

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 rencontre 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 iv^e/x^e 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. Aḥmad al-Azharī al-Shawbarī (d. 1069/1659), *al-Ajwiba ‘an al-as’ila 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

l-karāmāt, added to Abū l-Faḍl 'Abd al-Qādir Ibn al-Mughayzīl, *al-Kawākib al-zāhira fi ijtimā' al-awliyā' yaqzat^{an} bi-sayyid al-dunyā wa-l-ākhirā*, ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Sulṭān and 'Alī Ḥamīd (Cairo: Dār Jawāmi' al-Kalim, n.d.), 410.

² See Maḥmūd Shaltūt, *al-Fatāwā*, 12th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1403/1983), 52; and Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, *Fiqh al-sīra*, 4th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2008), 40–2.

³ Rashīd Riḍā, "Khawāriq al-'ādāt wa-l-khilāf fi l-karāmāt," *al-Manār* 2 (1899): 414–17. Riḍā's mentor, Muḥammad 'Abduh, had tried to (over) emphasize the size of the anti-*karāma* camp and argued that Muslims were not required to believe any specific miracle after the time of the Companions; Muḥammad 'Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, trans. Iṣḥāq Musā'ad and Kenneth Cragg (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), 157–8.

⁴ David L. Weddle, *Miracle: Wonder and Meaning in World Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 13–14.

produce the type of miraculous proofs on which prophecy depends. This, they hoped, would protect the Muslim *umma* from false claimants 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 *muʿjizas*, 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 *awliyāʾ* (sing. *walī*), 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

⁵ I borrow this term from C.S. Lewis' excellent book, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 100.

⁶ See Richard Martin, “The Role of the Basrah Muʿtazilah in Formulating the Doctrine of the Apologetic Miracle,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 39.3 (1980): 175–89; Isra Yazicioglu, “Redefining the Miraculous: al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd and Said Nursi on Qurʾanic Miracle Stories,” *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 13.2 (2011): 86–108.

⁷ Sainthood has been discussed as a central subject in Sufi discourse and needs no further comment here. See B. Radtke, F.M. Denny, Françoise Aubin, J.O. Hunwick and N. McHugh, “Walī,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1954–2004; hereafter *EI2*); and Bernd Radtke and John O’Kane, trans., *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism: Two Works by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996).

at discourse on denying or affirming saintly miracles, however, is Muhammad Amanullah's impressive overview in *Arab Law Quarterly*.⁸ 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 Rashīd Riḍā. Their discourse requires another study altogether.

The *karāma* of a saint has been rendered variously as “wonder/charisma” (after the Greek χάρισμα), “grace”, “favor,” or, more technically, thaumaturgical miracle.⁹ 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.¹⁰

The miracles of saints in Islam have received appreciable attention in Western scholarship.¹¹ The earliest surviving elaboration of *karāma*¹² discourse, as well as that of sainthood (*walāya*), appears in the works of the enigmatic Khurasanian mystic al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī¹³ (d. 295–300/905–10) and the laconic Hadith collections of the Baghdad traditionist Abū Bakr Ibn Abī al-Dunyā¹⁴ (d. 281/894). From their apparent genesis in Khurasanian Sufism, saintly miracles soon emerged as a salient topic in the Sufi treatises of Abū

⁸ Muhammad Amanullah, “Debate over the Karāmah of Allah's Friends,” *Arab Law Quarterly* 18.3 (2003): 365–74.

⁹ See L. Gardet, “Karāma,” in *El2*; Reynold A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998; originally published 1921), 65; and idem, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Arkana, 1989), 129.

¹⁰ Denis Gril, “Les fondements scripturaires du miracle en Islam,” in *Miracle et karāma: hagiographies médiévales comparées*, ed. Denise Aigle (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 245.

¹¹ For excellent studies of *karāmas*, see *Miracle et karāma*, especially Aigle's introductory essay, “Miracle et karāma: une approche comparatiste,” in *ibid.*, 13–35. See also her chapter “Le miracle en islam, critère de la sainteté?,” in *Saints orientaux*, ed. idem (Paris: De Boccard, 1995), 69–81. For a useful taxonomy of *karāmas* based on the standard Islamic sources as well as a digest of the discourse on *karāmāt*, see Richard Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1987). For studies on miracles in the Shiite tradition, see in particular Judith Loebenstein, “Miracles in Šī'ī Thought: A Case-Study of the Miracles Attributed to Imām Ġāfar al-Šādiq,” *Arabica* 50.2 (2003): 199–244; and Khalid al-Sindawi, “The Role of the Lion in Miracles Associated with Shī'ite Imāms,” *Der Islam* 84 (2007): 356–90.

¹² The miracles of saints were sometimes referred to as *āyāt* in fourth/tenth-century works. See Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, *al-Ibāna 'an uṣūl al-dīyāna*, ed. Fawqiyya Ḥusayn Maḥmūd (Cairo: Dār al-Anṣār, 1397/1977), 33, 125; Radtke and O'Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood*, 125; Abū Ṭālib Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 2 vols. in 1 (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Anwār al-Muḥammadiyya, 1405/1985), 2:68.

¹³ See Bernd Radtke, “Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī on Miracles,” in *Miracle et karāma*, 287–99.

¹⁴ Ibn Abī al-Dunyā studied with many of the same Hadith transmitters as the authors of the canonical Six Books, and he was a teacher of Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 327/938) and Ibn Mājah

Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988) and al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021).¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

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-A'rabī (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 Radtke 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.¹⁷

The miracles of saints took on novel importance as the Ash'ari school of theology matured, becoming a major issue of contention between Ash'aris and Mu'tazilis that lasted through the sixth/twelfth century. Here, as we will discuss below, Mu'tazili theologians found themselves in a new round of debate with a new foe on a familiar topic; Mu'tazili 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 Ash'arism, 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

(d. 273/876); Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūṭ et al., 3rd ed., 25 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1412–19/1992–8), 13:399–400.

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 Ṣūfism 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 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb suddenly having a vision while giving a *khuṭba* 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 'Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī, *Kitāb al-arba'īn fi l-taṣawwuf* (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-Uthmāniyya, 1369/1950), 3–4; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, *Takhrīj al-arba'īn al-sulamīyya fi l-taṣawwuf*, ed. 'Alī Ḥasan 'Alī 'Abd al-Ḥamid (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 *Arba'īn* being studied in Iran, see 'Abd al-Karīm b. Muḥammad al-Rāfi'ī, *al-Tadwīn fi akhbār Qazwīn*, ed. 'Azīz Allāh al-'Uṭāridī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1987), 2:30, 464, 3:385, also 2:56.

¹⁷ Al-Ḥakīm never mentions, for example, the term *kharq al-'āda*, which would later become ubiquitous in discussions of miracles among Ash'aris; Radtke, "al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī on Miracles," 297.

friends.¹⁸ For the Ash‘ari in him, insisting on God’s complete control over creation and his ability to interrupt (*kharq*) the habitual course of nature¹⁹ (*‘āda*) was an affirmation of his power. This stood in stark contrast to the Mu‘tazili 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² Beyond their social importance, *karāmas* became a pillar of Sufi discourse. Geoffroy notes how Sufi hagio-biographies could consist solely of *karāma* stories.²³ The stunning variety of miracles performed by saints allowed hagiographers to highlight specific themes in the saint’s life.²⁴

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 Shāfi‘i scholar of the Damascus/Cairo circuit, the “Sultan of Scholars” ‘Izz al-Dīn Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām (d. 660/1262). Writing after his embrace of Sufism, Ibn ‘Abd 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.²⁵

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that one of the books that al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī heard from al-Qushayrī when the latter visited Baghdad was *Ithbāt al-awliyā’* (Maḥmūd al-Ṭaḥḥān, *al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī wa-atharuhu fi ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth* [Beirut: Dār al-Qur‘ān al-Karīm, 1401/1981], 297).

¹⁹ I borrow this translation of *‘āda* from al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), 166.

²⁰ See Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 18–20.

²¹ Jürgen Paul “Au début du genre hagiographique dans le Khorassan,” 35.

²² Eric Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Egypte et en Syrie* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1995), 91–2.

²³ Geoffroy, *Soufisme*, 37. Trimmingham describes *karāmas* as part of a transformation of Sufism in this period, a “blending of the saint-cult with the orders and a new reverence for the Prophet” (J. Spencer Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders of Islam* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 26–7).

²⁴ Geoffroy, *Soufisme*, 297.

²⁵ ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī, *Laṭā‘if al-minan wa-l-akhlāq fi wujūb al-taḥadduth bi-ni‘mat Allāh ‘alā al-iṭlāq* (Cairo: ‘Alam al-Fikr, [1976]), 46; idem, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā al-musammā*

According to the seminal Egyptian jurist and Sufi hagio-biographer ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī (d. 973/1565), witnessing the miracles of Abū l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258) had been instrumental in converting Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām from a leading critic of Sufis’ *bid‘a* to his famous support for Sufism.²⁶ In this period, Nicholson observed that the accomplishment of miracles was essential for people to believe in a saint.²⁷ Al-Sha‘rānī’s teacher, the great pillar of Cairo’s religious community, *shaykh al-Islām Zakariyyā’* 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.²⁸ 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 holymān’s political opinions nearly resulted in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s execution by the Delhi Sultan.²⁹ In the early Ottoman realm, the ubiquity of saintly miracles in the conception of what constituted a true scholar is reflected in the *Shaqā’iq al-nu‘māniyya* of Ṭāshkūbrüzāde (d. 968/1561), where identifying scholars as being blessed with *karāmas* is a topos.³⁰ In South Asia, the miracles of saints proved integral not only to the spread and primacy of Sufism, but to

bi-lawāqīḥ al-anwār fi ṭabaqāt al-akhyār, ed. Sulaymān al-Ṣāliḥ (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifa, 1426/2005), 23–4. Quoting al-Sha‘rānī’s *al-Ajwiba al-marḍiyya ‘an a’immat al-fuqahā’ wa-l-ṣūfiyya*, Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (d. 1932) adds the words “. . . and believed it to be correct” to the final sentence (Yūsuf al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi’ karāmāt al-awliyā’*, ed. ‘Abd al-Wārith Muḥammad ‘Alī, 2nd ed., 2 vols. [Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1422/2002], 2:143–4). I have not actually found this quote in any of the works of Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām yet. However, this support for *karāmas* is consistent with Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām’s writing on the subject in his *al-Qawā’id al-kubrā* (Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām, *al-Qawā’id al-kubrā*, ed. Nazīr Kamāl Ḥammād and ‘Uthmān Jum‘a, 2 vols. [Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, n.d.], 2:367–9). For a similar statement, see Aḥmad Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *al-Fatāwā al-ḥadīthiyya*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mar‘ashlī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1419/1998), 176.

