshim al-Jubbāʾī (d. 321/933), to introduce the main argument for limiting miracles (referred to as *muʿjīza*, understood as actions beyond human capacity)67 to prophets: a *kharq al-ʿāda* cannot appear with anyone other than a prophet because then it would lose its special indication, and prophets would lack any undeniable proof.68 ʿAbd al-Jabbār continues to argue that, if a person with anything less than a prophetic level of consistency in faith and piety could produce a miracle, then “it is possible for this to occur frequently in one era, for there is no evidence for their small number. It would be required, according to that opinion, that all then [could] be distinguished by *muʿjīzas*. And that would render the *muʿjīz* no longer *muʿjīz*, and incidents breaking the habitual course of nature many and ordinary (*mutādan*).”69

Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār is certainly aware of and concerned with claims of *kharq al-ʿāda* occurring with “the righteous (ṣāliḥīn)” as *karāmas* (many such “righteous,” he observes, are imposters using asceticism [*nask*] to attract followers). He objects that, if miracles in such cases merely functioned to ennoble

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65 For the extent to which Muʿtazilism in Khwarazm differed from the school of ʿAbd al-Jabbār, see Sabine Schmidtke, trans., *A Muʿtazilite Creed of Az-Zamahsari* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1997), 7–9. Abū l-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar al-Zamakhshāri (d. 538/1144) in his *al-Kashshāf* states that the Qur’anic verse reading “God is the knower of the unseen realm, and He does not manifest His unknown realm except to him whom He chooses as a messenger . . .” constitutes “the proving false (*ibṭāl*) of *karāmas*, since those to whom they are ascribed, though they are saints pleasing [to God], they are not messengers . . .” (*al-Kashshāf*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥusayn Aḥmad, 4 vols. [Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Istiqāma, 1373/1953], 4:506 [Qur’an 72:27]). Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh notes his teacher Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Mursī’s response to this objection: that a *walī* or *ṣiddīq* can be understood to fit under the category of messenger, just as a king saying that he would only meet with his vizier could allow the vizier’s assistants in with him (*Latāʿif al-minan*, 68–9).


67 For a discussion of Muʿtazilite notion of *muʿjīz*, see Martin, “The Role of the Basrah Muʿtazilah,” 184.


69 Ibid., 15:220.
(karāma) a person, then they are not demonstrating prophethood, which must be their exclusive role. Yet even this discussion of saintly miracles is but an extension of his anti-Shiite polemic. ‘Abd al-Jabbār circles back to that topic with his remark that Imāmi Shiites claim many miracles for their “righteous (ṣāliḥīn)” leaders.

As the karāma emerged as a tenet of Sunnism, it further compounded Muʿtazili rejection of the ahl al-ḥadīth creed. Conversely, early Sunni theologians and Sufis saw the Muʿtazilis as the main rejectors of karāmas. Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī refers to precisely the type of argument advanced by ‘Abd al-Jabbār as the objection of those who reject ascribing miracles to anyone but prophets, a group that Radtke identifies as the Ḥanafī/Muʿtazilis of Khurasan and Transoxania. In his treatment of karāmas in his aggressively pro-Ashʿari theological creed, the Uṣūl al-dīn, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī of Nishapur focuses on the objections of the “Qadariyya,” an Ashʿari moniker for their rationalist, Muʿtazili foes. The Muʿtazili student of al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 436/1044), provided the main fodder for Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s systematic Ashʿari defense of karāmas.

From North Africa to Khurasan and Beyond: Limiting the Saintly Miracle

As the Muʿtazili discourse on miracles has shown, there was tremendous anxiety in some camps over the threat that karāmas posed to the probative power of Muḥammad’s miracles. Against this Muʿtazili effort to nip the non-prophetic miracle in the bud, the nascent Sunni movement had affirmed the unlimited possibility of saintly miracles. Even in the earliest surviving introduction to Sufism, we find the opinion that the karāma could reach the level of a muʿjīza in terms of the scale or dramatic effect of the act involved. Al-Kalābādhī (d. 380/990) of Bukhara, in his Taʿarruf, claims that all Sufis agree on this.

This was not, however, an opinion to which all Sunnis (or Sufis) in that period could conform. Maribel Fierro has identified a controversy that flared over karāmas amongst Mālikī scholars in North Africa and al-Andalus in the late fourth/tenth and early fifth/eleventh centuries. It originated with the leading Mālikī jurist of Qayrawān, Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386/996), author

70 Ibid., 15:227.
71 Ibid., 15:229.
72 Radkte and O’Kane, The Concept of Sainthood, 156; and Radtke, “al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī on Miracles,” 294.
74 Al-Kalābādhī, al-Taʿarruf, 87.
of the famous Risāla on Māliki fiqh. Writing his history of the Māliki school almost two centuries later, Qādī ʿIyāḍ notes in his entry on Ibn Abī Zayd that he penned polemics against a group known as the Fikriyya (Fierro identifies them as the Bakriyya)75 for their belief in excessive saintly miracles, such as the possibility that a saint could be granted the karāma of seeing God in this world videlicet.76 This had led many Sufis and Sunnis (ahl al-ḥadīth) to attack Ibn Abī Zayd for supposedly rejecting karāmas altogether. Qādī ʿIyāḍ adds that this was not true, suggesting that anyone who looked through the Qayrawānī scholar’s books would know his true objective.77 Unfortunately, the works in question have not survived.

Ibn Abī Zayd was known and respected beyond the Islamic West. In Baghdad scholarly circles, his contemporary Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385–8/995–8) calls him “one of most excellent men of our time.”78 In fact, our most immediate reference to the karāma controversy is the Baghdad scholar and one of the key figures in the elaboration of Ashʿari theology, Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013). The earliest surviving systematic Ashʿari / Sunni defense of karāmas was actually written by al-Bāqillānī because of the North African controversy. Al-Bāqillānī wrote his Kitāb al-Bayān ʿan al-farq bayn al-muʿjizāt wa-l-karāmāt wa-l-hiyal wa-l-kahāna wa-l-siḥr wa-l-nāranjāt because he had heard reports that Ibn Abī Zayd had denied karāmas altogether. The work aims at proving that a belief in karāmas in no way threatens the probative power of the muʿjiza. Although more directed by the contours of Muʿtazili discourse on the proper definition of muʿjiza, al-Bāqillānī’s treatise outlines what would become a standard Ash’ari argument for the theological permissibility of karāmas. It does so by tying prophetic miracles to a challenge issued by the prophet to his opponents to match his miracle. Hence, for al-Bāqillānī, prophetic miracles are more than what breaks the ʿāda of humankind by doing something totally

75 The book was called al-Istiẓhār fī l-radd ʿalā al-fikriyya (Qādī ʿIyāḍ, Tartīb al-madārik [Rabat ed.], 6:218, and Fierro, “Polemic,” 240). Al-Ashʿarī lists the Bakiyya as a sect of the Muʿtazila, noting that they believe that, on the Day of Judgment, God creates a body (ṣūra) for himself that can speak and be seen (al-Ashʿarī, Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn, ed. Helmut Ritter [Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-ʿĀmma li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 1400/1980], 287). It is interesting to note that al-Qushayrī addresses this question briefly in his Risāla, stating that the strongest position (aqwā) is that a saint could not see God in this world but admitting that al-Ashʿarī acknowledged the contrary position as well in his Kitāb al-ruʾyā al-kabīr (apparently not extant) (Risāla, 188). Al-Ashʿarī denies the possibility of seeing God in this world in his list of Sunni beliefs (Maqālāt, 293).
77 Qādī ʿIyāḍ, Tartīb al-madārik, 6:219.
out of the power of men; they must also be accompanied by a challenge from a prophet that others do the like.\textsuperscript{79}

Al-Bāqillānī’s \textit{Bayān}, however, is hardly a rebuttal of Ibn Abī Zayd’s supposed stance. Remarking on the North African’s reported denial of karāmas, al-Bāqillānī immediately expresses skepticism about the accuracy of attributing this extreme opinion to so vaunted a scholar, a master of al-Bāqillānī’s own school of law. Seeking an alternative explanation for Ibn Abī Zayd’s supposed statements, he suggests, “[i]t may be that, if he said this, he only meant to deny those karāmas the likes of which must be denied. For indeed we do not permit the righteous to have karāmas of every sort or those like the rest of the signs (āyāt) of the messengers (s)…” Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ observed that al-Bāqillānī was most aware of Ibn Abī Zayd’s actual stance, and it seems very likely that he only rejected karāmas that could be confused with prophetic miracles.\textsuperscript{80} Indeed, al-Bāqillānī upheld the same opinion. In the beginning of the \textit{Bayān}, he explains that only prophets can revive the dead, create bodies \textit{ex nihilo} (ikhtirāʿ al-ajsām), cure lepers and the blind and manipulate time (iqāmat al-zamān).\textsuperscript{81} It is no coincidence that all but the last of these are instances of kharq al-ʿāda matching prophetic miracles ascribed to Jesus in the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{82}

