A Contest of Grammar: Religion and Knowledge in the Thought of Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn Taymiyyah

Rory Dickson, *Wilfrid Laurier University*

Introduction

Sufism, or *tasawwuf* in Arabic, is the mystical tradition of Islam. Although depictions of Islam as an austere and anti-mystical faith abound, medieval Muslim societies were remarkably hospitable to mysticism, a fact most visibly evidenced by the proliferation and patronage of Sufi orders between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries CE.[1] Following Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali's successful synthesis of Sufism and Sunni orthodoxy in the eleventh century, Sufism became an integral part of Muslim religiosity. Medieval Muslim rulers, including those among the Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman dynasties, patronized Sufi centers, teachers, and teachings with official and material support. Notable *'ulama*, or religious scholars and jurists, were students of Sufis or Sufis themselves. For much of its history "Official" Islam has been Sufic in orientation.

Since the rise and spread of anti-Sufi reform movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries however, Sufism has frequently been marginalized within Islamic discourse, and Sufi teachers and teachings have come under considerable attack. Much of this attack can be traced to the anti-Sufi Arabian reformer and religious leader Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1791 CE). Followers of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab successfully captured the *hijaz*, or area encompassing Mecca and Medina, in 1805.[2] As Mecca and Medina are the most important pilgrimage sites of Islam, "Wahhabi" control of them ensured that their brand of anti-Sufi revivalism reached

---

1. See J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

2. John Obert Voll, "Foundations for Renewal and Reform: Islamic Movements in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 517.

Muslims from around the world, thereafter influencing nineteenth century revivalist movements from Africa to India.[3] Today's intellectual heirs of the Wahhabi movement generally refer to themselves as Salafis. It should be mentioned that it is not simply the intellectual heirs of the Wahhabis who use the term "Salafi." Tariq Ramadan, for example, refers to himself as a "Salafi reformist," a term that he distinguishes clearly from the "political literalist Salafism" often associated with Wahhabi, anti-Sufi activism.[4] For the purposes of this paper however, the term Salafi will be used narrowly in reference to those who adopt the term as a marker of a literalist, anti-Sufi approach to Islam.

Linguistically the term Salafi refers to the *salaf al-salih*, or pious ancestors. Salafis have adopted this term self-consciously in reference to their goal of reviving the pure, original Islam of the first generations of Muslims.[5] This goal implicitly rejects the medieval synthesis of Sufism and orthodoxy achieved by Al-Ghazali as a corruption of the purity of Islam as practiced by the first generations of Muslims. Although the difference of approach represented by Sufi and Salafi Muslims may be conceived of as a difference simply of interpretation, in this paper I will argue that the Salafi rejection of Sufism implies a deeper difference, one that hinges on differing conceptions of the nature of religion and religious knowledge. Put another way, the contest between Sufi and Salafi approaches to Islam is a contest of differing religious epistemologies, or grammars.

The noted twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously expanded the use of the word grammar to include not simply the rules of syntax, but also the rules of meaning.[6] In Wittgenstein's usage, grammar refers to the network of ideas that underlie a shared sense of

---

3. I have placed the term "Wahhabi" in quotation marks as it is a term that outsiders use, often derogatorily, to refer to followers of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, though his followers do not self-describe in this manner. Rather, the followers of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab initially referred to themselves as Muwahideen (Unitarians), or those who make one, in reference to their emphasis on a revived tawhid, or theology of the absolute oneness and transcendence of God. Sultan Ghalib al-Qu'aiti, *The Holy Cities, The Pilgrimage and the World of Islam: A History: From the earliest traditions till 1925 (1344AH)* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2007), 329.

4. Ian Buruma, "Tariq Ramadan has an identity Issue," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2007.

5. Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 245–246.

6. Anat Matar, Anat Biletzki, "Ludwig Wittgenstein," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2002 Edition), http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein.

what constitutes meaningful language. In other words, we only understand one another because we share a grammar, or a set of ideas about what is meaningful speech. Following Wittgenstein, Ebrahim Moosa, in his work *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, argues that "conflicts between competing discourses within a religion are often not disputes over a common language as much as they are clashes between entirely different "grammars," or networks of ideas."[7] Hence we can conceive of intra-religious debates as the "contesting grammars of religion."[8] These debates are not simply over differing interpretations of religious sources, but rather are rooted in different ways of being religious, ways that are in turn founded on different ideas about what religion is, or what religious knowledge consists of.