²⁶ See also E. Chaumont, “al-Sulamī, ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz,” in *ElZ*.

²⁷ Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 65. Nicholson bemoans the increased importance of miracles. Compared to the high teachings of Sufism, “the excessive importance which they [miracles] assume in the organised mysticism of the Dervish Orders is one of the clearest marks of its degeneracy” (idem, *The Mystics of Islam*, 139–40).

²⁸ Al-Sha‘rānī, *al-As’ila al-marḍiyya*, apud al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi’ karāmāt al-awliyā’*, 1:332.

²⁹ H.A.R. Gibb, trans., *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 3 vols. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2004), 3:627.

³⁰ Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā Ṭāshkūbrüzāde, *al-Shaqā’iq al-nu‘māniyya fi ‘ulamā’ al-dawla al-uthmāniyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1395/1975), 35–7, 45–7.

conversion to Islam in general.³¹ Interestingly, *karāmas* seem to have played less of a role in West Africa.³²

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

Early Sunni *ʿaqīda* 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 *ʿAqīda* of the Egyptian Ḥanafī al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933) (al-Muzanī's nephew), we find tenets on the status of the saint (*walī*) and on *karāmas*: “[w]e believe in what has come via sound transmission through trustworthy narrators (*ṣaḥḥa ʿan al-thiqāt min ruwātihim*) from among their *karāmas*.”³³ Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (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 (*ṣāliḥīn*) by making signs (*āyāt*) appear at their hands.”³⁴ Later theology works, such as the much-commented on *ʿAqīda* of al-Nasafī (d. 537/1142), note more succinctly that, “the miracles of saints are a reality (*ḥaqq*).”³⁵

Representing the synthesis of Ashʿarī/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*).³⁶ 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

³¹ See Richard Eaton, “Sufi Folk Literature and the Expansion of Indian Islam,” in *Essays in Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 199; Carl W. Ernst, “The Indian Environment and the Question of Conversion,” in *Sufism and Society in Medieval India*, ed. Raziuddin Aquil (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 93; and Simon Digby, “The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Medieval India,” in *Sufism and Society in Medieval India*, 123, 125.

³² Trimmingham, *Islam in West Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 89.

³³ Abū Jaʿfar Aḥmad al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Matn al-ʿaqīda al-ṭaḥāwīyya*, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1398/1978), 59.

³⁴ Al-Ashʿarī, *al-Ibāna ʿan uṣūl al-dīyāna*, 31, 33.

³⁵ Abū Ḥafs ʿUmar al-Māturīdī al-Nasafī et al., *Majmūʿat al-ḥawāshī al-bahīyya ʿalā sharḥ al-ʿaqāʾid al-nasafīyya*, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Muṣṭafā, 2007), 1:194.

³⁶ Abū l-Qāsim ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-qushayrīyya* (Cairo: [al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿĀmira], 1870), 186–7. For a new and thorough monograph on al-Qushayrī, see Martin Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qurʾan Scholar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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 *kufṛ* here should not be understood literally but rather as rhetorical flare. Others, like the Cairene Ibn al-Mughayzīl (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 (*ṣaḥḥa*) 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’an includes examples like the miraculous sustenance granted to Mary as she worshipped in the house of Zakariyyā’ 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 (*istihālatihā*).” If one were allowed to reject the miracles of saints based on nothing more than a “claim (*da’wā*),” 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 (*bid’a*) invented by misguided folk who deny God’s attributes (*taṭīl*) (a sure reference to Mu’tazilis) in order to deny prophetic miracles as well. Just like saintly miracles, prophetic miracles are *kharq al-’āda* outside of human capability.³⁸ Al-Sha’rānī summed up the mainstream stance on *karāmas* succinctly: “Believing in the miracles of saints is a required truth (*wājib ḥaqq*).”³⁹

³⁷ Al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 199. ‘Askar b. Muḥammad al-Nakhshabī’s statement led Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī to include one of the best-organized essays on *karāmas* in his biography of al-Nakhshabī: Tāj al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi’iyya al-kubrā*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥalw and Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Ṭanāḥī, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Hujr, 1413/1992), 2:315. Ibn al-Mughayzīl, in a work on encountering the Prophet in a waking state, argues that *kufṛ* here is actual unbelief. Since both *karāmas* and Prophetic miracles both belong to the class of *kharq al-’āda*, denying the former involves denying the latter, asserts the author (Ibn al-Mughayzīl, *al-Kawākib al-zāhira*, 91).

³⁸ Abū l-Walīd Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Ibn Rushd, *Fatāwā Ibn Rushd*, ed. Al-Mukhtār al-Talīlī, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1407/1987), 1:580–2. The last acting (*wakīl*) Ottoman *Shaykh al-Islām*, Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1952), offered a similar remark: disbelieving in miracles is placing limits on God’s power on the basis of one’s own feeble mind (Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī, *Maqālāt al-Kawtharī* [Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1428/2008], 322).

³⁹ Al-Sha’rānī, *Latā’if al-minan*, 2 vols. (Cairo: al-Maṭba’a al-’Āmirā, 1311/1894), 1:218. The modern Syrian ‘ālim, who settled in Mecca, ‘Alī al-Ṭanṭāwī (d. 1999), states in his *fatwās* that one who

From the fifth/eleventh century until the modern period, Sunni discussions of *karāmas* have affirmed their possibility and historical occurrence.⁴⁰ As we shall see, even those who produced the most skeptical discussions of saints' miracles upheld their possibility. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), usually assumed

denies the possibility of *kharq al-āda*, *karāmas* or *mu'jizās*, has left Islam ('Alī al-Ṭanṭāwī, *Fatāwā 'Alī al-Ṭanṭāwī*, ed. Mujaḥid al-Dayrāniyya [Jedda: Dār al-Manāra, 1405/1985], 20).

⁴⁰ Al-Ash'arī, *al-Ibāna*; 31, 33; al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 2:68; Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Ishāq al-Kalābādī, *al-Ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf*, ed. Maḥmūd Amīr al-Nawāwī, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kullīyyāt al-Azhariyya, 1400/1980), 87–9; Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-Bayān 'an al-farq bayn al-mu'jizāt wa-l-karāmāt wa-l-ḥiyāl wa-l-kahāna wa-l-siḥr wa-l-nāranjāt*, ed. Richard J. McCarthy (Beirut: Librairie Orientale, 1958); Abū Naṣr 'Abdallāh al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma' fi l-taṣawwuf*, ed. Reynold Nicholson (Leiden: Brill, 1914), 317–24; al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 186ff.; 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-dīn* (Istanbul: Dār al-Funūn al-Turkiyya, 1346/1928), 174–5; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Arba'ūn fi uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqā, 2 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kullīyyāt al-Azhariyya, n.d.), 2:203–5; Abū Ḥafṣ 'Umar al-Suhrawardī, *'Awārif al-ma'ārif*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd al-Sharaf (Cairo: al-Imān, 1426/2005), 264; 'Izz al-Dīn Ibn 'Abd al-Salām, *al-Qawā'id al-kubrā*, 2:367–9; Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1407/1987), 14:426, 16:343; Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī, *Laṭā'if al-minan*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1999), 66–73; al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi'iyya al-kubrā*, 2:314–44; Shihāb al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Ibshīhī, *al-Mustaṭraf fi kull fann mustaṭraf*, ed. Darwish al-Juwaydī, 2 vols. in 1 (Beirut: Maktabat al-'Aṣriyya, 1429/2008), 1:251; 'Abdallāh b. As'ad al-Yāfi'i, *Nashr al-maḥāsīn al-ghāliyya fi faḍl mashāyikh al-ṣūfiyya aṣḥāb al-maqāmāt al-'āliya / Kifāyat al-mu'taqid wa-nikāyat al-muntaqid*, in the margins of Yūsuf al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi' karāmāt al-awliyā'*, 2 vols. in 1 (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, [1972], reprint of Cairo, Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya al-Kubrā, 1329/1911), 1:17ff.; Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftazānī et al., *Majmū'at al-ḥawāshī*, 1:194–7; Ibn al-Mughayzil, *al-Kawākib al-zāhira*, 86ff.; Aḥmad Zarrūq, *Qawā'id al-taṣawwuf*, ed. 'Uthmān al-Ḥuwaydī (Tunis: al-Maṭābi' al-Muwahḥada, 1987), 75; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Bāḥir fi ḥukm al-nabī (ṣ) bi-l-bāṭin wa-l-ẓāhir*, ed. Mehmet Hayrī Kirbaşoğlu (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1407/1998), 19–20; Muḥammad b. Pīr 'Alī Birgivi, *The Path of Muhammad: A Book of Islamic Morals*, trans. Tosun Bayrak al-Jarrahī (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom, 2005), 87; Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī, *Mirqāt al-mafātiḥ sharḥ mishkāt al-maṣābiḥ*, ed. Jamāl 'Aytānī, 11 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1422/2001), 11:88; Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī, *al-'Aqida al-ḥasana* (n.p.: Maṭba'-'i Mufid 'Ālamkar, n.d.), 7; Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-Bayjūrī, *Hāshiyat al-imām al-Bayjūrī 'alā jawharat al-tawḥīd*, ed. 'Alī Jum'ā, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1427/2006), 220–1, 252–3; 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Farangī Maḥallī al-Laknawī, "Jam' al-ghurur fi radd nashr al-durar," in *Majmū'at al-rasā'il al-thamānī* (Lucknow: al-Maṭba' al-Yūsufi, n.d.), 41, 65; Muḥammad Amīn Ar al-Mayrānī, *Majmū'at al-rasā'il al-dīniyya wa-l-'ulūm al-mukhtalifa* (Istanbul: Dār al-Andalus, 1431/2010), 430–1; Maḥmūd Abū l-Fayḍ al-Manūfi, *Jamharat al-awliyā'*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Ḥalabī, 1387/1967), 1:105–14; Ashraf 'Alī Thānvī, *Karāmāt Imdādīyya* ([n.p.]: Maṭba'a Imdād, n.d.), 5; Yūsuf al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi' karāmāt al-awliyā'*, 1:14–56; Yūsuf al-Dijwī, *Maqālāt wa-fatāwā al-shaykh Yūsuf al-Dijwī*, ed. 'Abd al-Rāfi' al-Dijwī, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Baṣā'ir, 2006), 2:769–70; Muḥammad 'Ubaydallāh al-As'adī al-Qāsimī, *Dār al-'ulūm dayūband* (Deoband, India: Akādimiyyat Shaykh al-Hind, 1420/2000), 674–8; 'Abdallāh b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī, *al-Hujaj wa-l-bayyināt fi ithbāt al-karāmāt* (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1410/1990), 17; and Muḥammad Zakī Ibrāhīm, *Uṣūl al-wuṣūl adillat aḥamm ma'ālim al-ṣūfiyya al-ḥaqqā*, vol. 1, 5th ed. (Cairo: Mu'assasat Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-Ṣūfi, 2005), 211ff.