Al-Bāqillānī’s position was shared by his contemporary Abū Isḥāq al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 418/1027), a towering Shāfīʿi jurist, theologian and Hadith scholar who played an equally central role in constructing Ashʿari theology and epistemology.\textsuperscript{83} Al-Isfarāyīnī’s close student was none other than al-Qushayrī, who records his master’s opinion on karāmas: “[p]robative miracles (muʿjizāt) are the indications of prophets, and the indication of prophecy does not occur with a non-prophet.” Al-Isfarāyīnī affirmed that “[s]aints have karāmas similar to (shibh) having prayers answered (ijābat al-duʿāʾ), but as for the type that are probative miracles of prophets, no.”\textsuperscript{84}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{79} Sorcery cannot be mistaken for a \textit{muʿjiza} because, in such a case, God would render the sorcerer unable to perform his trick (al-Bāqillānī, \textit{Kitāb al-bayān}, 54–5, 94–5).
\item \textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 5. He says he had already written such a response to one Ibn al-Muʿtamir al-Raqqī in Mecca.
\item \textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 57.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Jesus presides over lifeless clay birds being animated (Qur’an 3:43), cures the blind and a leper (Qur’an 5:110) and revives the dead (Qur’an 3:43, 5:110). It is also worth noting that, in addressing Muʿtazilī fears of sorcery (siḥr) being conflated with prophetic miracles, al-Ghazālī says that no one could conceive of siḥr extending to things like curing the blind or lepers, reviving the dead, or splitting the moon or seas—these are only within the power of God (al-Ghazālī, \textit{al-Iqtiṣād fī al-iʿtiqād} [Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, n.d.], 96).
\item \textsuperscript{83} For a discussion of al-Isfarāyīnī’s life and works, see Jonathan Brown, \textit{The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim} (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 188–91.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Al-Qushayrī, \textit{Risāla}, 186. Some later Sunnis like al-Rāzī interpreted al-Isfarāyīnī as rejecting karāmas altogether (al-Rāzī, \textit{al-Arbāʿūn}, 2:399).
\end{itemize}
Although his Risāla would serve as the basis for later Sunni defenses of karāmas, al-Qushayrī, in fact, followed his teacher’s anomalous position. In his seminal assertion of saintly miracles, al-Qushayrī states that they can include breaches of the habitual order of nature as dramatic as teleportation (literally “folding” space, ṭayy al-ard) or feeding the multitudes. “But know,” he adds, “that for many of the acts lying within [God’s] power (maqdūrāt), it is known today with certainty (qat’an) that they cannot appear as a karāma for saints - and this is necessary knowledge (darūra) or close to necessary (shibh darūra).” Examples include, “the appearance of a person by means other than two parents or transforming an inanimate object (jamād) into a beast or animal. And there are many things similar to that.”

The anxiety over karāmas among these three formative figures in Ash’arism seems palpable. Faced with Mu’tazili objections, they had to establish a qualitative distinction between prophetic and non-prophetic miracles. This they grounded in the notion of the prophets’ challenge to their opponents to match their miracles, a construct inherited from Mu’tazili discourse itself. Defining prophetic miracles as such entailed that miracles performed by a prophet could never be replicated by a non-prophet. If they were, the challenge would have been met, and mu’jizas would lose their distinctive proof value. The Qur’an recounts how Jesus had been born of only one parent, animated inanimate objects, revived the dead and cured lepers. Such miracles could thus never be replicated by a mere saint.

This limiting position on karāmas coexisted alongside what became the mainstream Sunni position. In his Risāla, al-Qushayrī lists an alternative stance held by another of his teachers, Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015), who was a friend and colleague of both al-Isfarāyīnī and al-Bāqillānī and along with them formed the third effective formulator of the Ash’ari school. Ibn Fūrak summarized what would become the mainstream Sunni position on what distinguished a karāma from a mu’jiza. It was not the presence of a challenge or the degree of kharq al-ʿāda. Rather, the mu’jiza was accompanied by a claim of prophethood, something a saint would never do. As a result, there was no risk of a challenge being met and hence no ceiling on the scale or dramatic effect of a karāma. This categoric allowance had clearly already gained favor among Ash’aris even in al-Qushayrī’s lifetime. His own son, the accomplished

85 Al-Qushayrī, Risāla, 187. See also, Nguyen, Sufi Master and Qur’an Scholar, 237–42.
Shāfiʿi / Ashʿari Abū Naṣr ‘Abd al-Raḥīm (d. 514/1120), stated that there is no limit on potential karāmas.87

Indeed, it would be Ibn Fūrak’s position, not the limiting one shared by al-Bāqillānī and al-Isfarāyīnī, that became the stance of the vast majority of Sunni scholars until today. Leading ulama like Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), al-Yāfī (d. 767/1367), al-Taftazānī, al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392), al-Sha‘rānī, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), Mullā ‘Ali al-Qārī (d. 1014/1606) and Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (d. 1932) all stated that karāmas could reach the range of or even supersede muʿjīzas. The restrictions of al-Bāqillānī, al-Isfarāyīnī and al-Qushayrī have been dismissed as aberrations.88 In retrospect, it is tempting to accept this and to treat the categoric allowance as the default Ashʿari position. As the Andalusian controversy illustrates, however, it would be more accurate to view the limiting stance of al-Bāqillānī, al-Isfarāyīnī and al-Qushayrī as the original position of the Sunni kalām scholars that was only later abandoned.

Indeed, the concerns that led to these three scholars’ restrictions survived and moved other prominent Sunnis to uphold them as well. We have already seen that Ibn Abī Zayd most likely held the limiting position. His student, Muḥammad b. Mawhab al-Tujībī (d. 406/1015–16), brought his teacher’s position on karāmas to Cordoba, where it caused an even more dramatic controversy than the one in Qayrawān. Combined with al-Tujībī’s embrace of kalām, his rejection of both “extreme (ghulūww)” saintly miracles and ones not reliably reported offended staunch Sunni traditionalists in the city, such as Abū ʿUmar al-Ṭalamankī (d. 429/1038). They raised such a row that a number of


scholars from both parties were expelled from the city and exiled across the straits of Gibraltar.  

Early Ashʿari kalām devotees, however, were not the most extreme faithful dissenters in Andalusia. Not surprisingly, the most strident faithful dissenter in Cordoba’s karāma controversy was the inimitable Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064). He actually debated some of the Ashʿaris involved in the dispute and had read al-Bāqillānī’s response. Like the Muʿtazilis, Ibn Ḥazm sees non-prophetic instances of kharq al-ʿāda as inherent threats to the proof of Muḥammad’s message. However, he pursues his argument by trumpeting the unchanging reality of natural laws over the Ashʿari denial of causation and their alternative theory of ʿāda.

Ashʿaris allowed the possibility of karāmas by denying that God’s creation ran according to unchanging causal rules. There were no “laws of nature” in the Enlightenment sense, only its “habitual course,” which God could violate whenever he chose. In a chapter on “Natures (ṭabāʾiʿ)” in his heresiographical work, Ibn Ḥazm explains that the Ashʿari vision of the physical world and of karāmas was thus premised on an underappreciation of the rules of nature, an assumption that ignored the very language of the Qur’anic revelation. While Arabs of the Prophet’s time spoke of the unchanging, essential nature (ṭabīʿa) of certain objects or substances, they used the word ʿāda for mere human customs like wearing hats. The Ashʿari designation of great muʿjizas like splitting the moon or reviving the dead as “kharq al-ʿāda” was thus a misnomer born of a failure to grasp the firmness of God’s laws. Unlike ʿāda, Ibn Ḥazm states, “nature (ṭabiʿa) cannot be exited from.”

For Ibn Ḥazm, “transforming nature (iḥālat al-ṭabāʾa)” is impossible for anyone but God or his prophets. We must accept their capacity to do so, he claims, because of the undeniable transmitted evidence (tawātur) of prophetic miracles. As for miracles by non-prophets, such as those attributed to the “righteous (ṣāliḥīn),” there is no such evidence for them. As a result, claims of karāmas do not overcome the default assumption that altering nature is “impossible according to reason (mumtaniʿ fī l-ʿaql).” Ibn Ḥazm explains that to accept such unsubstantiated miracle claims as being within the realm of the possible would be mean that “the impossible, possible and necessary would all be equivalent (istawā), and thus all truths (ḥaqāʾiq) would be undermined.

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89 Al-Tujībī also upheld the possibility of women receiving prophecy and rejected the idea that the sage Khîdr could remain alive across the centuries (Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ, Tartīb al-madārik, ed. Muḥammad Sālim Ḥāshim [Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1418/1998], 2:261–2).
91 Ibid., 5:11–12.
If we accepted *karāmas* after the Prophet’s death, how then could we contest the Shiite claim that the sun had been miraculously reversed for ‘Alī when he missed a prayer, or how could people know that a miracle was not the prophetic sign of a new messenger from God?93

Ibn Ḥazm was a genius, but to many Sunnis he was a gadfly who espoused the Ḥanafī madhhab, the anomalous opinions of which scholars like al-Isfarāyīnī did not even consider pertinent to scholarly consensus.94 A Cordoban scholarly contemporary of Ibn Hazm, however, was embraced as an exemplary Sunni Hadith scholar while holding the same stance on miracles. ‘Alī b. Khalaf Ibn Baṭṭāl (d. 449/1057)95 was born in Cordoba but was forced to flee along with many others during the horrible Berber attacks on the city from 1010–13 CE. The fact that Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ states that Ibn Baṭṭāl heard *ḥadīths* from Ibn al-Faraḍī, who was killed in the sack of the city in 1013, means that he must have been at least an adolescent when Cordoba fell. Ibn Baṭṭāl fled to Valencia, where he studied with al-Ṭalāmanki and other leading traditionalist Hadith experts.

Little is known of Ibn Baṭṭāl’s life, and he owes his place in posterity entirely to his respected commentary on al-Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*. Concerning *karāmas*, like Ibn Ḥazm, Ibn Baṭṭāl is ultimately concerned with securing the prophetic monopoly over the miraculous so that no ambiguity could arise over Muḥammad’s status as the final bearer of God’s message. Ibn Baṭṭāl turns to the question of *karāmas* in the context of a *ḥadīth* in which a Muslim prisoner in Mecca impresses his captors when they find him eating a fruit not usually in season in the town. Ibn Baṭṭāl acknowledges that this could, ostensibly, have been a miracle provided by God to impress the unbelievers. But he reveals himself to be far more skeptical of *karāmas* than any Sunni discussed so far:

As for someone claiming that this happened today among the Muslims, this has no argument (*wajh*), since all the Muslims have entered the religion of God in waves, believing in Muḥammad with certainty. So what meaning would making a miracle (*āya*) manifest to them have, and what would it be used to prove for them? For one

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who is weak in faith might feel doubt, as might one who is credulous (gharāra). He could say, 'If these miracles were possible for non-prophets, how are they to be believed from a prophet when non-prophets can also bring them?' So if it accomplished nothing more than removing that doubt from the hearts of people with shortcomings [of faith], the credulous and the ignorant, blocking those means (qat' al-dharī'a) would be required (wājib), with preventing [miracles] following necessarily (lāzim) from that cause. And how much more this is the case when [these miracles] have no meaning in Islam after its taking root (ta'ṣṣulihī) or among the people of faith after its establishment! [All this] with the exception of whatever miracles might occur that do not violate the habitual course of nature (‘āda) or shock people (yuqallibu ‘aynām) or fall outside what is rationally conceivable for men (ma‘qūl al-bashar)…. 