In what follows I will explore one of the most significant contests of grammar within the Islamic tradition. This grammatical contestation began in earnest in the thirteenth century and today manifests in the debate between Sufi and Salafi approaches to Islam. This contest between different understandings of what the Islamic religion is and what it means is historically grounded in the lives and writings of medieval Muslim saints and scholars. In this specific case, the debate often returns to, and revolves around a particular Sufi saint and a particular legal scholar, namely the Andalucian Sufi Muhyi ad-Din Ibn al-'Arabi (1165–1240 CE) and his most famous detractor, the Damascene jurist and theologian Taqi ad-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328 CE). Indeed these two figures have occupied more of Sunni Islam's polemical space than any other pair. Alexander Knysh observes that almost every significant Muslim thinker since the thirteenth century has made a point of defining his position on Ibn al-'Arabi's orthodoxy or lack thereof.[9] Although Ibn Taymiyyah's work fell into near irrelevance for some centuries following his death, his work was resurrected in the eighteenth century by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and later by

7. Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 140.

8. Ibid.

9. Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 1.

Rashid Rida (1865–1935 CE).[10] Since this time, Ibn Taymiyyah's thought has proliferated throughout the Muslim world and his works form the basis for much of contemporary Salafi thought. As a result Ibn al-'Arabi and Ibn Taymiyyah have become iconic representatives of the Sufi and Salafi approaches to Islam, respectively. Ibn al-'Arabi, or simply Ibn 'Arabi, is generally understood as the representative *par excellence* of metaphysical Sufism, renown for his sometimes radical and subversive interpretations of the *Qur'an*, while Ibn Taymiyyah is often read as an archetype of legalism, literalism, and anti-Sufi reformism.

To better understand how Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn Taymiyyah differ, or to get a sense of the difference of grammar underlying their approaches, I will first explore each author's epistemological approach, or their understanding of religious knowledge. In other words, I will outline how each author conceives of religious knowledge, specifically in terms of how this knowledge is gained. Following this, I will discuss the religious implications of each author's epistemological approach, in terms of religious belief, scriptural interpretation, and relations with non-Muslims. Finally, I will connect these historical implications to the context of contemporary grammatical contestations within Muslim communities. To contextualize these issues, I will first provide a brief historical sketch of the life and thought of Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn Taymiyyah.

The Life and Thought of Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn Taymiyyah

Ibn 'Arabi was born in Murcia in 1165 CE, a town in southeastern Spain, or under Arab rule, al-Andalus.[11] He came of age in Seville, which under the Almohads was a city of remarkable cultural florescence and learning. The near century of Almohad rule marked the final flowering of Arabic culture in Spain.[12] Ibn 'Arabi was born into an aristocratic family

---

10. As Victor Makari notes, "few scholars concentrated with any degree of depth on his [Ibn Taymiyyah's] career as a Muslim theologian and jurist. These include his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, [and] his follower in the eighteenth century, Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab." Victor E. Makari, *Ibn Taymiyyah's Ethics: The Social Factor* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983), 3.
11. Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier: The spiritual life and thought of Ibn 'Arabi* (Ashland: White Cloud Press, 1999), 33.
12. Ibid., 35.

and the few available anecdotes of his life at this time indicate that he "led a life typical of a wealthy young man of noble Arab stock," which included both the study of the religious sciences under the best Andalucian *ulama* or religious scholars, and considerable time for leisure and carousing with his aristocratic companions.[13]

His time as a young man of leisure was to be short lived. At the age of sixteen Ibn 'Arabi experienced a voice calling him to abandon his heedless lifestyle and devote himself to God.[14] This call marks the beginning of Ibn 'Arabi's life as a Sufi. Following this call he left his wealthy companions and began frequenting Sufi gatherings, which were generally attended by scruffy, impoverished ascetics and mendicants.[15] His former companions were distraught at the poor company he had chosen, but for Ibn 'Arabi his conversion was final and he was to spend the rest of his life on the Sufi path. After studying with Sufi teachers in Spain, Ibn 'Arabi left for the Maghreb, or the Western half of North Africa, to further pursue the path. Ibn 'Arabi traveled widely throughout the Muslim world in his thirties, and eventually settled in Damascus, where he died in 1240.[16] By the time of his death he was a renowned Sufi master, surrounded by disciples and students. In Damascus he "enjoyed the patronage of the Ayyubid princes who granted him generous allowances in money and property."[17]