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 Ṭālib al-Makkī [d. 386/996] and the *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* of al-Sulamī) was the difference between *kharq al-‘āda* 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-‘āda* specifically given by God to a person of appreciable piety, a saint. As the famous Levantine scholar ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī (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 ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037) and Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftazānī (d. 793/1390) stressed this distinction. Critics of popular Sufism like Ibn Taymiyya made it a central plank

⁴¹ Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘at al-fatāwā*, ed. Sayyid Ḥusayn al-‘Affānī and Khayrī Sa‘īd, 35 vols. (Cairo: al-Maktabat al-Tawfiqiyya, n.d.), 11768. Contrary to what some assume, traditionalist Salafis affirm the existence of *awliyā’* and *karāmas*. The Salafi schools rely on ‘*aqida* works like that of al-Ṭahāwī, 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-Suhrawardī), 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-‘aqida al-ṭahāwīyya*, 494–5; and Yāsir Burhāmī, *al-Minna sharḥ i‘tiqād ahl al-sunna*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria: Dār al-Khulafā’ al-Rāshidīn, 1431/2010), 384. Much as Ibn Taymiyya was, al-Albānī is described as unmasking false saints by discovering the trick behind the miraculous claims (Muḥammad Ḥāmid ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, *Aḥdāth muthīra fī ḥayāt al-shaykh al-‘allāma 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.

⁴³ “*Amr khāriq li-l-‘āda ghayr maqrūn bi-l-tahaddī yazharu ‘alā yad ‘abd zāhir al-ṣalāh mul-tazim bi-mutāba‘at nabī min al-anbiyā’ (s) maṣḥub bi-ṣaḥīḥ al-i‘tiqād wa-l-‘amal al-ṣāliḥ*” (‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī, *al-Ḥadiqa al-nadiyya sharḥ al-ṭarīqa al-muḥammadiyya*, 2 vols. [(India): Dār al-Ḥadiqa, 1276/1860], 1:99). This definition is shared exactly by al-Bayjūrī, *Sharḥ jawharat al-tawḥīd*, 253; cf. al-Taftazānī, *Majmū‘at al-ḥawāshī*, 1:194. An early definition of *karāma* comes from al-Qushayrī: “a matter that breaks the habitual order [of events] (‘*ada*) during the period when the [divinely ordained] religious observation (*taklīf*) is in force” (*Al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism*, trans. Alexander Knysch [Reading, UK: Garnet, 2007], 358).

in their call for reform. By the ninth/fifteenth century, a clear typology⁴⁴ had emerged for the varied types of *kharq al-ʿāda*: 1) the *māʿūna*, which answers the prayers of normal folk, like rainfall during a drought; 2) the *karāma* of a *walī*; 3) the *istidrāj*, granted to an iniquitous or unbelieving person to further their misguidance, like the magic of Pharaoh’s sorcerers; 4) the *irhāṣ*, demonstrating a prophet’s special status but preceding his call, like miracles that accompanied Muḥammad’s birth; 5) the *muʿjiza*, connected to a prophetic call or challenge; 6) and the *ihāna*, which God ordains to humiliate a false prophet like Musaylama.⁴⁵ As we will see, this qualifier of “a challenge” for the *muʿjiza* resulted from Muʿtazili/Ashʿari debate over a prophet’s opponents being unable to match the challenge of his miracle.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 *karāma* from a *muʿjiza*.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ This typology of *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 (*mukāshafāt*) to non-saints nor can he try these saints with *kharq al-ʿāda* designed to mislead them (*istidrāj*) (al-Kalābādhī, *al-Taʿarruf*, 95–6). Al-Subkī claims the consensus of all Muslims that *karāmas* cannot happen to wanton sinners (*fasaqa fajara*), though he exempts instances in which an iniquitous or misguided person receives a *kharq al-ʿāda* to guide him to rectitude—an effective *karāma*. Similarly, centuries earlier, al-Ḥakīm had mentioned the idea that saints can suffer “stumbles (*ʿatharāt*),” which God transforms for them into *karāmas*, as He did with David and his realization about his sin (Qurʿan 21:79) (al-Kalābādhī, *al-Taʿarruf*, 95–6; al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:320; and al-Ḥakīm, *Nawādir al-uṣūl fi maʿrifat ahādīth al-rasūl*, ed. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Sāyih and al-Sayyid al-Jamil, 2 vols. [Cairo: Dār al-Dayyān, 1408/1988], 2:47).

⁴⁵ The earliest instance I have seen for this six-fold taxonomy is in the marginal commentary on al-Taftazānī’s *Sharḥ al-ʿaqāʾid* by the Ottoman scholar Aḥmad b. Mūsā al-Khayālī (d. 862/1458) (al-Khayālī et al., *Majmūʿat al-ḥawāshī al-bahīyya ʿalā sharḥ al-ʿaqāʾid al-nasafīyya*, 1:194). Al-Taftazānī mentions all six but only lists four systematically (al-Taftazānī, *Sharḥ al-maqāṣid*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿUmayra, 5 vols. [Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1419/1998], 5:73).

⁴⁶ Al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-bayān*, 15–16, 31, 45–6.

⁴⁷ The isomorphic relationship between the “challenge” and “prophetic claim” is clearly evident in al-Qushayrī’s work on *uṣūl*; see Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qurʿan 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 *muʿjiza*. 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 prophesy would have no meaning without some announcement. His own definition of *karāma* in his famous *Sharḥ al-maqāṣid* only notes “no claim of prophecy” (al-Taftazānī, *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 Nuʿaym 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-ṣūfiyya*.

In these works we find traces of skepticism towards outrageous claims of the miraculous. In Abū Nuʿaym's biography of Manṣūr b. Zādhān, he provides an *isnād* from Makhlad b. al-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."⁴⁸

During the Mamluk period, however, chains of transmission for authenticating *karāma* reports became rarer.⁴⁹ Such reports were accepted prima facie amongst the ulama class and the devotees of Sufi shaykhs. This resulted from both the theological dominance of Ash'arism and the prevalent reverence for Sufi saints and their miracles. Abū Turāb al-Nakshabī's terrifying warning about denying saintly miracles had strong basis in Ash'ari 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

⁴⁸ Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyāʾ*, 10 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānī and Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1416/1997), 3:57–8.

⁴⁹ An interesting reaction to this comes from a Sufi scholar from the revivalist atmosphere of eighteenth-century Zabīd, 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 (*tarājīm*) are never free of carelessness (*mujāzafa*) and lack authentication (*tathabbut*)" (ʿAbd al-Khāliq b. ʿAlī al-Mizjājī, *Nuzhat riyāḍ al-ijāza al-mustaṭāba*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb and ʿAbd al-Ilāh Muḥammad al-Ḥibshī al-Yamanī [Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1418/1997], 185).

(*qudra*).⁵⁰ The Shādhilī Sufi master of Cairo, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh (d. 709/1309) similarly wrote, “[d]isbelieving in the miracle of a saint is disbelieving (*jaḥd*) in the capacity of the Most Powerful (*qudrat al-qadīr*).”⁵¹

Al-Sha‘rānī 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-qulūb*, underscoring the total otherness of the realm inhabited by the gnostics (*‘arīfūn*). 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-‘Abbās al-‘Aṭā’ that, for one who truly grasps God’s message, “it would not be astounding (*‘ajīb*) 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 ‘ajab wa-laysa shay’ minhu bi-‘ajab*).”⁵⁴ Al-Sha‘rānī tells that his teacher, Zakariyyā’ 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-Sha‘rānī 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

⁵⁰ Al-Suhrawardī, *‘Awārif*, 141. For a very useful discussion on al-Suhrawardī and his context, see Erik S. Ohlander, *Sufism in an Age of Transition: ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī and the Rise of Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

⁵¹ Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh, *Laṭā‘if al-minan*, 69.

⁵² Al-Sha‘rānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 430.

⁵³ Al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 2:69–70.

⁵⁴ Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. Nūr al-Dīn Sudayba, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1418/1997), 269.

⁵⁵ Al-Sha‘rānī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-ṣuḡhrā*, ed. Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Sāyih and Tawfiq ‘Alī Wahba (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 1426/2005), 26. I thank my friend Matthew Ingalls for help with this citation.

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-Laḥḥām (d. 333/945), a respected *faqīh* and Sufi of Qayrawān, Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ (d. 544/1149) reports how one person used to criticize and cast doubts on him. One night this skeptic entered al-Laḥḥām’s chamber and saw that his lamp had gone out. When he offered to light it again, it suddenly illuminated itself. Al-Laḥḥām explained to the perplexed visitor that it had been lit by “your anger, O you who denies *karāmas*.”⁵⁶ In his *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm 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-Ra’ūf al-Munāwī (d. 1031/1621), an accomplished student of al-Sha’rānī 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 *‘āda*, that such people considers miracles unusual.⁵⁹

Mu‘tazili 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

⁵⁶ Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ b. Mūsā, *Tartīb al-madārik wa-taqrīb al-masālik li-ma‘rifat a’lām madhhab Mālīk*, ed. Sa‘īd Aḥmad A’rāb (Rabat: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shu’ūn al-Islāmiyya, 1401/1981), 6:24.