Ibn Baṭṭāl lists as examples of acceptable miracles God answering a prayer in a time of need or preventing some harm from occurring. He adds that these are truly the acts of the merciful God and “the ennoblement (karāma) of the saint before his Lord.” Ibn Baṭṭāl makes another jab at non-prophetic miracles as well as at Ash‘arism. He recounts how he was told by his teacher in Qayrawān, Abū ‘Imrān [Mūsā b. ʿĪsā al-Fāsī]96 (d. 430/1038–9), who had studied with al-Bāqillānī in Baghdad, that he had once asked the famous theologian the following question: if a Mu‘tazili came to you and told you that the proof for the positions they took against the Ash‘aris was that some miracle (āya) had appeared at the hands of a righteous Mu‘tazili, what would you say? Al-Bāqillānī apparently replied after some thought that “[a]nything that contradicts some matter that is based on religion, the Prophetic traditions (sunan) or something affirmed by sound knowledge (ṣaḥīh al-ʿilm), it will not be accepted on principle (aṣlām), no matter via what route it came.”97

Unlike the limits placed on the degree of kharq al-ʿāda by the early Ash‘aris, Ibn Baṭṭāl is not concerned with theological niceties. For him, the habitual course of nature can only be broken for prophets because allowing otherwise would create a slippery slope to disbelief in Muḥammad. It is ironic that al-Bāqillānī serves as a target of Ibn Baṭṭāl’s attack. Although neither al-Bāqillānī nor al-Qushayrī would have limited karāmas to only that which does not violate the habitual course of nature—they only set limits on those violations reaching the level of prophetic miracles—they were much more critical of karāma claims than the Sunni majority with whom Ibn Baṭṭāl so disagreed.

Ibn Baṭṭāl was not the last Sunni scholar to disagree with what became the mainstream position on karāmas. In one of the most comprehensive essays on karāmas by any Muslim scholar, contained in his biographical dictionary of the Shāfīʿī school, the Damascene Ashʿari scholar Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī concludes by providing his own stance on saintly miracles. The question of whether one should accept the possibility of karāmas categorically or if one should place a theoretical limit on the types of kharq al-ʿāda allowed is a challenging one, he admits. For “confining the graces gifted by God to the saints is great and difficult, while widening their possibility leads to opening the closed door of prophetic miracles.”

Al-Subkī concludes that his preferred opinion is that karāmas be accepted unconditionally if they do not violate the habitual course of nature. Furthermore, some types of kharq al-ʿāda should be believed, but not ones as extreme as a child being born without two parents or animating an inanimate object. His exemplar in this opinion, he states, is al-Qushayrī.

Another titan of Mamluk-era Sunnism also identified with al-Qushayrī’s limitations: the great Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449) of Cairo, so venerated a Hadith scholar that he was referred to as “shaykh al-Islām” by al-Suyūṭī and is still referred to by Sunni scholars merely as “the Hadith Master (al-ḥāfīẓ).” In his Fatḥ al-bārī, Ibn Ḥajar drew extensively on and engaged with Ibn Baṭṭāl’s commentary on Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī. After quoting a segment of Ibn Baṭṭāl’s above comments, Ibn Ḥajar concludes that Ibn Baṭṭāl had held a middle position between those who denied karāmas and those who affirmed them. He then provides his own opinion: “the most just (aʿdal)” position on the issue is that of al-Qushayrī, namely, that karāmas cannot extend to “what occurred as a challenge for one of the prophets.”

Holding this skeptical position on the miracles of saints had a cost in the Mamluk milieu. Ibn Ḥajar may have been the most revered Hadith scholar of his day, but his skepticism was noted, and it colored his image in posterity. Al-Shaʿrānī, who respected the “shaykh al-Islām” greatly, nonetheless casts him as a Doubting Thomas character in the biographies of several leading saints of Cairo in his day, such as Aḥmad b. Sulaymān al-Zāhid (d. 820’s/1420’s). Al-Shaʿrānī reports in his hagiography of Sufis that Ibn Ḥajar had disapproved of the dervish Aḥmad b. Farghal, saying to himself, “God does not take the.

99 Ibid., 2:337.
100 Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, Fatḥ al-bārī sharh Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, ed. Ṭādh al-ʿAdīr Bin Bāz and Ayman Fuʿād ʿAbd al-Bāqī, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥilmiyya, 1448/1927), 7:487. Ibn Ḥajar’s position on karāmas may have some link to a book he wrote, which I have been unable to locate, on prophetic miracles entitled al-ʿĀyāt al-nayyirāt li-khawāriq al-muʿjizāt (Kātib Chelebī, Kashf al-ẓunūn, 1:265).
ignorant as saints, and if he did he would teach them." The dervish miraculously read Ibn Ḥajar’s mind, grabbing the scholar and smacking him on the face while exclaiming, “[n]ay, God has taken me as a walī and taught me!”

What if Breaking the Habitual Course of Nature Becomes Habit?

Unlike the theological discourse of Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār and al-Qushayrī, Ibn Ḥajar’s explanation for why one should not accept karāma reports categorically centers on social concerns. He explains that, in his day:

“. . . having prayers answered immediately, multiplying food and water, perceiving that which is hidden from the eye, foretelling things to come and other such things have become very common (qad kathura jiddan), such that their occurrence at the hands of someone said to be righteous has become like the habitual course of nature (al-ʿāda).”

“So any [real] violation of that course (khāriq),” he continues, “has now become limited to what [exceptions] al-Qushayrī mentioned. And it is fitting to limit (taqyīd) the opinion that anything that has occurred as a prophetic miracle could also occur as a karāma of a saint.” The only real violations of the habitual course of nature, in other words, were now the miracles worked by prophets—karāmas had become mundane. Indeed, one scholar of the time was described as performing at least fifty miracles every day during his teaching sessions alone.

Ibn Ḥajar then further explains his concerns about religious practice in society: “[a]nd behind all of this is the notion, which has become accepted among the masses, that kharq al-ʿāda indicates that the person for whom it occurs is among the saints of God most high, and that is an error.” He then reinforces a theme stressed so commonly by supporters of the Sufi path for centuries: someone disrupting the habitual course of nature is not necessarily a walī, for sorcerors and charlatans either do or appear to do the same. “So you need a criterion (fāriq),” Ibn Ḥajar concludes, “and that is following the sharia.”

The most extensive rumination on this topic comes from an earlier scholar who was both a committed Sufi and a critic of that tradition’s failures and excesses, both a contributor to the intellectual corpus of medieval Islamdom and the most hailed preacher of his day. Ibn al-Jawzī of Baghdad (d. 597/1201)

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101 Al-Shaʿrānī, al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā; 419, 451; and al-Nabhānī, Jāmiʿ, 1:221.
wrote his \textit{Talbīs Iblīs} late in his career, commenting on the many and varied ways in which Satan had misled various segments of Muslim scholarly and lay society.\footnote{He wrote this after his \textit{Kitab al-quṣṣāṣ}, which he wrote after his \textit{Kitāb al-mawḍūʿāt} and his \textit{tafsīr} works (Ibn al-Jawzī, \textit{Naqd al-ʿilm wa-l-ʿulamāʾ aw Talbīs Iblīs} [Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Muḥammad ʿAlī Ṣubayḥī, n.d.], 120; and idem, \textit{Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa-l-mudhakkirīn}, ed. Merlin Swartz [Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1986]; 103, 147).}

Early chapters of the \textit{Talbīs} address the ways in which the Devil deludes people by making them deny prophecy altogether. Here Ibn al-Jawzī discusses how some people have forged reports, with \textit{isnāds}, of events that resemble \textit{muʿjizas} and \textit{kharq al-ʿāda}, and how some in his own time claim to be soothsayers, astrologers knowing the unseen (\textit{ghayb}) or \textit{jinn} exorcists. He rejects such claims of supernatural powers, mocking soothsayers who claim to know that there is "a grain of wheat in the penis of a foal (\textit{ḥabbat burr fī iḥlīl muhr})" and then boast that their clairvoyance makes them equal to Jesus, whom the Qur'an describes as promising "I will inform you of what you eat and what you keep stored in your homes (\textit{unabbiʾukum bi-mā taʾkulūn wa-mā taddakhirūn fī buyūtikum})" (Qur'an 3:49).