Along with his reputation as a *shaykh* or spiritual master, Ibn 'Arabi was noted for his intricate works of commentary on the *Qur'an* and *hadith*, and is rightly deemed to be Sufism's greatest metaphysician. In particular his name is often associated with the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*, or the "oneness of being." Although Ibn 'Arabi never used the term *wahdat al-wujud*, his works imply the term's ontology.[18] Besides articulating this metaphysics of "oneness" or non-duality, Ibn 'Arabi was the first to fully explicate the Sufi doctrine of *walaya* or sainthood, which involved an intricate delineation of the hierarchy of saints, a specified number of which perpetually occupy the various levels of holiness and fulfill the divine functions allotted to them

13. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*, 6.

14. Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier*, 52.

15. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*, 7.

16. Ibid., 8.

17. Ibid., 7.

18. William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 15.

by God.[19] It was for the this grand systematization of Sufi thought in terms of a metaphysics of unity and a cosmology of sainthood that earned Ibn 'Arabi the title of the *shaykh al-akbar*, or the "Greatest Master." He was a remarkably prolific author, and, according to conservative estimates, wrote over four hundred books.[20] Some of these were quite short, while others, such as his famous *Futuhat al-Makkiyya* or "Meccan Revelations," are several thousand pages long.[21] Besides the *Futuhat*, Ibn 'Arabi's most notable and controversial work is his *Fusus al-Hikam*, or "Bezels of Wisdom," a work in which he frequently employs a hermeneutic of inversion in interpreting verses of the *Qur'an*.[22] It was this text that first drew the ire of the *Hanbali* jurist Ibn Taymiyyah in 1303 CE.[23]

Taqi ad-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah was born in 1263 CE in the ancient city of Harran. Presently located in Turkey's southeastern province of Urfa, near the Syrian border, Harran was an ancient center of Mesopotamian culture. Ibn Taymiyyah was born into a family of religious scholars, with both his grandfather and father having established reputations as authorities within the *Hanbali* jurisprudential school.[24] At the age of seven Ibn Taymiyyah's family fled to Damascus to escape the Mongol invasions ravaging much of the Muslim world at the time.[25]

Following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, Ibn Taymiyyah began studying the sciences of religion in Damascus, which included the study of the *Qur'an*, *hadith*, the Arabic language, and *Hanbali* law.[26] As he rose to prominence as a jurist, Ibn Taymiyyah was noted both for his personal courage in resisting the Mongol invaders, and for his relentless vocal and written attacks on Sufism, philosophy, and mainstream interpretive theology.

---

19. For an excellent discussion of Ibn 'Arabi's articulation of the hierarchy of sainthood, see Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993).

20. Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 5.

21. Ibid.

22. Ronald L. Nettler, *Sufi Metaphysics and Qur'anic Prophets: Ibn 'Arabi's Though and Method in* Fusus al-Hikam (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 106.

23. Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle against Popular Religion: With an Annotated Translation of his Kitab iqtida as-sirat al-mustaqim mukhalafat ashab al-jahim* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1976), 51.

24. Makari, *Ibn Taymiyyah's Ethics*, 21.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 23.

Besides the external, political threat posed to central Muslim societies by the Mongol invasions, Ibn Taymiyyah perceived an equally pernicious internal threat in the form of Sufism, or at least its more metaphysically radical approaches, and he is rightfully regarded as the foremost medieval critic of Ibn 'Arabi.

It is important to note that Ibn Taymiyyah has oft been portrayed as an unrestrained opponent of Sufism in all its forms, and this, ultimately, is a false understanding of Ibn Taymiyyah's perspective. Clearly Ibn Taymiyyah criticized a great deal of what he saw in Sufism, though this critique does not imply a rejection of Sufism as such. As George Makdisi has shown in his article, "Ibn Taymiyyah: A Sufi of the Qadari Order," Ibn Taymiyyah was himself initiated into a well-known Sufi order, one associated with the *Hanbali madhab*.[27] Although Ibn Taymiyyah did not oppose Sufism as such, he vehemently opposed metaphysical or philosophical Sufism (*tassawuf al-falasifa*), which he felt was a misguided attempt to unite with God, or know Him experientially, a path not described by the first generations of Muslims (*salaf al-salih*), and one that potentially compromised the monotheism of Islam *(tawhid)*. Ibn Taymiyyah delivered his attacks on metaphysical Sufism not only through his many *fatawa* or legal rulings, but also in works of refutation such as "The Exposition of the Falsity of the Unity of Being and the Refutation of Those Who Adhere to It."[28] His opposition to Sufism was part in parcel of his general sense that Islamic societies were fragmenting politically and spiritually, and were hence in need of a politics and theology of unity, based firmly on the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*.