⁵⁷ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, ed. Muḥammad Wahbī Sulaymān and Usāma ‘Ammūra, 5 vols. (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2006), 4:3120–1.

⁵⁸ Shams al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Munāwī, *Fayḍ al-qadīr sharḥ al-jāmi’ al-ṣaghīr*, ed. Ḥamdi al-Damardāsh Muḥammad, 13 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 1418/1998), 2:940.

⁵⁹ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hama‘āt*, ed. Nūr al-Ḥaqq al-‘Alawī and Ghulām Muṣṭafā al-Qāsīmī (Hyderabad, Pakistan: Shāh Walī Allāh Academy, n.d.), 121. This work was written in the middle of the author’s career, in 1735 (Yasin Mazhar Siddiqui, *Shah Waliullah Dehlavi* [Aligarh: Institute of Islamic Studies, (2003)], 21).

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 Qurʾanic miracle. The Baghdad school, soon adopted by Imāmi Shiites like al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044), held that it was well within human means to replicate a text like the Qurʾan, 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 ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī (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

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-Maʾmūn* [Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1985], 158–62, 165).

⁶¹ Martin, “The Role of the Basrah Muʿtazilah,” 179–82.

⁶² Daniel Gimaret, *Une Lectures Muʿtazilite du Coran: Le Tafṣīr dʿAbū ʿAlī al-Djubbāʾī partiellement reconstitué à partir de ses citateurs* (Louvain: Peeters, 1994), 156 (Qurʾan 1:259).

⁶³ For example, one of the few books on miracles of any sort listed by Ibn al-Nadīm in his *Fihrist* is the *Kitāb iḥtijāj al-muʿjiza* by the Imāmi Shiite Abū l-Naḍr Muḥammad b. Masʿūd al-ʿAyyāshī (d. 320/932) of Samarqand (Abū l-Faraj Muḥammad Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist*, trans. Bayard Dodge [Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1998, originally published by Columbia University Press, 1970], 484).

⁶⁴ Martin, “The Role of the Basrah Muʿtazilah,” 189. Even in the early fifth/eleventh century, the Abbasid caliph al-Qāḍir engaged the Muʿtazili Abū Saʿīd al-Iṣṭakhārī (d. 404/1013) to rebut the Bāṭiniyya (Abū Ishāq al-Shirāzī, *Kitāb al-maʿūna fī al-jadal*, ed. ʿAbd al-Majīd Turkī [Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1408/1988], 25–6).

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

This is most evident in the *Mughnī*, the *summa theologica* of the Mu‘tazili Shāfi‘ī al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār. The bulk of the author’s energy in his chapter on *mu‘jizās* is spent undermining Imāmi Shiite 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. ‘Abd al-Jabbār cites a pillar of the Basran school, Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā‘ī (d. 321/933), to introduce the main argument for limiting miracles (referred to as *mu‘jiza*, understood as actions beyond human capacity)⁶⁷ to prophets: a *kharq al-‘āda* cannot appear with anyone other than a prophet because then it would lose its special indication, and prophets would lack any undeniable proof.⁶⁸ ‘Abd 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 *mu‘jizās*. And that would render the *mu‘jiz* no longer *mu‘jiz*, and incidents breaking the habitual course of nature many and ordinary (*mu‘tād^{an}*).”⁶⁹

Al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār is certainly aware of and concerned with claims of *kharq al-‘āda* 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

⁶⁵ For the extent to which Mu‘tazilism in Khwarizm differed from the school of ‘Abd al-Jabbār, see Sabine Schmidtke, trans., *A Mu‘tazilite Creed of Az-Zamahsari* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1997), 7–9. Abū l-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar al-Zamaksharī (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 make manifest his unknown realm except to him whom He chooses as a messenger . . .” constitutes “the proving false (*ibtāl*) 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: Maṭba‘at al-Istiqāma, 1373/1953], 4:506 [Qur’an 72:27]). Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh notes his teacher Abū l-‘Abbās 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 well allow the vizier’s assistants in with him (*Laṭā’if al-minan*, 68–9).

⁶⁶ Al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Asadābādī, *al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-‘adl*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Qāsim, 20 vols. (Cairo: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wa-l-Irshād al-Qawmī, [1960–]), 15:217–26.

⁶⁷ For a discussion of Mu‘tazilite notion of *mu‘jiz*, see Martin, “The Role of the Basrah Mu‘tazilah,” 184.

⁶⁸ Al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, 15:217.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 15:220.

(*karāma*) a person, then they are not demonstrating prophethood, which must be their exclusive role.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

As the *karāma* emerged as a tenet of Sunnism, it further compounded Mu‘tazili rejection of the *ahl al-ḥadīth* creed. Conversely, early Sunni theologians and Sufis saw the Mu‘tazilis 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/Mu‘tazilis of Khurasan and Transoxania.⁷² In his treatment of *karāmas* in his aggressively pro-Ash‘ari theological creed, the *Uṣūl al-dīn*, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī of Nishapur focuses on the objections of the “Qadariyya,” an Ash‘ari moniker for their rationalist, Mu‘tazili foes. The Mu‘tazili student of al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār, Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 436/1044), provided the main fodder for Fakhṛ al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s systematic Ash‘ari defense of *karāmas*.⁷³

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

As the Mu‘tazili 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 Mu‘tazili 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 *mu‘jiza* in terms of the scale or dramatic effect of the act involved. Al-Kalābādihī (d. 380/990) of Bukhara, in his *Ta‘arruf*, claims that all Sufis agree on this.⁷⁴

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 Māliki scholars in North Africa and al-Andalus in the late fourth/tenth and early fifth/eleventh centuries. It originated with the leading Māliki jurist of Qayrawān, Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 386/996), author

⁷⁰ Ibid., 15:227.

⁷¹ Ibid., 15:225.

⁷² Radtke and O’Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood*, 156; and Radtke, “al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī on Miracles,” 291.

⁷³ ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-dīn*, 184ff.; and al-Rāzī, *al-Arba‘un fi uṣūl al-dīn*, 2:203–5.

⁷⁴ Al-Kalābādihī, *al-Ta‘arruf*, 87.

of the famous *Risāla* on Māliki *fiqh*. Writing his history of the Māliki school almost two centuries later, Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ 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. Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ 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 Ash‘ari theology, Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013).

The earliest surviving systematic Ash‘ari / Sunni defense of *karāmas* was actually written by al-Bāqillānī because of the North African controversy. Al-Bāqillānī wrote his *Kitāb al-Bayān ‘an al-farq bayn al-mu’jizāt wa-l-karāmāt wa-l-ḥiyāl 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 *mu’jiza*. Although more directed by the contours of Mu‘tazili discourse on the proper definition of *mu’jiza*, 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 *‘āda* of humankind by doing something totally

⁷⁵ The book was called *al-Istizhār fi l-radd ‘alā al-fikriyya* (Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ, *Tartīb al-madārik* [Rabat ed.], 6:218, and Fierro, “Polemic,” 240). Al-Ash‘arī lists the Bakriyya as a sect of the Mu‘tazila, noting that they believe that, on the Day of Judgment, God creates a body (*ṣūra*) for himself that can speak and be seen (al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Helmut Ritter [Cairo: al-Hay‘a al-‘Āmma 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-Ash‘arī acknowledged the contrary position as well in his *Kitāb al-ru’yā al-kabīr* (apparently not extant) (*Risāla*, 188). Al-Ash‘arī denies the possibility of seeing God in this world in his list of Sunni beliefs (*Maqālāt*, 293).

⁷⁶ Fierro, “Polemic,” 240; cf. Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ, *Tartīb al-madārik*, 6:219.

⁷⁷ Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ, *Tartīb al-madārik*, 6:219.

⁷⁸ Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist*, 498.

out of the power of men; they must also be accompanied by a challenge from a prophet that others do the like.⁷⁹

Al-Bāqillānī's *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)..." Qādī 'Iyād 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.⁸⁰ Indeed, al-Bāqillānī upheld the same opinion. In the beginning of the *Bayān*, he explains that only prophets can revive the dead, create bodies *ex nihilo* (*ikhtirā' al-ajsām*), cure lepers and the blind and manipulate time (*iqāmat al-zamān*).⁸¹ It is no coincidence that all but the last of these are instances of *kharq al-āda* matching prophetic miracles ascribed to Jesus in the Qur'an.⁸²

Al-Bāqillānī's position was shared by his contemporary Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 418/1027), a towering Shāfi'ī jurist, theologian and Hadith scholar who played an equally central role in constructing Ash'ari theology and epistemology.⁸³ Al-Isfarāyīnī's close student was none other than al-Qushayrī, who records his master's opinion on *karāmas*: "[p]robative miracles (*mu'jizāt*) 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-du'ā'*), but as for the type that are probative miracles of prophets, no."⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Sorcery cannot be mistaken for a *mu'jiza* because, in such a case, God would render the sorcerer unable to perform his trick (al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-bayān*, 54–5, 94–5).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5. He says he had already written such a response to one Ibn al-Mu'tamir al-Raqqi in Mecca.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

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 Mu'tazili fears of sorcery (*sihr*) being conflated with prophetic miracles, al-Ghazālī says that no one could conceive of *sihr* 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, *al-Iqtisād fi al-ʿitiqād* [Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, n.d.]), 96.

⁸³ For a discussion of al-Isfarāyīnī's life and works, see Jonathan Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 188–91.

⁸⁴ Al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 186. Some later Sunnis like al-Rāzī interpreted al-Isfarāyīnī as rejecting *karāmas* altogether (al-Rāzī, *al-Arba'ūn*, 2:199).

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 (*maqḍūrāt*), it is known today with certainty (*qaṭʿan*) 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.”⁸⁵

The anxiety over *karāmas* among these three formative figures in Ashʿarism seems palpable. Faced with Muʿtazili 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 Muʿtazili 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 *muʿjizas* would lose their distinctive proof value. The Qurʾan 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 Ashʿari school. Ibn Fūrak summarized what would become the mainstream Sunni position on what distinguished a *karāma* from a *muʿjiza*. It was not the presence of a challenge or the degree of *kharq al-ʿāda*. Rather, the *muʿjiza* was accompanied by a *claim* of prophethood, something a saint would never do.⁸⁶ 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 Ashʿaris even in al-Qushayrī's lifetime. His own son, the accomplished

⁸⁵ Al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 187. See also, Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qurʾan Scholar*, 237–42.