Ibn al-Jawzī explores the effect of these superstitions. Certainly, he remarks, in all the lands of Islam, there is one soothsayer who has enjoyed the coincidence of accurate predictions. Would people then believe all this person's claims, and would the miracles worked by prophets now not be accepted as \textit{kharq} al-ʿāda? He tells of a group of Sufis coming and claiming that:

\begin{quote}
\textquote{someone had reached with their drinking cup into the Tigris, and it came out full of gold!} and this has become like \textit{ʿāda} by way of the \textit{karāmas} from the Sufi devotees, and like \textit{ʿāda} according to the claims of the astrologers, and by way of the special properties [of matter] (\textit{khawāṣṣ}) according to the natural philosophers (or alchemists) (\textit{ṭabāyiʿīn}) (sic), and by way of soothsaying (\textit{kahāna}) according to the charmer (\textit{muʿazzimīn}) and "knowers (\textit{ʿarrāfīn})." So what ruling remains for Jesus' (s) saying 'I will inform you of what you eat and what you keep stored in your homes,' and what \textit{kharq} remains for the \textit{ʿādāt}? For are the \textit{ʿādāt} anything but the ongoing existence of the world (\textit{istimrār al-wujūd}) and the great number of events that transpire (\textit{kathrat al-ḥuṣūl})? But if a reasonable, believing person draws attention to the corruption and harm (\textit{fusād}) in this, the Sufi says, 'Do you deny the miracles of saints?\footnote{Ibn al-Jawzī, \textit{Talbis Iblis}, 66–7. Ibn al-Jawzī expressed concerns over Sufi deviations, heresy or extremism, for example those who look up to al-Ḥallāj as one of the "\textit{arbāb al-qulūb}" (idem, \textit{Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ}, 116–7). Ibn al-Jawzī also criticized al-Ghazālī for including stories in his \textit{Iḥyāʾ} that have bad implications for \textit{fiqh} or ethics in a book called \textit{Iʿlām al-aḥyāʾ bi-aghlāṭ al-Iḥyāʾ} (idem, \textit{al-Muntaẓam}, 17/18:226). It is interesting that al-Yāfīʿī considered the \textit{Talbis Iblis} to be an undue criticism of Sufism (al-Yāfīʿī, \textit{Nashr al-mahāsin}, 1:81).}
Both Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Ḥajar perceived the issue of karāmas primarily through the lens of their social effect and the impact they had on the religious worldview of the Muslim masses. One of the roots of both their concerns, as well as at those of Ibn Baṭṭāl and the skeptics in the Maghrib controversy, was the threat of fraudulent claimants to sainthood. Ibn al-Jawzī, in fact, devoted a whole separate chapter in his Talbīs to “How the Devil Deludes the Religious by What Appears to be Karāmas (dhikr talbīs Iblīs ‘alā al-mutadāyynīn bi-mā yushbīhu al-karāmāt).”

Emphasizing that there is no necessary correlation between someone’s bringing about a break in the habitual course of nature and being a wālī had been and has remained a prominent theme in Sufi discourse since its traceable origins. It is bound closely to the fear that Sufi devotees might follow an unworthy teacher because of apparent or actual supernatural acts. This was the major motive for Sufi teachers as early as al-Sulamī emphasizing that saints needed to keep their karāmas secret, “so that the masses might not be tried by them.” The solution prescribed by Sufi masters throughout the centuries has been to advocate looking past instances of kharq al-ʿāda and instead examining the conduct of the supposed saint: does he or she fear God and follow the sharia committedly—“upholding the straight path (istiqāma)?” In his widely disseminated Sufi manual, al-Suhrawardi calls this “a major principle (aṣl kabīr),” and that failing to observe it is a main cause of many going astray on the Sufi path. Sufi teachings in general frequently describe istiqāma as the greatest karāma. This point is summed up in a statement attributed to Bāyazīd al-Bīstāmī (d. 261/874) in Sufi manuals: “[i]f you look at a man who has been granted karāmas to the point that he levitates in the air, don’t be deluded

107 For the risk that visions and supposed unveilings (kashf) might be tests from God, see al-Makki, Qīt al-qaʿīlūb, 1:123.
109 Al-Suhrawardi, ʿAwārif, 113. See also Ibn Taymiyya, Fatāwā, 11:85–6.
110 Al-Suhrawardi, ʿAwārif, 113–4, also 129, 265; Ibn Taymiyya, Fatāwā, 11:98, 121, 161; and al-Haytamī, al-Fatāwā al-ḥadīthiyya, 383. Ṭāshkübrüzāde describes one Muḥammad Zayn al-Dīn al-Khaqānī (d. 838/1435) as having “mutābaʿat al-sharīʿa wa-l-sunna, wa-kāna dhālik min aʿlā al-karāmāt ʿind ahl hādhahi al-ṭarīqa” (al-Shaqāʾiq al-nuʿmāniyya, 44). The centrality of istiqāma in knowing a saint as opposed to just looking at any kharq al-ʿāda they might manifest is the main topic of a Persian treatise by an unknown author entitled al-Tajallī fī maʿrifat al-walī, the main chapter of which is “faṣl dar miyān-i maʿnā karāmat wa ḥaqiqat anna al-istiqāma fawq kull-ast” (MS Nadwat al-Ulama [Lucknow], Taṣawwuf 223 Fārisī, fol. 4a).
by him until you have looked at how he is in commanding [right] and forbidding [wrong] and observing the limits set by God.”

The danger of the masses or even more specialized Sufi devotees following a false saint became more pronounced as the frequency and importance of karāmās increased. As this intensification of karāmās plateaued in the Mamluk period, certain Sufi brotherhoods, like the Shādhiliyya, emphasized saints observing the exoteric sharia and actually evinced a mistrust of karāmās. As Nicholson observes wryly, at this point in Islamic civilization, “[m]iracles there must be; if the holy man failed to supply them, they were invented for him.”

The effort to delink supposed instances of kharq al-ʿāda from the bestowal of saintly status found its most forceful expression in two of Ibn Taymiyya’s most famous critiques of popular religious deviations, his Qāʿida fī l-karāmāt and his “Friends of the Most Merciful and Friends of Satan (Awliyāʾ al-Raḥmān wa-awliyāʾ al-Shayṭān).”

Concern over fraudulent saints and claims of karāma was linked to another bête noire of the Mamluk-era ulama: popular preachers (quṣṣāṣ) and their claims to authority. Ibn Ḥajar’s teacher, the famous Shafiʿi Hadith scholar Zayn al-Dīn al-ʿIrāqī (d. 806/1404), ends an invective penned against the heretical teachings and ignorance of preachers with a quote from the Tafsīr of Abū Ḥayyān al-Nahwī (d. 745/1344). He complains in exasperation about “this bizarre age” in which frauds posing as Sufi shaykhs gain the devotion of the public, milk their wealth, and teach their flocks litanies with no sharia basis. They do so by hiring servants to “spread karāmās about them and have visions of them in dreams, collecting all this in books…”

There is also another, more general, stratum to Ibn al-Jawzī’s and Ibn Ḥajar’s critiques, one that echoes clearly the anti-karāma arguments of Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār: if the habitual course of nature is violated frequently enough, it ceases to be habitual. ‘Āda itself disintegrates, and miracles have no meaning.

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112 Geoffrroy, Soufisme, 228, 351.


This is also reminiscent of Ibn Ḥazm’s warning that accepting the possibility of *karāmas* would “undermine all truths.”

In his own biographical dictionary of Sufi saints, the *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*, Ibn al-Jawzī expresses concern over the inversion of *kharq al-ʿāda* and *ʿāda* in Sufi hagiography. He criticizes Abū Nu‘aym’s *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’* for including stories that contain dangerous morals for the lay reader. One finds a terrible lesson, Ibn al-Jawzī complains, in the story of Abū Ḥamza al-Ṣūfī falling down a well and not calling to people above as the well flooded. So great was his intense trust in God’s aid (*tawakkul*) that he did not need the help of men. Ibn al-Jawzī argues that authentic trust in God means using the normal “tools (*āla*)” that God has given man for helping himself in such situations, not trusting in extraordinary salvation.116

Several noteworthy Sunni scholars attempted to address the concern of the habitual course of nature losing all meaning. They did so, however, on the theoretical and logical level, not on the social one. Al-Subkī admits that some of “our imāms” restrict *karāmas* and *muʿjiza* stories from occurring with such regularity that they are confused with the habitual course of nature. Al-Subkī concedes that he himself would not allow *karāmas* to occur so frequently, but points out that neither the objection nor his solution to it affect the basic principle (*aṣl*) that the miracles of saints are possible.117

Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-Bayjūrī (d. 1860), the venerable shaykh of al-Azhar and leading light of its Shāfīʿi/Ashʿari/Sufi heritage in his day, offered another tepid answer. On the question of a plethora of *karāmas*, he replies, “[w]e do not concede that a great number would remove them from being violations of the habitual course of nature. Rather, at most, this would be an instance of a

115 This work, written after *Talbis Iblīs*, is a digest of Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣbahānī’s *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’* stripped of its many *karāma* stories and unreliable *ḥadīth* and focusing more on knowledge (*ʿilm*) and pious abstemiousness (*waraʿ*). In the entry on Abū Turāb al-Nakhshabi, for example, Ibn al-Jawzī includes the episode in which the saint famously said that doubting *karāmas* was disbelief but omits that actual quote (Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Hindāwī, 2 vols. in 1 [Beirut: al-Maktaba al-ʿAṣriyya, 1426/2005], 1:6–7; 2:301).

116 Ibid., 1:6–7. In another interesting instance, Ibn al-Jawzī reports a story of one man who claimed that, as he was on his roof, he heard a voice telling him to throw himself off his roof, for “[h]e will draw close to the righteous” (Qur’an 7:196). The man jumped and was stopped miraculously in midair. Ibn al-Jawzī remarks, “[t]his is an impossible lie (*kadhib muḥāl*), as no reasonable person would doubt. For even if we assumed it were true, throwing himself from the roof would be *ḥarām*, as is his belief that God would draw close (*tawallā*) from one who did something prohibited. God most high said, ‘and do now throw yourselves into ruin by your own hands,’ [Qur’an 2:195], so how could he be righteous when he disobeys his Lord?” (*Talbis Iblīs*, 372–3).

continued series (istimrār) of such violations, and that does not entail that this becomes the habitual course of nature.”

The most capable and vigorous defender of karāmas in modern times has been Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (d. 1932), a native of Palestine who studied at al-Azhar in the years immediately after al-Bayjūrī’s passing and later served as an Ottoman judge in Jerusalem, Latakia and finally Beirut. He responds to this objection by reminding the reader that God’s true servants are few and far between. Even if every wāli were able to produce violations of the habitual course of nature, their paucity would mean that their karāmas could never reach the level of ‘āda.

And yet al-Nabhānī’s descriptions of saints in his own day, listed in his capacious Jāmiʿ karāmāt al-awliyāʾ (completed in 1906), belie his assurances. In the longest entry in the work, al-Nabhānī recounts the miracles of ʿAlī al-ʿUmarī, a saint from Trablus whom the author and his family knew well. Al-Nabhānī praises him by noting that he had “more karāmas and instances breaking the habitual course of nature than even the great saints of the past . . .”. Indeed, they “reached the point that they became the habitual course of nature (alḥaqathā bi-l-ʿādāt)” (my emphasis). In fact, al-ʿUmarī’s miracles became so commonplace that some people did not even notice them or appreciate his sainthood. Here we see perhaps a more crass expression of the elevated state of the true saint, at which, according to Shāh Walī Allāh, instances breaking the habitual course of nature become “normal (ʿādiyya).”

The Criterion of Probability and Faithful Dissenters: Isnād and Legal Theory

So far, the faithful dissenters we have encountered have based their arguments on theological or sociological concerns about the categorical acceptance of supposed miracles. The only detailed criteria we have encountered for filtering out unacceptable reports of karāmas consist of limiting the degree of the miracles or denying them altogether. Other faithful dissenters, however, have applied methodological criteria for probability based on the Sunni principles of epistemology and legal theory (uṣūl al-fiqh) or transmission (isnād) criticism.

118 Al-Bayjūrī, Sharḥ jawharat al-tawḥīd, 253.
119 Al-Nabhānī, Jāmiʿ, 1:19–21. See also idem, Asbab al-taʿlīf, addended to idem, Jāmiʿ karāmāt al-awliyāʾ (Dār Ṣādir edition), 2:332.
120 Al-Nabhānī, Jāmiʿ, 2:319, also 2:332.
121 Shāh Wali Allāh, Hamaʿāt, 121–2.
By the mid-fifth/eleventh century, Sunni scholars had constructed a rigorous system for evaluating the reliability of historical reports. Its component parts were elaborate but also in tension with one another. As we have discussed elsewhere, the Sunni science of transmission criticism was committed to both a fideistic credence in reports if their transmission was deemed reliable but also to applying rational criteria to the contents of reports in order to determine their truth or falsehood. Although Sunni transmission criticism was originally designed to take man’s frail reason and limited scope of understanding out of the process of historical criticism, the introduction of these rational criteria ironically brought the subjectivity of individual reason back to the center of examining reports.122

Two individuals provide fascinating examples of how this internally dynamic method of historical criticism was applied to miracle stories. The first, the Damascene traditionist and historian Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), applied an inchoate and idiosyncratic mixture of *matn* and *isnād* criticism. The second, the Moroccan Neo-Sufi polymath ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī (d. 1993), represents a uniquely confident, modern application of *uṣūl al-fiqh* to *karāma* claims.

Demanding reliable transmission for evidence was routine in Sunni legal discourse, but, as we have seen, it was highly controversial when miracles were concerned. Even highlighting the reliability of a miracle report is rare in histories and hagiographies from the Mamluk period onward.123 One of the controversial positions of Ibn Abī Zayd and al-Tujībī had been demanding that miracle stories be transmitted by reliable means in order to be accepted. Al-Dhahabī found this admirable, extolling Ibn Abī Zayd for following “the path of the Salaf in principles (*uṣūl*).” He also praises one of Ibn Abī Zayd’s students, the famous Cordoban Hadith scholar ʿAbdallāh b. Ibrāhīm al-Aṣīlī (d. 392/1002), for “denying extreme (*al-ghulūww*) miracles but affirming those that were established by reliable reports (*yuthbitu minhā mā ṣaḥḥa*).”124

Al-Dhahabī is a rare example of a scholar who steadfastly demanded authentication before believing *karāma* reports. Even in the case of the Prophet, al-Dhahabī signals that his tolerance for the miraculous goes only as far as what can be established by historical evidence.125 Al-Dhahabī discusses a

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123 For relatively rare claims of multiple *isnāds* or *tawātūr* for miracles, see note 129 below.


125 The *sīra* genre had always been characterized by more relaxed critical standards, but by the Mamluk period, Muhammad-centered pietism and Sherifism had led to the admission of *ḥadīths* and stories otherwise considered patently unreliable into *sīra* and *shamā’il* literature. These include reports that the Prophet’s parents had been resurrected to believe in their son before
searing controversy over a ḥadīth transmitted during the time of Hārūn al-Rashid. A respected Sunni scholar named Wākı‘ b. al-Jarrāḥ (d. 197/813) reported that, after the Prophet’s death, when his body was left to rest unburred for three days, his stomach had bloated and his pinkie fingers straightened from decay. Many scholars wanted Wākı‘ killed for purveying this report, which they felt defamed the Prophet, but the scholar Sufyān Ibn ‘Uyayna (d. 196/811) explained that Medina was a hot city and that the Prophet’s body might have undergone this change. Al-Dhahabī refutes Wākı‘ and Sufyān vigorously. Certainly, the Prophet was a mortal who ate, drank and used the bathroom. And when he died he was buried as all Muslims are. His humanity was no shortcoming, nor would bloating after death, “if it had occurred, be considered a fault (ʿayb).” But, al-Dhahabī warns, we have no textual evidence (naṣṣ) that this happened, while we do have sound ḥadīths that God’s prophets will not decay or be consumed by the earth after death.126

Isnād analysis leads al-Dhahabī to dismiss reported miracles on other occasions. He includes the following anecdote in his biography of the great Hadith scholar of Isfahan, Ibn Mandah (d. 395/1004–5), in the Siyār a’lām al-nubalā’. A Khurasanī pilgrim visiting Medina is told by the man who tends the Prophet’s grave that he once saw Ibn Mandah approach the tomb with a pen and paper. The wall of the grave opened, and Ibn Mandah entered, remained inside for a time, and then came back out. The stunned caretaker asked Ibn Mandah what had happened, and the scholar replied, “[a] ḥadith was proving problematic for me, so I came and asked the Messenger of God (s), and he answered me.” Al-Dhahabī dismisses the story’s likelihood because the isnād is interrupted, saying, “I only included this story for wonderment’s sake (taʿajjub).”127

Yet we are left wondering, if the isnād were contiguous, would al-Dhahabī have believed the story? Or was the content of the report inconceivable to him? In an article seeking to identify the criteria that al-Dhahabī used in choosing which reports to include in his biography of Ibn Ḥanbal, Michael Cooperson observes that we cannot really know why a historian like al-Dhahabī rejected some wondrous reports and accepted others. Al-Dhahabī dismissed many spectacular reports about miraculous events that occurred to Ibn Ḥanbal, but being returned to the grave. Al-Suyūṭī, al-Bayjūrī and others cite amongst their evidences for accepting these ḥadīths a poem urging belief in this “even if the ḥadīth on it is weak” (al-Suyūṭī, “al-Taʿzîm wa-l-manna fī anna abaway rasūl allāh fi l-janna,” in Silsilat Maṭbūʿāt Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya 50 (Hyderabad: Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1915), 18; and al-Bayjūrī, Sharḥ jawharat al-tawḥīd, 68–70. The Egyptian scholar Nūr al-Dīn ʿAlī b. al-Jazzār also wrote Taḥqīq ʿamāl al-rājīn fī anna wāliday al-muṣṭafā bi-faḍl allāh fī al-dārayn min al-nājīn (Kātib Chelebī, Kashf al-zumūn, 1:399).

he also accepted a story that, when Baghdad was flooded around 1320 CE, all the tombs in the vicinity of Ibn Ḥanbal’s tomb were submerged while the great imām’s remained miraculously dry.128

Al-Dhahabī’s reasoning in his reception of karāma reports does indeed prove opaque. His treatment of saintly miracles suggests that, while he admitted their possibility, he viewed their attribution to saints with subtle suspicion. Reading through the reports from which al-Dhahabī constructs his biography of the great Ḥanbalī Sufi of Baghdad, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 561/1166), the reader finds mixed messages. Al-Dhahabī cites al-Jīlānī’s student, the famous Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223), as remarking that he had never heard so many karāmas recounted about anyone as he did about al-Jīlānī.129 Al-Dhahabī then includes a peerless tribute from the great Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām: “[t]here have not been related to us by massive, unimpeachable transmission (tawātur) miracles from anyone but ʿAbd al-Qādir.”130 Yet immediately before that, al-Dhahabī places a report from Ibn Qudāma that he had not personally seen any karāmas done by al-Jīlānī except, perhaps, that Ibn Qudāma could not remember any of the ḥadīths he had heard in another teacher’s class on the one day that he had elected to attend it instead of al-Jīlānī’s class.131 At the end of the beloved Sufi’s biography, al-Dhahabī remarks that, “[t]here is no one from among the great shaykhs who has more spiritual states (aḥwāl) and karāmas than shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir. But many of them are not reliable (lā taṣiḥḥu), and among them are things that are impossible (mustaḥīla).”132

This reference to “the impossible” illustrates al-Dhahabī’s odd confidence in the capacity of reason to evaluate the truth of a report based on its contents. Although he was a staunch traditionalist who despised rationalist Sunnis and longed for a return to a simple, Hadith-based piety instead of the

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129 Al-Dhahabī, Siyar, 20:443.

130 Al-Yāfī also notes that some ulama have mentioned that al-Jīlānī’s “miracles have approached tawātur” (Nashr al-maḥāsin, 2:442). It is surprising how rare claims of tawātur of saintly miracles are, in my opinion. Al-Nabhānī makes very few claims about mutawātir karāmas, and most are of saints living in his own day (Jāmiʿ, 1:331, 407, 451, 472, 2:236–7, 177). Al-Subkī mentions in his biography of the Yemeni scholar Ismāʿīl b. Muḥammad al-Ḥaḍramī (d. 776–7/1374–5) that his miracles “have almost reached the level of tawātur,” including one karāma that he once ordered the sun to stop setting until he could return to his house to pray maghrib (Ṭabaqāt, 8:130–1). For other examples, see al-Yāfī, Nashr al-maḥāsin, 2:114, 135, and al-Haytamī, al-Fatāwā al-ḥadīthiyya, 386–7.