⁸⁶ Al-Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 186; and Ibn Fūrak, *Maqālāt al-shaykh Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī*, ed. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Sāyih [Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 1425/2005], 183. See also a quote of Sahl al-Tustarī that “*al-āyāt li-llāh wa-l-muʿjizāt li-l-anbiyāʾ wa-l-karāmāt li-l-awliyāʾ wa-l-mughithāt li-l-murīdīn wa-l-tamkīn li-ahl al-khuṣūṣ*” (al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 211).

Shāfi‘ī / Ash‘ari 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-Yāfi‘ī (d. 767/1367), al-Taftazānī, al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392), al-Sha‘rānī, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī (d. 1014/1606) and Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (d. 1932) all stated that *karāmas* could reach the range of or even supersede *mu‘jizas*. 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 categorical allowance as the default Ash‘ari 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. Mawḥab 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 ‘Umar al-Ṭalamankī (d. 429/1038). They raised such a row that a number of

⁸⁷ Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī quotes Abū Naṣr’s book *al-Murshid* to this effect (al-Haytamī, *al-Fatāwā al-ḥadīthiyya*, 148). For Abū Naṣr’s uncompromising Ash‘arism and the problems it caused, see Abū l-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī tārikh al-mulūk wa-l-umam*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā and Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1992), 16:181–3; and al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 7:159–65.

⁸⁸ Al-Subkī notes that the “*jumhūr*” of *imāms* holds this position (*Ṭabaqāt*, 2:337). See also, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, 174–5; al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 16:343; al-Yāfi‘ī, *Nashr al-maḥāsīn*, 1:24; al-Taftazānī, *Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid*, 5:73; Ibn al-Mughayzil, *al-Kawākib al-zāhira*, 89–90; al-Haytamī, *al-Fatāwā al-ḥadīthiyya*, 148; al-Sha‘rānī, *al-Yawāqit wa-l-jawāhir fī bayān ‘aqā’id al-akābir* (Cairo: n.p., 1860), 1:148; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Ḥāwī li-l-fatāwā*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 2:331; al-Qārī, *Sharḥ al-fiqh al-akbar*, ed. Marwān Muḥammad al-Sha‘ār (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā’is, 1417/1997), 169; Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Shawkānī, *Nayl al-awṭār*, ed. ‘Izz al-Dīn Khaṭṭāb, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1422/2001), 4:313; al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi‘*, 1:30–1; and Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 104–5. I thank Mohammad Rustom for this citation.

scholars from both parties were expelled from the city and exiled across the straits of Gibraltar.⁸⁹

Early Ash'ari *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 Ash'aris involved in the dispute and had read al-Bāqillānī's response.⁹⁰ Like the Mu'tazilis, Ibn Ḥazm sees non-prophetic instances of *kharq al-'āda* 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 Ash'ari denial of causation and their alternative theory of *'āda*.

Ash'aris 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 (*ṭabā'ir*)" in his heresiographical work, Ibn Ḥazm explains that the Ash'ari 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 (*ṭabī'a*) of certain objects or substances, they used the word *'āda* for mere human customs like wearing hats. The Ash'ari designation of great *mu'jizas* like splitting the moon or reviving the dead as "*kharq al-'āda*" was thus a misnomer born of a failure to grasp the firmness of God's laws. Unlike *'āda*, Ibn Ḥazm states, "nature (*ṭabī'a*) cannot be exited from."⁹¹

For Ibn Ḥazm, "transforming nature (*iḥālat al-ṭabā'a*)" 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 (*mumtani' fi l-'aql*)." 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 (*ḥaqā'iq*) would be undermined

⁸⁹ Al-Tujībī also upheld the possibility of women receiving prophecy and rejected the idea that the sage Khidr could remain alive across the centuries (Qādī 'Iyād, *Tartīb al-madārik*, ed. Muḥammad Sālim Hāshim [Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1418/1998], 2:261–2).

⁹⁰ 'Alī b. Aḥmad Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Fiṣal fi l-milal wa-l-ahwā' wa-l-niḥal*, 5 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1964), 5:12.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 5:11–12.

(*baṭalat*).⁹² 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 *Zāhiri 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 Ḥazm, 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 'Iyāḍ 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-Ṭalamankī 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

⁹² Ibid., 5:2–3. For Ibn Ḥazm dismissing reports by Mālikis of their *madhhab's* founder accomplishing miraculous acts of worship and piety, see Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Risāla al-bāhira fī l-radd 'alā al-aqwāl al-fāsida*, ed. Muḥammad Ṣaghīr Ma'sūmī (Damascus: n.p., 1989), 30–1.

⁹³ Ibn Ḥazm, *Fīṣal*, 5:3, 7.

⁹⁴ Abū 'Amr Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, *Fatāwā Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Ibn Taymiyya, 1980), 39.

⁹⁵ Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ gives Ibn Baṭṭāl's death date as 474/1081–2, but this seems unrealistically late; al-Dhahabī puts it at 449/1057, with the month specified; and al-Ziriklī follows him (al-Dhahabī, *Sīyar*, 18:47–8; Khayr al-Dīn Ziriklī, *al-A'lām*, 16th ed. [Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li-l-Malāyīn, 2005], 4:285). Aside from his commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, he also wrote a work on *al-Zuhd wa-l-raqā'iq* as well as a book called *al-I'tisām fī l-ḥadīth* (Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ, *Tartīb al-madārik*, [Beirut ed.], 2:365); Ḥājī Khalifa Muṣṭafā Kātīb Chelebī, *Kashf al-zunūn 'an asāmī l-kutub wa-l-funūn*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā [Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1429/2008], 1:189).

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 (*qaṭ‘ al-dharī‘a*) would be required (*wājib*), with preventing [miracles] following necessarily (*lāzīm*) 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 ‘ayn^{an}*) 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. ‘Īsā 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 (*ṣaḥīḥ al-‘ilm*), it will not be accepted on principle (*aṣl^{an}*), no matter via what route it came.”⁹⁷

Unlike the limits placed on the degree of *kharq al-‘āda* 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.

⁹⁶ Qāḍī ‘Iyād, *Tartīb al-madārik* (Beirut ed.), 2:280; and ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī, *Fahras al-fahāris*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1406/1986), 1:159.

⁹⁷ ‘Alī b. Khalaf Ibn Baṭṭāl, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Abū Tamīm Yāsir b. Ibrāhīm, 10 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat Rusd, 2003), 5:208–9.

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 Shāfiʿī 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.”⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹

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-ḥāfiẓ*).” In his *Fath 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 (*ʿadal*)” 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.”¹⁰⁰

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

⁹⁸ “*Al-ihtijār ʿalā mawāhib allāh li-l-awliyāʾ ʿaẓīm ʿasira, wa-l-ittisāʿ fī tajwīz āyil ilā fath bāb ʿalā l-muʿjizāt masdūd*” (al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:337).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:337.

¹⁰⁰ Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fath al-bārī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Bin Bāz and Ayman Fuʿād ʿAbd al-Bāqī, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 14148/1997), 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-Āyāt 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!”¹⁰¹

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-‘āda*).

“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.¹⁰²

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-‘āda* 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 sorcerers 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.”¹⁰³

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)

¹⁰¹ Al-Sha‘rānī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*; 419, 451; and al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi‘*, 1:221.

¹⁰² Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī, *al-Kawākib al-sā‘ira bi-a‘yān al-mi‘a al-‘āshira*, ed. Jibrā‘il Jabbūr, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq, 1979), 1:74.

¹⁰³ Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath*, 7:487–8.

wrote his *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.¹⁰⁴

Early chapters of the *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 *isnāds*, of events that resemble *muʿjizas* and *kharq al-āda*, and how some in his own time claim to be soothsayers, astrologers knowing the unseen (*ghayb*) or *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 (*ḥabbat burr fi iḥlūl muhr*)” and then boast that their clairvoyance makes them the equal of Jesus, whom the Qur’an describes as promising “I will inform you of what you eat and what you keep stored in your homes (*unabbiʾukum bi-mā taʾkulūn wa-mā taddakhirūn fi 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 *kharq al-āda*? He tells of a group of Sufis coming and claiming that:

[s]omeone had reached with their drinking cup into the Tigris, and it came out full of gold!,” and this has become like *āda* by way of the *karāmas* from the Sufi devotees, and like *āda* according to the claims of the astrologers, and by way of the special properties [of matter] (*khawāṣṣ*) according to the natural philosophers (or alchemists) (*ṭabāyīʿīn*) (*sic*), and by way of soothsaying (*kahāna*) according to the charmer (*muʾazzimīn*) and “knowers (*ʿarrāfin*).” 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 *kharq* remains for the *ādāt*? For are the *ādāt* anything but the ongoing existence of the world (*istimrār al-wujūd*) and the great number of events that transpire (*kathrat al-ḥuṣūl*)? But if a reasonable, believing person draws attention to the corruption and harm (*fasād*) in this, the Sufi says, ‘Do you deny the miracles of saints?’¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ He wrote this after his *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ*, which he wrote after his *Kitāb al-mawḍūʿāt* and his *tafsīr* works (Ibn al-Jawzī, *Naqd al-ʿilm wa-l-ʿulamāʾ aw Talbīs Iblīs* [Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Muḥammad ʿAlī Ṣubayḥī, n.d.], 120; and idem, *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ wa-l-mudhakkirīn*, ed. Merlin Swartz [Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1986]; 103, 147).

¹⁰⁵ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs*, 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 “*arbāb al-qulūb*” (idem, *Kitāb al-quṣṣāṣ*, 116–7). Ibn al-Jawzī also criticized al-Ghazālī for including stories in his *Iḥyāʾ* that have bad implications for *fiqh* or ethics in a book called *Iʿlām al-aḥyāʾ bi-aḡhlāṭ al-Iḥyāʾ* (idem, *al-Muntaẓam*, 17/18:126). It is interesting that al-Yāfiʿī considered the *Talbīs Iblīs* to be an undue criticism of Sufism (al-Yāfiʿī, *Nashr al-maḥāsīn*, 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-mutadayyinīn bi-mā yushbihu al-karāmāt*).”¹⁰⁶

Emphasizing that there is no necessary correlation between someone’s bringing about a break in the habitual course of nature and being a *walī* had been and has remained a prominent theme in Sufi discourse since its tracable origins.¹⁰⁷ 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.”¹⁰⁸ The solution prescribed by Sufi masters throughout the centuries has been to advocate looking past instances of *kharq al-‘āda* and instead examining the conduct of the supposed saint: does he or she fear God and follow the sharia committedly—“upholding the straight path (*istiḳāma*)”? In his widely disseminated Sufi manual, al-Suhrawardī 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.¹⁰⁹ Sufi teachings in general frequently describe *istiḳāma* as the greatest *karāma*.¹¹⁰ This point is summed up in a statement attributed to Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī (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

¹⁰⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs*, 366ff.