131 Al-Dhahabī, Siyar, 20:443.

132 Ibid., 20:450. Al-Nabhānī adds to this statement a report attributed to ʿAbd Zarrūq (d. 899/1493) that Abū l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī came close (Jāmiʿ, 2:214).
convoluted hierarchy of the madhhab,\textsuperscript{133} al-Dhahabî is perhaps the pre-modern Sunni scholar who most readily engaged in content criticism of reports. His response to the karāmas attributed to al-Jīlānī stands in stark contrast to other Sunnis like ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-ʿUrḍī (d. 1024/1614), a Shāfī’i jurist of Aleppo. Responding to skeptics like al-Dhahabî, he notes how widely transmitted al-Jīlānī’s miracles are and demonstrates the proper deference to the Sufi saint’s legacy: “I am but a stupid, ignorant and envious man who has wasted his life understanding what’s written in books, content not to engage in the purification of the soul . . . or understand what God most high grants to his saints . . .”\textsuperscript{134}

As demonstrated elsewhere, al-Dhahabî often rejected supposed hadiths or historical reports due to what he deemed illogical or unreasonable content, anachronism or physical impossibility. In fact, he rejects several hadiths included in the esteemed canonical Hadith collections Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim and Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhî on these grounds.\textsuperscript{135} Al-Dhahabî’s penchant for content criticism was based on the principles outlined by Sunni legal theorists from the fifth/eleventh century onward. One principle stated that a report should be declared false if it described an event or statement that, if it had really occurred or been made, would have been much more widely disseminated than it actually was. This reasoning was grounded in an appreciation for the habitual course of both nature and human society. If an incident breaking this habitual course occurred publically, like a man flying low over the streets of a city or a wealthy man suddenly giving all his wealth away to a crowd, this event would surely be noticed and talked about extensively. If only one person claimed such an event occurred, then it must necessarily not have happened.

Al-Dhahabî sometimes uses this tool to disprove miracle reports. One account of the events that followed in the wake of Ibn Ḥanbal’s death includes an isnād to an eyewitness who observed that on the day of Ibn Ḥanbal’s funeral procession, 20,000 non-Muslims converted to Islam. Al-Dhahabî rejects this story out of hand. Certainly, the isnād relies at one point on an unknown

\textsuperscript{133} Brown, Canonization, 356–7. Al-Dhahabî states, “[o]nly one unable to achieve knowledge, like most of the scholars of our age, or a chauvinist (mutaʿaṣṣib) constrains himself to one madhhab.” Although al-Dhahabî did not allow any level of ijtihād to minor scholars, he allowed ijtihād muqayyad (i.e., choosing which position of the early great imāms best conformed with revealed evidence) to those who studied fiqh and uṣūl thoroughly (al-Dhahabî, Siyar, 14:491, 18:191). For criticisms of Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī for “over-intellectualism,” see idem, Mīzān, 2:259, 3:340.


\textsuperscript{135} Brown, “The Rules of Matn Criticism.”
transmitter (majhūl) and is thus unreliable. Even so, al-Dhahabī, explains, “āda and reason make such an occurrence impossible.” If such a dramatic conversion of Baghdad’s Christians and Jews had actually transpired, it would have been transmitted by manifold channels (la-tawātara), not by one unidentified person. If even one hundred people had converted, al-Dhahabī quips, “it would been judged a wonder (ʿajab).”

ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī hailed from a family of sayyids that had moved from their ancestral home south of Tlemcen to Tangiers in the early 1900’s. He left to study in al-Azhar, however, and spent much of his life in Cairo after 1935. His father was a noted religious scholar in Tangiers, where he headed the family branch of the Shādhili Sufi order (the ʿīṣāḍīyya). ʿAbdallāh and his brothers, several of whom also became famous ulama, sprung from the same Neo-Sufi current that produced the Kattāniyya order in Fez and the many noted scholars of that clan, prominent members of which served as ʿAbdallāh’s major teachers. Like Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar al-Kattānī (d. 1927), the Ghumāris were committed to the belief that Sufism was the essence of Islam and to the prestige of the descendents of the Prophet. They were totally opposed to the modernist movement of scholars like Muḥammad ʿAbduh and the Salafi/Wahhābi disavowal of saint veneration.

Even more than the Kattānis, however, the Ghumāri brothers were also fiercely anti-taqlīd, opposed to the institutional domination of the schools of law and proponents of returning to the Qur’ān and Hadith for a proper understanding of Islam. Both ʿAbdallāh and his older brother, Aḥmad (d. 1960), claimed to have attained the rank of mujtahid mutlaq, with ʿAbdallāh even hoping that his tremendous knowledge made him the “renewer (mujaddid) of the era.” ʿAbdallāh al-Ghumārī wrote dozens of books on issues ranging from Hadith to legal theory, from Sufism to debates over Islam and modernity. Like his brother Aḥmad, ʿAbdallāh al-Ghumārī was a tireless defender of Sufism, especially the practices of venerating the graves of saints and the truth of karāmas. In fact, he wrote several works on saintly miracles over the course of his life. His first monograph on the topic was a comprehensive defense of karāmas against modernist and Salafi critics. The Hujaj wa-l-bayyināt fi ithbāt

\[\text{136} \quad \text{Al-Dhahabī, Sīyar, 11:343. I am indebted to Cooperson’s article for bringing this text to my attention (“On Probability,” 74).} \]

\[\text{137} \quad \text{For more on the Kattāniyya, see Sahar Bazzaz, Forgotten Saints (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).} \]

\[\text{138} \quad \text{Ahmad b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī, al-Bahr al-ʿamīq fī marwiyāt Ibn al-Ṣiddīq, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutubī, 2007), 118; and ʿAbdallāh al-Ghumārī, Sabīl al-tawfīq fi tarjamat ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ṣiddīq (Cairo: Dār al-Bayḍāʾ, 1990), 54.} \]

\[\text{139} \quad \text{This is most clearly evident in al-Ghumārī’s, al-Ilām bi-anna l-taṣawwuf min shariʿat al-islām, ed. Ṭḥām Muḥammad al-Ṣārī, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Maktatbat al-Qāhirah, 1427/2006).} \]
al-karāmāt followed in the footsteps of al-Qushayrī’s, al-Subkī’s, al-Yāfīi’s and al-Nabhānī’s apologetic works, using both theological discussions and historical evidence to establish the existence of saintly miracles.

In 1967, while in prison in Egypt for suspicion of Islamist activities, al-Ghumārī wrote a fascinating treatise entitled *Awliyā’ wa-karāmāt*.140 Although conscious that he might be accused of inclining towards Wahhābism for doing so, al-Ghumārī explains that he wrote this treatise to expose the falsehood of extreme karāma reports. In the book he rejects the excessive, hyperbolic claims made about saints and their miracles, with followers raising Sufi sages above the level of the prophets and even sometimes to that of God. In particular, al-Ghumārī discusses the book *al-Sharaf al-muḥattam fī-mā manna Allāh biḥi ‘ałā walihi al-sayyid Ahmad al-Rifā‘ī min taqībī yad al-Nabī (s)*, which was attributed to al-Suyūṭī. Al-Ghumārī recounts how, after learning the science of epistemology and legal theory (*ʿilm al-uṣūl*), he realized that the miracles described in this book, as well as many others, must be false. He also became convinced that the *Sharaf al-muḥattam* was not actually written by al-Suyūṭī.141 Similarly, although al-Ghumārī believed deeply in the power of “the friends of God” to work miracles, in the legitimacy of Sufi gatherings, their litanies and in celebrating the Prophet’s birthday, he considered the saintly mawlid of Egypt to be heretical innovations used to excuse sinful behavior.142 His attempt to curtail excessive belief in karāmas was a manifestation of the same reformist Sufi bent.

The central story in the hagiographical work on Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī (d. 587/1191) describes the saint visiting Medina on the way to Hajj. When al-Rifā‘ī approached the Prophet’s tomb and conveyed his greetings, the Prophet returned them in a voice so loud it filled the whole mosque. Al-Rifā‘ī then begged the Prophet to extend his hand to be kissed. The Prophet’s right hand emerged from the grave to grant the Sufi his request. All this occurred before a crowd of some 90,000 witnesses, the great mass of pilgrims gathered in the mosque.143

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Al-Ghumārī declares this report false on the basis of the same uṣūl principle invoked by al-Dhahabī: “repeated claims about transmission by a multitude of channels (tawātur) when they are only narrated by individuals.…” How, al-Ghumārī asks rhetorically, could a miracle of such tremendous power, in which the Prophet’s own hand emerges from the grave, in which his voice is heard thundering, only be narrated by the four people claimed in the source? Al-Ghumārī states that no other report of this event can be found, neither in the histories of Medina, in the writings of those Sufis supposedly present in the mosque (such as ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī), nor in the recorded recollections of the vast throng who are claimed to have witnessed the miracle.144

Much like al-Dhahabī’s criticism, al-Ghumārī’s methodology holds that miracles must also be rejected if they “leave the realm of the possible (dāʾirat al-imkān).” For example, al-Ghumārī rejects the parallel telescoping of time (ṭayy al-zamān) because it entails a logical impossibility. He draws an example from al-Shaʿrānī’s hagio-biographical work al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, a story that al-Shaʿrānī uses as an archetype for this type of miracle. A jeweler dives into the Nile to bathe, and when he resurfaces he finds himself in the Tigris in Baghdad. He walks ashore, settles there, marries and has a family. One day he dives into the Tigris to bathe and resurfaces in the Nile once again, his clothes still on the bank and hardly a moment having elapsed “Cairo time.” This all occurred in a waking state.145

Al-Ghumārī argues that this story and ones like it are necessarily untrue. Manipulation of time can only occur if a person actually departs the sublunary realm (dāʾirat al-falak) (the motion of the heavenly bodies were thought to define “Time”146 as the Prophet did during the Ascension to Heaven, or if a person is miraculously able to accomplish great deeds in a short time, as al-Ghazālī and al-Shāfiʿī did in their relatively short but prolific lifespans. But the notion of time passing at one speed in Baghdad and at another in Cairo is logically impossible. An hour, al-Ghumārī explains, is part of a day, which is part of a year. If an hour were to equal a year, this would entail “a part equaling the whole (musāwāt al-juz’ li-l-kull),” a logical contradiction.147 Al-Ghumārī also considered another miracle reported about al-Rifāʿī to be necessarily false. It was said that God would appear (tajallā) before the Sufi regularly, causing him to melt before God’s glory only to be reformed into his original shape through

144 Al-Ghumārī, Awliyāʾ wa-karāmāt, 14.
145 Al-Shaʿrānī, Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, 423.
147 Al-Ghumārī, Awliyāʾ wa-karāmāt, 43–4.
God’s mercy. Such miracles, concludes al-Ghumārī, like a human form melting into liquid and reforming, are rationally impossible (mustaḥīlāt).  

Al-Ghumārī also seems to reject miracle reports that involve natural impossibilities, like two instances of famous Egyptian saints rescuing children from the bellies of crocodiles by ordering the creatures to regurgitate them (and, in one case, removing the beast’s teeth). How could crocodiles preserve a child in their stomachs until the saint was called upon?, al-Ghumārī objects. Implicitly disclaiming a miracle found often in hagiographies, al-Ghumārī denies that a human can go even one day without relieving himself, let alone the miraculous lengths of time that some saints are said to have gone without renewing their ablutions.  

Unlike the hagio-biographical works of al-Shaʿrānī and al-Nabhānī, in which comically foul karāmas are salient, al-Ghumārī rejects any miracle attribution that contravened the sharia or proper ethics.  

Al-Ghumārī objects to one such miracle in which the great Egyptian mujtahid Ibn Daqīq al-ʿĪd (d. 702/1302) criticizes the Sufi Aḥmad al-Badawī (d. 675/1276) for not attending Friday prayers, only to be suddenly trans-

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148 Ibid., 28; and al-Nabhānī, Jāmiʿ, 1:401.

149 Al-Ghumārī, Awliyāʿ wa-karāmāt; 41, 44–6. The saints in the crocodile stories are Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī and Aḥmad b. Farghal. See al-Shaʿrānī, Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, 451; and al-Nabhānī, Jāmiʿ, 1:222, 323. For a report that Abū Ḥanīfa went forty years without needing to renew his wuḍūʿ, see ibid., 2:417.

150 Al-Nabhānī includes as miracles a near contemporary, Ḥasan al-Dimashqī, defecating gold coins as a karāma, with his erstwhile detractors using the baraka-laden loot to start successful businesses. Al-Nabhānī reports his own shaykh, ‘Ali al-ʿUmarī, using his miraculously extended penis to whip an obstinate servant. Both al-Shaʿrānī and al-Nabhānī report an Egyptian saint, ʿĀmir al-Tayjūrī (d. 656/1258), who lived with prostitutes and drove away customers, and a saint who sold drugs in Cairo but whose customers would desist from using them (al-Nabhānī, Jāmiʿ, 2:35, 114–5, 326–7; and al-Shaʿrānī, Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, 453).

151 Ibn al-Jawzī in the Talbīs Iblīs lists violating the sharia as a crucial sign for identifying a fraudulent saint. If a karāma involves something like wasting money, the claimant must be a charlatan, since “saints do not violate the sharia.” Similarly, Ibn Taymiyya insists that a filthy dervish who does not perform ablutions cannot be a true wāli. Even prophets cannot bring a message that contradicts reason, so how could a saint perform a karāma that contradicts reason or the sharia? Aḥmad Zarrūq similarly stresses that no spiritual condition or access to the unseen justifies indulging in the ḥarām. Imām al-Birgivī reiterates that no miraculously gained knowledge can excuse violating the sharia of God and his prophet. The Deoband scholar Ashraf ‘Ali Thanvi requires that karāmas be ḥalāl. See, Ibn al-Jawzī, Talbīs, 463; Ibn Taymiyya, Fatāwā, 11:23, 139; Ahmad Zarrūq, Qawāʾid al-taṣawwuf, 77; al-Birgivī, The Path of Muhammad, 74; and Thanvi, Karāmāt Imādiyya, 7. Ibn Taymiyya and Zarrūq both offer arguments against the “Khudrīan” model (Ibn Taymiyya, Fatāwā, 11:150–1; and Aḥmad Zarrūq, Qawāʾid al-taṣawwuf, 77).
ported to an island “sixty years’ travel away.” Only when he had repented for his slight did a miraculous encounter with Khidr return Ibn Daqiq to Egypt. Al-Ghumari considers it unacceptable that, first, a saint would regularly miss required communal prayers, and, second, that reminding him to do so would be punishable through a karāma.152 Another miracle story that Al-Ghumari believes al-Sha’rānī and others should not have recorded due to its sheer rudeness involves a supposed saint named Shaykh ‘Ubayd rescuing a boat that had become stuck in the mud of Egypt’s Delta. He supposedly did so by pulling the boat by a rope tied to his testicles.153

Al-Ghumari is particularly irked by the belief, endemic to Egypt, that the biers of dead saints levitate (tayrān al-na‘sh) above the men carrying them during funeral processions. He had been in the funeral procession of a famous Azhar scholar when one of his friends swore that he saw the coffin floating. Al-Ghumari looked closely but saw nothing of the sort. Interestingly, although Al-Ghumari is consistently critical of al-Sha’rānī for packing his works on saints with so many baseless legends (khurāfāt), he notes that he found a short treatise by the sixteenth-century scholar explaining how the levitating bier miracle was a lie.154

In what appears to be a later work, al-I‘lam bi-anna al-taṣawwuf min sharī‘at al-islām, Al-Ghumari reveals that his perspective on karāmas is close to that of al-Qushayri. Commenting on the mainstream position that the level of kharq al-‘āda that occurs with a karāma can equal that of a prophetic miracle, Al-Ghumari adds, “[t]his is interpreted as only the prophetic miracles (āyāt) that were not accompanied by a challenge (taḥaddī).” Karāmas could not duplicate miracles that did include a challenge, like the Qur’an. He continues by noting that al-Qushayri had alluded to this in his limitations on potential karāmas. By “a child born of other than two parents,” al-Qushayri had meant Jesus’ miraculous virgin birth, which the Qur’an describes as a “sign (āya).” For al-Ghumari, no karāma can be allowed to equal an earlier prophetic miracle that people had been challenged to match. Would that saint performing such a karāma not be matching the prophet in the question’s ancient challenge?155

Like Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Ḥajar before him, al-Ghumari’s perspective on miracles was ultimately informed by his own socio-religious context.

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152 Al-Ghumari, Awliyā‘ wa-karāmāt, 32–3; cf. al-Nabhānī, Jāmi‘, 1:416.
153 Al-Ghumari, Awliyā‘ wa-karāmāt, 56; and al-Sha’rānī, Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā, 427 (entry on Ḥusayn Abū ‘Alī).
154 Al-Ghumari, Awliyā‘ wa-karāmāt, 46; and idem, al-Hujaj wa-l-bayyināt, 184. See also, Shaltūṭ, al-Fatāwā, 199–201.
155 Al-Ghumari implies that this understanding of “challenge” was drawn attention to by Muhammad Ibn Khilfat al-Ubbi of Tunis (d. 827/1424) in his Ikmāl ikmāl al-mu‘lim li-fawā‘id Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (al-Ghumari, al-I‘lam, 46–7).
Modernist attacks on Sufism as the wellspring of backward superstition in Islam had led him to defend karāmas. But he was himself troubled by what he saw as the outlandish and decadent superstition all around him in Egypt. Ironically, in a popular journal article defending the possibility of saints appearing in different places at the same time (taṭawwur), al-Ghumārī concluded:

...and be cautious and aware, except with someone you have interrogated personally. And do not believe, in this dark time, those karāmas except what your own eyes have seen over and over, to the point that it could not be a coincidence (muṣādafa). For lies of this sort have become many.

Faithful dissent similar to al-Ghumārī’s has appeared elsewhere amongst pro-Sufi Sunni ulama. Although committed to the Ash’ari theological vision, according to which a report of a breach of the habitual course of nature merits no more suspicion than any other report, several notable Sunni scholars have revealed unease about the uncritical approach to karāmas. The late Syrian Hadith scholar ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997) vigorously defended the Ash’ari/Sufi dimensions of Sunni Islam from Salafī critics like Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999). Yet in his edition of a work on forged Hadith, Abū Ghudda criticizes many fellow scholars for accepting unreliable ḥadīths as evidence for incidents of kharq al-ʿāda. He asserts that, unlike other subjects generally treated with laxity, such as the virtues of actions (faḍāʾil al-aʿmāl), miraculous events cannot be substantiated by an amalgamation of weak ḥadīths. Establishing a kharq al-ʿāda requires ṣaḥīḥ narrations. Another leading Syrian Sunni scholar, Muḥammad Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, has remarked that people regularly fabricate karāma stories for beloved local pious persons. “The negative effects of such stories outweigh the positive effects,” al-Būṭī explains, because of the gullibility and disregard for fact that they engender in the Muslim community.