¹⁰⁷ For the risk that visions and supposed unveilings (*kashf*) might be tests from God, see al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1:123.

¹⁰⁸ Here al-Sulamī is quoting Abū ‘Amr al-Dimashqī: “*kamā faraḍa allāh ‘alā l-anbiyā’ iẓhār al-‘āyāt wa-l-mu’jizāt li-yu’minū bihā kadhālika faraḍa ‘alā l-awliyā’ kitmān al-karāmāt hattā lā yaf-tatana al-khalq bihā*” (al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 277). See also, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1417/1997), 12:126; and al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi’*; 1:358, 2:218.

¹⁰⁹ Al-Suhrawardī, *‘Awārif*, 113. See also Ibn Taymiyya, *Fatāwā*, 11:185–6.

¹¹⁰ Al-Suhrawardī, *‘Awārif*, 113–4, also 129, 265; Ibn Taymiyya, *Fatāwā*, 11:98, 121, 161; and al-Haytamī, *al-Fatāwā al-ḥadīthiyya*, 383. Tāshkūbrūzāde describes one Muḥammad Zayn al-Dīn al-Khāqī (d. 838/1435) as having “*mutāba’at al-sharī’a wa-l-sunna, wa-kāna dhālik min a’lā al-karāmāt ‘ind ahl ḥādhihi al-ṭarīqa*” (*al-Shaqā’iq al-nu’māniyya*, 44). The centrality of *istiḳāma* in knowing a saint as opposed to just looking at any *kharq al-‘āda* they might manifest is the main topic of a Persian treatise by an unknown author entitled *al-Tajallī fī ma’rifat al-walī*, the main chapter of which is “*faṣl dar miyān-i ma’nā karāmat va ḥaqīqat anna al-istiḳāma faḥw qull-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."¹¹¹

The danger of the masses or even more specialized Sufi devotees following a false saint became more pronounced as the frequency and importance of *karāmas* increased. As this intensification of *karāmas* plateaued in the Mamluk period, certain Sufi brotherhoods, like the Shādhiliyya, emphasized saints observing the exoteric sharia and actually evinced a mistrust of *karāmas*.¹¹² 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.”¹¹³ The effort to delink supposed instances of *kharq al-‘āda* 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 *Qā’ida fi l-karāmāt* and his “Friends of the Most Merciful and Friends of Satan (*Awliyā’ al-Rahmān wa-awliyā’ 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 Shāfi’i Hadith scholar Zayn al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī (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-Naḥwī (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 *karāmas* about them and have visions of them in dreams, collecting all this in books. . . .”¹¹⁴

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 ‘Abd 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.

¹¹¹ “*Law naẓartum ilā rajul u’ṭiya min al-karāmāt ḥattā yartafi’a fi l-hawā’ fa-lā taḡtarrū bihi ḥattā tanzurū kayfa tajidūnahu ‘ind al-amr wa-l-nahy wa-ḥifẓ al-ḥudūd*” (Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbis Iblīs*, 208; and al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-i’tidāl fi naqd al-rijāl*, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī, 4 vols. [Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifa, n.d., reprint of the 1963–4 ‘Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī edition [Cairo]], 2:346]). See also, al-Suhrawardī, *Awārif*, 129.

¹¹² Geoffroy, *Soufisme*, 228, 351.

¹¹³ Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, 65.

¹¹⁴ Zayn al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-‘Irāqī, *al-Bā’ith ‘alā al-ikhlāṣ min ḥawādith al-quṣṣāṣ*, ed. Maḥmūd Luṭfi al-Ṣabbāgh (Beirut: Dār al-Warrāq, 1422/2001), 106; and Abū Ḥayyān Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Gharnāṭī, *Tafsīr al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, ed. ‘Ādil Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mawjūd et al., 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1422/2001), 4:312. Al-‘Irāqī also complains of people who claim to be scholars because Khidr granted them knowledge of the unseen (*al-Bā’ith*, 92).

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*,¹¹⁵ Ibn al-Jawzī expresses concern over the inversion of *kharq al-‘āda* and *‘āda* 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 *mu‘jizas* 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 Shāfi‘i/Ash‘ari/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 *Talbīs Iblīs*, is a digest of Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣbahānī’s *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’* stripped of its many *karāma* stories and unreliable *ḥadīths* and focusing more on knowledge (*‘ilm*) and pious abstemiousness (*wara’*). In the entry on Abū Turāb al-Nakhshabī, 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. ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Hindāwī, 2 vols. in 1 [Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Aṣriyya, 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 (*kadhīb 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?” (*Talbīs Iblīs*, 372–3).

¹¹⁷ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:319; and Ibn al-Mughayzī, *al-Kawākib al-zāhira*, 125.

continued series (*istimrār*) of such violations, and that does not entail that this becomes the habitual course of nature."¹¹⁸

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 *walī* 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*.¹¹⁹

And yet al-Nabhānī's descriptions of saints in his own day, listed in his capacious *Jāmi' karāmāt al-awliyā'* (completed in 1906), belie his assurances. In the longest entry in the work, al-Nabhānī recounts the miracles of 'Alī al-'Umarī, 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-'ādāt*)" (my emphasis). In fact, al-'Umarī's miracles became so commonplace that some people did not even notice them or appreciate his sainthood.¹²⁰ 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 (*'ādīyya*)."¹²¹

The Criterion of Probability and Faithfull 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, *Jāmi'*, 1:19–21. See also idem, *Asbab al-ta'rif*, added to idem, *Jāmi' karāmāt al-awliyā'* (Dār Ṣādir edition), 2:332.

¹²⁰ Al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi'*, 2:319, also 2:332.

¹²¹ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Hama'āt*, 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 'Abdallāh 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

¹²² See Jonathan Brown, “The Rules of *Matn* Criticism: There Are No Rules,” *Islamic Law and Society* 19 (2012), forthcoming.

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

¹²⁴ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 17:12, 16:560.

¹²⁵ The *sīra* genre had always been characterized by more relaxed critical standards, but by the Mamluk period, Muḥammad-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-Rashīd. A respected Sunni scholar named Wakī' b. al-Jarrāḥ (d. 197/813) reported that, after the Prophet's death, when his body was left to rest unburied for three days, his stomach had bloated and his pinkie fingers straightened from decay. Many scholars wanted Wakī' 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 Wakī' 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 (*'ayb*)." 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 Hadīth scholar of Isfahan, Ibn Mandah (d. 395/1004–5), in the *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'*. A Khurasani 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] *ḥadīth* was proving problematic for me, so I came and asked the Messenger of God (ṣ), 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 (*ta'ajjub*)." 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-Ta'zīm wa-l-manna fi anna abaway rasūl allāh fi l-janna," in *Silsilat Maṭbū'āt Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-Uthmāniyya* 50 (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-Uthmāniyya, 1915), 18; and al-Bayjūrī, *Sharḥ jawharat al-tawḥīd*, 68–70. The Egyptian scholar Nūr al-Dīn 'Alī b. al-Jazzār also wrote *Tahqīq āmāl al-rājīn fi anna wāliday al-muṣṭafā bi-faḍl allāh fi al-dārāyn min al-nājīn* (Kātib Chelebi, *Kashf al-ẓunūn*, 1:399).

¹²⁶ Al-Dhahabī, *Mīzān*, 2:649–50.

¹²⁷ Idem, *Siyar*, 17:37–8.

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 'Abd al-Salām: "[t]here have not been related to us by massive, unimpeachable transmission (*tawātur*) miracles from anyone but 'Abd 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 'Abd al-Qādir. But many of them are not reliable (*lā taṣīḥḥu*), 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

¹²⁸ Michael Cooperson, "On Probability, Plausibility and 'Spiritual Communication' in Classical Arabic Biography," in *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. Philip F. Kennedy (Wiesbaden: Harrossowitz, 2005), 75; and al-Dhahabī, *Sīyar*, 11:231.

¹²⁹ Al-Dhahabī, *Sīyar*, 20:442.

¹³⁰ Al-Yāfi'ī also notes that some ulama have mentioned that al-Jīlānī's "miracles have approached *tawātur*" (*Nashr al-maḥāsīn*, 2:142). 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 (*Jāmi'*, 1:331, 407, 451, 472, 2:136–7, 177). Al-Subkī mentions in his biography of the Yemeni scholar Ismā'īl 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-Yāfi'ī, *Nashr al-maḥāsīn*, 2:114, 135, and al-Haytamī, *al-Fatāwā al-ḥadīthīyya*, 386–7.

¹³¹ Al-Dhahabī, *Sīyar*, 20:443.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 20:450. Al-Nabhānī adds to this statement a report attributed to Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 899/1493) that Abū l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī came close (*Jāmi'*, 2:214).

convoluted hierarchy of the *madhhabs*,¹³³ al-Dhahabī is perhaps the pre-modern Sunni scholar who most readily engaged in content criticism of reports. His response to the *karāmas* attributed to al-Jilānī stands in stark contrast to other Sunnis like ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-‘Urḍī (d. 1024/1614), a Shāfi‘i jurist of Aleppo. Responding to skeptics like al-Dhahabī, he notes how widely transmitted al-Jilānī’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. . . .”¹³⁴

As demonstrated elsewhere, al-Dhahabī often rejected supposed *ḥadīths* or historical reports due to what he deemed illogical or unreasonable content, anachronism or physical impossibility. In fact, he rejects several *ḥadīths* included in the esteemed canonical Hadith collections *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* and *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī* on these grounds.¹³⁵ Al-Dhahabī’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-Dhahabī 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-Dhahabī rejects this story out of hand. Certainly, the *isnād* relies at one point on an unknown

¹³³ Brown, *Canonization*, 356–7. Al-Dhahabī states, “[o]nly one unable to achieve knowledge, like most of the scholars of our age, or a chauvinist (*muta‘aṣṣib*) constrains himself to one *madhhab*.” Although al-Dhahabī 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-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 14:491, 18:191). For criticisms of Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī for “over-intellectualism,” see idem, *Mizān*, 2:259, 3:340.