Conclusion

Sunni credos have required belief in the possibility of saintly miracles, and the dominant intellectual and fideist cultures of Ash’ari theology and Sufism

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157 Al-Ghumārī, al-Ḥujaj wa-l-bayyināt, 183–4; and idem, Majallat al-Islām, 8.21–33 (1358/1939).
have deemed it an impiety to challenge any miracle in particular. Main-
stream Sunni discourse since the late fifth/eleventh century has categorized
the rejection of karāmas as no more than an archaic error of the Muʿtazila or
the isolated mistake of a stray Ashʿari theologian, usually al-Isfarāyīnī. As we
have seen, however, Muʿtazila objections to saintly miracles lived on in early
Ashʿari thought. The Muʿtazila had rejected the possibility of post-prophetic
kharq al-ʿāda because it undermined the necessary link between miracles and
prophecy. Two of the three real architects of Ashʿari theology and epistemol-
ogy, al-Isfarāyīnī and al-Bāqillānī, as well as the most vigorous defender of the
school from the following generation, al-Qushayrī, upheld a position very simi-
lar to that of the Muʿtazila. They allowed saints to break the habitual course of
nature, but concern for protecting the unmatchable quality of prophetic won-
ders led them to limit miracles only to those lesser realms of wonder beneath
that of muʿjizas. Far from the Ashʿari heartland of the Baghdad/Khurasan cir-
cuit, scholars invested in Ashʿari theology found themselves embroiled in dra-
matic controversies in Qayrawān and Cordoba. As Ibn Baṭṭāl’s work shows,
even a respected Sunni Hadith scholar in Andalusia could reject completely
non-prophetic violations of the habitual course of nature out of the fear that
laymen might fall into confusion about whose claim to prophecy was true.

Yet despite the calls of these early faithful dissenters to limit saintly mira-
cles, karāmas could not be reined in. Reading hagiographies from the Mam-
luk period onward, like those of al-Shaʿrānī or al-Nabhānī, one finds saints
regularly working miracles equal to or greater than prophetic miracles. Saints
“fold” time, revive the dead, and even animate lifeless objects all too fre-
quently. A new breed of faithful dissenters railed against this world overfilled
with God. Sunni scholars like Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Ḥajar saw in the routiniza-
tion of the quotidian karāma a byproduct of fraudulent saints and a threat
to the very distiction between the miraculous and the mundane. Outstand-
ing scholars like al-Dhahabī and al-Ghumārī provided criteria for their faith-
ful dissent. Cryptic about where he actually stood regarding the miraculous,
al-Dhahabī rejected and accepted reports of prophetic and saintly miracles
according to his idiosyncratic application of Sunni legal theory and transmis-
sion criticism. Although he labored against the modern contempt for miracles,
al-Ghumārī nonetheless used a similar approach to champion the early faith-
ful dissent of al-Qushayrī and trim away the excesses of karāma claims “in this
dark time.”

160 Al-Nabhānī, Ḫāmiʿ, 2:231, 303.
162 In this case, the Kaaba’s black stone coming alive, with legs, arms and a face, and walking
around (al-Nabhānī, Ḫāmiʿ, 2:287).
Faithful dissent was perhaps inevitable in the Sunni tradition as it solidified from the fifth/eleventh to the seventh/thirteenth centuries. At an intuitive level, a miracle means something. It backs up a claim or supports a cause so powerfully that we are justifiably skeptical when we hear reports of one. Ash’āri theology and popular Sufism eventually rendered the miraculous ordinary and the ordinary unpredictable, two developments that scholars concerned with either the divine or the temporal would surely reject.

Appendix—Books on Karāmāt al-awliyā’

This list includes general works, not works on the karāmas of specific saints, such as, Muhammad b. al-Mukhtar al-Shinqitī al-Kuntī’s (d. 1854) al-Tawā’if al-tāliḍa min karāmāt al-shaykhbayn al-wālīd wa-l-wālīda or Ibrāhīm b. Ṣāliḥ al-Rashīd (d. 1874) ‘Iqd al-durar al-nafis fi ba’d karāmāt Aḥmad b. Idrīs.163

- Ibn al-Aʿrābī, Muḥammad b. Ziyād al-Kūfī (d. 231/845), Kitāb Karāmāt al-awliyā’.164
- Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, Abū Bakr (d. 281/894), Karāmāt al-awliyā’.165
- Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 295–300/905–10), al-Farq bayn al-muʿjizāt wa-l-karāmāt.166
- Al-Bāqillānī, Abū Bakr (d. 403/1013), al-Karāmāt, Kitāb al-bayān ʿan al-farq bayn al-muʿjizāt wa-l-karāmāt wa-l-hiyal wa-l-nārānjāt.168
- Al-Lālakāʾī, Hibatallāh b. al-Ḥasan (d. 418/1027–8), Karāmāt al-awliyā’.169
- Abū Dharr al-Harawī, ʿAbdallāh (d. 430/1038), Karāmāt al-awliyā’.171
- Ibn Shaqq al-Layl, Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ṭulayṭulī (d. 455/1063), Kitāb karāmāt wa-burāhīn al-ṣāliḥīn.172

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163 Al-Zirikli, Aʿlām, 7:392, 1:44.
164 Kātib Chelebī, Kashf al-zunūn, 3:70.
165 Ibn Abī l-Dunyā’s Karāmāt al-awliyā’ is noted by al-Dhahabī but seems not to have survived (al-Dhahabī, Siyar, 13:403). Related works by Ibn Abī l-Dunyā include Kitāb al-awliyā’ and Man ’āsha ba’d al-mawt, published in Mawsūʿat rasāʾil Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfīyya, 1993).
167 Al-Dhahabī, Siyar, 16:31.
168 Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ, Tartīb al-madārik (Beirut ed.), 2:214; and note 88 above.
169 Published with Sharh usūl iʿtiqād ahl al-sunna, ed. Ahmad Saʿd Ḥamdān (Riyad: Dār Ṭība, 1992).
170 Al-Dhahabī, Siyar, 17:212.
171 Ibid., 17:560.
172 Kātib Chelebī, Kashf al-zunūn, 3:70. Fierro states that this book was a rebuttal of Ibn Abī Zayd’s position (‘Polemic,” 239).
• Al-Shahid al-Qaysi, Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir (d. 408/1017), Ijābāt wa-l-karāmāt.173
• Al-Dākāli, [??], Karāmāt.174
• Al-Khallāl, ʿAbdallāh b. Najm al-Miṣrī al-Māliki (d. 616/1219), Kitāb karāmāt al-awliyāʾ.175
• Ibn Bāṭish, ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl b. Hibatallāh (d. 655/1257), Muzīl al-shubuhāt fī ithbāt karāmāt al-awliyāʾ.176
• Ibn Mughayzīl, ʿAbd al-Qādir b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 894/1489), Kawākib al-zāhira fī ītimāʿ al-awliyāʾ yaqazat wa-sayyid al-dunyā wa-l-ākhira.178
• Al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn (d. 911/1505), Tanwīr al-ḥalak fī imkān ruʾyat al-nabī wa-l-malak, al-Munjalī fī taṭawwur al-wāli.179
• Al-Shaʿrānī, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (d. 973/1565), al-Burūq al-khawāṭif li-baṣr man ʿamila bi-l-hawātif.180
• Al-Shawbarī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Azharī (d. 1069/1659), al-Ajwiba ʿan al-asʾila fī karāmāt al-awliyāʾ.181
• Imām al-Ashrafijiyya, ʿAbd al-Bāqī b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Miṣrī (d. 1078/1667), the Suyūṭī, al-Suyūf al-ṣiqāl fī raqabat man yunkiru karāmāt al-awliyāʾ baʿd al-intiqāl.182
• Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan al-Jūharī al-Azharī (d. 1181/1767), al-ʿulamāʾ min ʿulamāʾ al-shīʿa al-imāmiyya.183
• Aḥmad b. Aḥmad Ibn al-ʿAjamī al-Azharī (d. 1086/1675), Karāmāt al-awliyāʾ.184

174 Al-Dhahabi, Siyār, 3:362.
175 Kātib Chelebī, Kashf al-ẓunūn, 3:70.
176 Ibid., 3:240; and al-Ghumārī, al-Ḥujaj wa-l-bayyināt, 23.
177 Ed. ʿIffat Wiṣāl Ḥamza (Beirut: n.p., 1986).
178 Al-Kattānī, Fahras al-fahāris, 2:721.
179 Al-Suyūṭī, see note 1 above.
181 Al-Kattānī, Faḥras al-fuḥāris, 23081.
182 Al-Ziriklí, Aʾlām, 6:11.
183 MS King Saud University (Riyadh), Ms # 3451.
184 Ismāʿīl Bāshā al-Bābānī, Idāh al-maknūn fī l-dhayl al-ḥawārif min al-awliyāʾ; and Risāla fī karāmāt al-awliyāʾ hal hiya jāʿizat al-wuqūṭ wa-hal al-taṣdīq bihā wājib am jāʿiz.
185 Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Tankābāni (d. 1892), Karāmāt al-ʿulamāʾ min ʿulamāʾ al-shīʿa al-imāmiyya.187
• Al-Nabhānī, Yūsuf (d. 1932), Jāmiʿ karāmāt al-awliyā’.\textsuperscript{188}
• Al-Zahrāwī, Jamīl Ṣidqī (d. 1936), al-Fajr al-ṣādiq fī ithbāt al-khawāriq.\textsuperscript{189}
• Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh al-Kuwī (d. 1943), al-Muʿjizāt wa-l-karāmāt.\textsuperscript{190}
• Abū Samaḥ ʿAbd al-Zahir Nūr al-Dīn al-Talinī (d. 1950), al-Awliyāʾ wa-l-karāmāt.\textsuperscript{191}
• Al-Ghumārī, ʿAbdallāh (d. 1993), al-Ḥujaj wa-l-bayyināt fī ithbāt al-karāmāt; and Awliyāʾ wa-karāmāt.
• Al-Ṭuʿmī, Muḥyī al-Dīn, Takmilat Jāmiʿ karāmāt al-awliyā’.\textsuperscript{192}

\textsuperscript{188} See note 25 above.
\textsuperscript{189} Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī, al-Muʿāṣirūn, ed. Muḥammad al-Miṣrī, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1413/1993), 149.
\textsuperscript{190} Al-Ziriklī, Aʿlām, 6:245.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 4:11.
\textsuperscript{192} (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2008).