¹³⁴ Kātib Chelebī, *Kashf al-ẓunūn*, 1:312. Al-‘Urḍī wrote this on the cover of his copy of the *Bahjat al-asrār wa-ma‘din al-anwār fī manāqib al-sāda al-akhyār min mashāyikh al-abrār* by ‘Alī b. Yūsuf Ibn Jahḍam al-Hamdānī (d. 713/1313).

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 be judged a wonder (*‘ajab*).”¹³⁶

‘Abdallāh 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 Ṣiddīqiyya). ‘Abdallāh 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 ‘Abdallāh’s major teachers.¹³⁷ Like Muḥammad b. Ja‘far al-Kattānī (d. 1927), the Ghumārīs 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 ‘Abduh and the Salafi/Wahhābi disavowal of saint veneration.

Even more than the Kattānīs, however, the Ghumārī brothers were also fiercely anti-*taqlīd*, opposed to the institutional domination of the schools of law and proponents of returning to the Qur’an and Hadith for a proper understanding of Islam. Both ‘Abdallāh and his older brother, Aḥmad (d. 1960), claimed to have attained the rank of *mujtahid muṭlaq*, with ‘Abdallāh even hoping that his tremendous knowledge made him the “renewer (*mujaddid*) of the era.”¹³⁸ ‘Abdallāh 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, ‘Abdallāh al-Ghumārī was a tireless defender of Sufism, especially the practices of venerating the graves of saints and the truth of *karāmas*.¹³⁹ 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 *Ḥujaj wa-l-bayyināt fi ithbāt*

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

¹³⁷ For more on the Kattāniyya, see Sahar Bazzaz, *Forgotten Saints* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹³⁸ Aḥmad b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī, *al-Baḥr al-‘amiq fi marwiyāt Ibn al-Ṣiddīq*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutubī, 2007), 1:118; and ‘Abdallāh al-Ghumārī, *Sabūl al-tawfiq fi tarjamat ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ṣiddīq* (Cairo: Dār al-Bayḍā’, 1990), 54.

¹³⁹ This is most clearly evident in al-Ghumārī’s, *al-I‘lām bi-anna l-taṣawwuf min sharī‘at al-islām*, ed. ‘Iṣām Muḥammad al-Ṣārī, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1427/2006).

al-karāmāt followed in the footsteps of al-Qushayrī's, al-Subkī's, al-Yāfi'ī'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 fi-mā manna Allāh bihi 'alā walīhi al-sayyid Aḥmad al-Rifā'ī min taqbīl yad al-Nabī (ṣ)*, which was attributed to al-Suyūṭī. Al-Ghumārī recounts how, after learning the science of epistemology and legal theory (*'ilm 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*s 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

¹⁴⁰ Al-Ghumārī mentions the *Ḥujaj* in the work (al-Ghumārī, *Awliyā' wa-karāmāt*, ed. Muḥammad 'Alī Yūsuf [Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1419/1998]; 8, 75; and idem, *Sabīl al-tawfīq*, 132).

¹⁴¹ Idem., *Awliyā' wa-karāmāt*, 7–9.

¹⁴² Idem., *al-Khawātir al-dīniyya*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. in 1 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1425/2004), 1:138–9.

¹⁴³ This story appears in the *Durar al-aṣḍāf fi manāqib al-ashraf* of 'Abd al-Jawwād al-Shirbīnī (al-Ghumārī, *Awliyā' wa-karāmāt*, 13; cf. al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi'*, 1:401). It was not unheard of for a saint to hear silently the Prophet return the *taslīm* performed in prayer. It occurred with Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥanafī (al-Sha'rānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 445). Muḥammad al-Bakrī heard the Prophet greet him in Medina (al-Ghazzī, *al-Kawākib al-sā'ira*, 1:83).

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-Jīlānī), 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 (*dā’irat al-inkān*).” 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-Sha’rānī’s hagio-biographical work *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, a story that al-Sha’rānī 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 (*dā’irat 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-Shāfi’ī 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-Rifā’ī 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, *Awliyā’ wa-karāmāt*, 14.

¹⁴⁵ Al-Sha’rānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 423.

¹⁴⁶ See al-Bayjūrī, *Sharḥ jawharat al-tawḥīd*, 109.

¹⁴⁷ Al-Ghumārī, *Awliyā’ wa-karāmāt*, 43–4.

God's mercy. Such miracles, concludes al-Ghumārī, like a human form melting into liquid and reforming, are rationally impossible (*mustaḥilāt*).¹⁴⁸

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.¹⁴⁹

Unlike the hagio-biographical works of al-Sha'rānī and al-Nabhānī, in which comically foul *karāmas* are salient, al-Ghumārī rejects any miracle attribution that contravened the sharia or proper ethics.¹⁵⁰ The outcry against *karāmas* violating the sharia was ironically a hallmark of Ibn Taymiyya and the Salafi movement, but it was also echoed by sharia-minded Sufis like Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 899/1493).¹⁵¹

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

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 28; and al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi'*, 1:401.

¹⁴⁹ Al-Ghumārī, *Awliyā' wa-karāmāt*, 41, 44–6. The saints in the crocodile stories are Ibrāhīm al-Ḍasūqī and Aḥmad b. Farghal. See al-Sha'rānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 451; and al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi'*, 1:222, 323. For a report that Abū Ḥanīfa went forty years without needing to renew his *wuḍū'*, 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, 'Alī al-'Umarī, using his miraculously extended penis to whip an obstinate servant. Both al-Sha'rānī and al-Nabhānī report an Egyptian saint, 'Amīr 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, *Jāmi'*, 2:35, 114–5, 326–7; and al-Sha'rānī, *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 *walī*. 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-Birgīvī reiterates that no miraculously gained knowledge can excuse violating the sharia of God and his prophet. The Deoband scholar Ashraf 'Alī Thanvī requires that *karāmas* be *ḥalāl*. See, Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs*, 463; Ibn Taymiyya, *Fatāwā*, 11:123, 139; Aḥmad Zarrūq, *Qawā'id al-taṣawwuf*, 77; al-Birgīvī, *The Path of Muhammad*, 74; and Thanvī, *Karāmāt Imdādīyya*, 7. Ibn Taymiyya and Zarrūq both offer arguments against the "Khīḍrian" model (Ibn Taymiyya, *Fatāwā*, 11:150–1; and Aḥmad Zarrūq, *Qawā'id 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 Daqīq to Egypt. Al-Ghumārī 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-Ghumārī believes al-Shaʿrānī and others should not have recorded due to its sheer rudeness involves a supposed saint named shaykh ʿUbayd 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-Ghumārī is particularly irked by the belief, endemic to Egypt, that the biers of dead saints levitate (*ṭayrān al-naʿsh*) 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-Ghumārī looked closely but saw nothing of the sort. Interestingly, although al-Ghumārī is consistently critical of al-Shaʿrānī 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-Iʿlām bi-anna al-taṣawwuf min sharīʿat al-islām*, al-Ghumārī reveals that his perspective on *karāmas* is close to that of al-Qushayrī. 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-Ghumārī 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-Qushayrī had alluded to this in his limitations on potential *karāmas*. By “a child born of other than two parents,” al-Qushayrī had meant Jesus’ miraculous virgin birth, which the Qur’an describes as a “sign (*āya*).” For al-Ghumārī, 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-Ghumārī’s perspective on miracles was ultimately informed by his own socio-religious context.

¹⁵² Al-Ghumārī, *Awliyāʾ wa-karāmāt*, 32–3; cf. al-Nabhānī, *Jāmiʿ*, 1:416.

¹⁵³ Al-Ghumārī, *Awliyāʾ wa-karāmāt*, 56; and al-Shaʿrānī, *Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 427 (entry on Ḥusayn Abū ʿAlī).

¹⁵⁴ Al-Ghumārī, *Awliyāʾ wa-karāmāt*, 46; and idem, *al-Ḥujaj wa-l-bayyināt*, 184. See also, Shaltūt, *al-Fatāwā*, 199–201.

¹⁵⁵ Al-Ghumārī implies that this understanding of “challenge” was drawn attention to by Muḥammad Ibn Khilfat al-Ubbī of Tunis (d. 827/1424) in his *Ikmāl ikmāl al-muʿlim li-fawāʿid Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (al-Ghumārī, *al-Iʿlām*, 46–7).

Modernist attacks on Sufism as the wellspring of backward superstition in Islam had led him to defend *karāmas*.¹⁵⁶ 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:

[a]nd 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.¹⁵⁷

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 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (d. 1997) vigorously defended the Ash'ari/Sufi dimensions of Sunni Islam from Salafi 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-'āda*. He asserts that, unlike other subjects generally treated with laxity, such as the virtues of actions (*faḍā'il al-a'māl*), miraculous events cannot be substantiated by an amalgamation of weak *ḥadīths*. Establishing a *kharq al-'āda* requires *ṣaḥīḥ* narrations.¹⁵⁸ Another leading Syrian Sunni scholar, Muḥammad Sa'īd 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.¹⁵⁹

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

¹⁵⁶ See, for example, Albert Hourani, "Rashid Rida and the Sufi Orders," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 29 (1977): 231–41.

¹⁵⁷ Al-Ghumārī, *al-Ḥujaj wa-l-bayyināt*, 183–4; and idem, *Majallat al-Islām*, 8.21–33 (1358/1939).

¹⁵⁸ Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī, *al-Masnū' fī ma'rīfat al-ḥadīth al-mawḍū'*, ed. 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 6th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 1426/2005), 80.

¹⁵⁹ Muḥammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, personal communication, Abu Dhabi, 4/15/2006.

have deemed it an impiety to challenge any miracle in particular. Mainstream Sunni discourse since the late fifth/eleventh century has categorized the rejection of *karāmas* as no more than an archaic error of the Mu‘tazila or the isolated mistake of a stray Ash‘ari theologian, usually al-Isfarāyīnī. As we have seen, however, Mu‘tazila objections to saintly miracles lived on in early Ash‘ari thought. The Mu‘tazila had rejected the possibility of post-prophetic *khariq al-‘āda* because it undermined the necessary link between miracles and prophecy. Two of the three real architects of Ash‘ari theology and epistemology, 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 similar to that of the Mu‘tazila. They allowed saints to break the habitual course of nature, but concern for protecting the unmatchable quality of prophetic wonders led them to limit miracles only to those lesser realms of wonder beneath that of *mu‘jizās*. Far from the Ash‘ari heartland of the Baghdad/Khurasan circuit, scholars invested in Ash‘ari theology found themselves embroiled in dramatic 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 miracles, *karāmas* could not be reined in. Reading hagiographies from the Mamluk period onward, like those of al-Sha‘rānī or al-Nabhānī, one finds saints regularly working miracles equal to or greater than prophetic miracles. Saints “fold” time,¹⁶⁰ revive the dead,¹⁶¹ and even animate lifeless objects¹⁶² all too frequently. 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 routinization of the quotidian *karāma* a byproduct of fraudulent saints and a threat to the very distinction between the miraculous and the mundane. Outstanding scholars like al-Dhahabī and al-Ghumārī provided criteria for their faithful 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 transmission criticism. Although he labored against the modern contempt for miracles, al-Ghumārī nonetheless used a similar approach to champion the early faithful dissent of al-Qushayrī and trim away the excesses of *karāma* claims “in this dark time.”

¹⁶⁰ Al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi‘*; 2:231, 303.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1:345, 1:193, 123, 2:210.

¹⁶² In this case, the Kaaba’s black stone coming alive, with legs, arms and a face, and walking around (al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi‘*, 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‘ari 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’*²

This list includes general works, not works on the *karāmas* of specific saints, such as, Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār al-Shinqīṭī al-Kuntī’s (d. 1854) *al-Ṭawā’if al-tāliḍa min karāmāt al-shaykhayn al-wāliḍ wa-l-wāliḍa* or Ibrāhīm b. Ṣālīḥ al-Rashīd (d. 1874) *‘Iqd al-durār al-naḥīs fī ba‘ḍ karāmāt Aḥmad b. Idrīs*.¹⁶³

- Ibn al-A‘rābī, 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-mu‘jizāt wa-l-karāmāt*.¹⁶⁶
- Al-‘Assāl, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Iṣbahānī (d. 349/960), *Āyāt wa-karāmāt al-awliyā’*.¹⁶⁷
- Al-Bāqillānī, Abū Bakr (d. 403/1013), *al-Karāmāt, Kitāb al-bayān ‘an al-farq bayn al-mu‘jizāt wa-l-karāmāt wa-l-ḥiyāl wa-l-kahāna wa-l-siḥr wa-l-nāranjāt*.¹⁶⁸
- Al-Lālakā‘ī, Hibatallāh b. al-Ḥasan (d. 418/1027–8), *Karāmāt al-awliyā’*.¹⁶⁹
- Ibn Fuṭays, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad al-Qurṭubī (d. 402/1012), *al-Karāmāt*.¹⁷⁰
- Abū Dharr al-Harawī, ‘Abdallāh (d. 430/1038), *Karāmāt al-awliyā’*.¹⁷¹
- Ibn Shaqq al-Layl, Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ṭulayṭulī (d. 455/1063), *Kitāb karāmāt wa-burāhīn al-ṣālīḥīn*.¹⁷²

¹⁶³ Al-Zirikli, *A‘lām*, 7:92, 1:44.

¹⁶⁴ Kātib Chelebī, *Kashf al-ḡunūn*, 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’*² and *Man ‘āsha ba‘ḍ al-mawt*, published in *Mawsū‘at rasā’il Ibn Abī l-Dunyā* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, 1993).

¹⁶⁶ Fuat Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums*, vol. 1. (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 657.

¹⁶⁷ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 16:11.

¹⁶⁸ Qāḍī ‘Iyād, *Tartīb al-madārik* (Beirut ed.), 2:214; and note 88 above.

¹⁶⁹ Published with *Sharḥ uṣūl i‘tiqād ahl al-sunna*, ed. Aḥmad Sa‘d Ḥamdān (Riyad: Dār Ṭība, 1992).

¹⁷⁰ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, 17:212.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 17:560.

¹⁷² Kātib Chelebī, *Kashf al-ḡunūn*, 3:70. Fierro states that this book was a rebuttal of Ibn Abī Zayd’s position (“Polemic,” 239).

- Al-Shahid al-Qaysī, Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir (d. 408/1017), *Ijābat wa-l-karāmāt*.¹⁷³
- Al-Dākālī, [??], *Karāmāt*.¹⁷⁴
- Al-Khallāl, ‘Abdallāh b. Najm al-Miṣrī al-Māliki (d. 616/1219), *Kitāb karāmāt al-awliyā’*.¹⁷⁵
- Ibn Bāṭish, ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā’īl b. Hibatallāh (d. 655/1257), *Muzil al-shubuhāt fī ithbāt al-karāmāt*.¹⁷⁶
- Ibn Sayyid al-Nās al-Ya‘murī, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad (d. 734/1334), *al-Maqāmāt al-‘aliya wa-l-karāmāt al-jaliya li-ba‘d al-ṣaḥāba*.¹⁷⁷
- Ibn Mughayzil, ‘Abd al-Qādir b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 894/1489), *Kawākib al-zāhira fī ijtimā’ al-awliyā’ yaqāzat^{am} bi-sayyid al-dunyā wa-l-ākhirā*.¹⁷⁸
- Al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn (d. 911/1505), *Tanwīr al-ḥalāk fī imkān ru’yat al-nabī wa-l-malak, al-Munjali fī taṭawwur al-walī*.¹⁷⁹
- Al-Sha‘rānī, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 973/1565), *al-Burūq al-khawāṭif li-baṣr man ‘amila bi-l-hawāṭif*.¹⁸⁰
- Al-Shawbarī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Azharī (d. 1069/1659), *al-Ajwiba ‘an al-as’ila fī karāmāt al-awliyā’*.¹⁸¹
- Imām al-Ashrafīyya, ‘Abd al-Bāqī b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Miṣrī (d. 1078/1667), *al-Suyūf al-ṣiqāl fī raqabat man yunkiru karāmāt al-awliyā’ ba‘d al-intiqāl*.¹⁸²
- Aḥmad b. Aḥmad Ibn al-‘Ajāmī al-Azharī (d. 1086/1675), *Karāmāt al-awliyā’*.¹⁸³
- Abū l-‘Abbās Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Ḥamawī (1098/1687), *Nafahāt al-qurb wa-l-ittisāl bi-ithbāt al-taṣarruf li-awliyā’ Allāh ta‘ālā wa-l-karāma ba‘d al-intiqāl*.¹⁸⁴
- Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan al-Jūharī al-Azharī (d. 1181/1767), *Fayḍ al-ilāh al-muta‘āl fī ithbāt karāmāt al-awliyā’ fī l-ḥayāt wa-ba‘d al-intiqāl*.¹⁸⁵
- Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Sindī (d. 1841), *Jawāz al-istighātha wa-l-tawassul wa-ṣudūr al-khawāriq min al-awliyā’*; and *Risāla fī karāmāt al-awliyā’ hal hiya jā’izat al-wuqū‘ wa-hal al-taṣdiq bihā wājib am jā’iz*.¹⁸⁶
- Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Tankābanī (d. 1892), *Karāmāt al-‘ulamā’ min ‘ulamā’ al-shī‘a al-imāmiyya*.¹⁸⁷

¹⁷³ Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ, *Tartīb al-madārik* (Beirut ed.), 2:267.

¹⁷⁴ Al-Dhahabī, *Sīyar*, 3:362.

¹⁷⁵ Kātib Chelebī, *Kashf al-zunūn*, 3:70.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 3:240; and al-Ghumārī, *al-Ḥujaj wa-l-bayyināt*, 23.

¹⁷⁷ Ed. ‘Iffat Wiṣāl Ḥamza (Beirut: n.p., 1986).

¹⁷⁸ Ibn al-Mughayzil, see note 1 above.

¹⁷⁹ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Ḥawī li-l-fatāwā*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 1:288–95, 2:473–91.

¹⁸⁰ Al-Kattānī, *Fahras al-fahāris*, 2:2081.

¹⁸¹ Al-Ziriklī, *A‘lām*, 6:11.

¹⁸² MS King Saud University (Riyadh), Ms # 3451.

¹⁸³ Ismā’īl Bāshā al-Bābānī, *Īdāḥ al-maknūn fī l-dhāyil ‘alā Kashf al-zunūn*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1429/2008), 5:290.

¹⁸⁴ ‘Abd al-Qādir b. Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Irbilī, *Ḥujjat al-dhākīrīn wa-radd al-munkirīn* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya li-l-Turāth, [2005]), 47.

¹⁸⁵ Al-Kattānī, *Fahras al-fahāris*, 1:303.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 2:721.

¹⁸⁷ Al-Bābānī, *Īdāḥ al-maknūn*, 5:290.

- Al-Nabhānī, Yūsuf (d. 1932), *Jāmi‘ karāmāt al-awliyā’*.¹⁸⁸
- Al-Zahrāwī, Jamīl Ṣidqī (d. 1936), *al-Fajr al-ṣādiq fī ithbāt al-khawāriq*.¹⁸⁹
- Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Kuwī (d. 1943), *al-Mu‘jizāt wa-l-karāmāt*.¹⁹⁰
- Abū Samah ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir Nūr al-Dīn al-Talīnī (d. 1950), *al-Awliyā’ wa-l-karāmāt*.¹⁹¹
- Al-Ghumārī, ‘Abdallāh (d. 1993), *al-Ḥujaj wa-l-bayyināt fī ithbāt al-karāmāt*; and *Awliyā’ wa-karāmāt*.
- Al-Ṭu‘mī, Muḥyī al-Dīn, *Takmilat Jāmi‘ karāmāt al-awliyā’*.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ See note 25 above.

¹⁸⁹ Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī, *al-Mu‘āṣirūn*, ed. Muḥammad al-Miṣrī, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1413/1993), 149.

¹⁹⁰ Al-Ziriklī, *A‘lām*, 6:245.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4:11.

¹⁹² (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2008).