The famous travel writer Ibn Battuta, after seeing Ibn Taymiyyah preach in a Damascus mosque, noted his eloquence and learning, and then famously speculated on whether Ibn Taymiyyah had a "screw loose," or a "kink in his brain."[29] Ignaz Goldziher more charitably described Ibn Taymiyyah as someone with a "bee in his bonnet."[30] Although immensely popular in Damascus, and well-respected for the breadth of his knowledge, Ibn Taymiyyah spent years in prison at various periods throughout his life

---

27. See George Makdisi, "Ibn Taymiyyah: A Sufi of the Qadari Order," *American Journal of 'Arabic Studies* 1 (1973): 118–129.

28. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*, 89.

29. Donald P. Little, "Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?" *Studia Islamica* 41: 93–94.

30. Memon, *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle against Popular Religion*, vii.

in Cairo, Alexandria, and Damascus.[31] These stints in prison were often at the behest of high-ranking religious scholars who opposed Ibn Taymiyyah's theological literalism, or perturbed Sufis who had come under his intellectual assault. Ibn Taymiyyah died in a Damascus prison in 1328 as a direct result of his literalist creedal statements and his active polemic against important religious figures of his day, most notably Ibn 'Arabi.[32]

Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn Taymiyyah's Conceptions of Religious Knowledge

Following the Sufi approach to sacred knowledge Ibn 'Arabi understands the knowledge of religion as first and foremost experiential and revelatory (*ma'rifa*).[33] In contrast, Ibn Taymiyyah understands this knowledge as primarily textual and cognitive (*'ilm*). We can further think of these as the saintly and scholarly modes of religiosity. These contrasting modes, or grammars, are evidenced first of all in the notable difference of literary form that Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn Taymiyyah present.

All of Ibn Taymiyyah's works, whether theological tracts, refutations of philosophical or Sufi doctrines, or legal rulings (*fatawa*), are composed within a paradigm of scholarship: they are works that reflect Ibn Taymiyyah's comprehensive study of the sources and methods of Islamic jurisprudence. For example, in his *Kitab iqtida*, Ibn Taymiyyah addresses the issue of Muslims participating in non-Muslim festivals, or festivals influenced by non-Muslims. Written towards the end of his life, sometime between 1321 and 1326 CE, the work is meant to demonstrate that the *shari'* or Islamic legal perspective is decidedly against the celebration of such festivals, as Muslims are supposed to oppose the practices of the Jews, Christians and other non-Muslims, rather than imitate them. This work is best understood within the greater context of Ibn Taymiyyah's lifelong struggle against *bid'a* or innovation in religion, much of which Ibn Taymiyyah believed to be rooted in the practices of non-Muslims, or in the misguided thought of the

---

31. "Biographical Notes," "Ibn Taymiya," Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Reliance of the Traveller: A Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law* (Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 1994), 1059.
32. Memon, *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle against Popular Religion*, 51.
33. William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn 'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 147–148.

Greek intellectual tradition, represented by Plato and Aristotle.[34] In terms of method, the *Kitab iqtida* is replete with verses of the *Qur'an* and *hadith*. Muhammad Umar Memon notes that over a third of the *Kitab iqtida* consists of direct quotes from these sources.[35] As the *Kitab iqtida* exemplifies, Ibn Taymiyyah's thought overwhelmingly manifests an understanding of religious knowledge that is primarily textual in origin and literal in interpretation. For Ibn Taymiyyah, all authentic religious knowledge can be confirmed by referring to the texts of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. What coincides with the clear meaning of these texts is true, whereas that which appears to contradict it is false. As he writes in the *Kitab iqtida*, "whatever the Koran and the *Sunna* adduce of law and learning is true and whatever in law and learning they contradict is wrong."[36] Ibn Taymiyyah's approach is exemplified further in this passage of his on Sufism:

> Some people accept everything of Sufism, what is right and what is wrong; others reject it totally, both what is wrong and what is right, as some scholars of *kalam* [theology] and *fiqh* [law] do. The right attitude towards Sufism, or any other thing, is to accept what is in agreement with the Qur'an and the Sunnah, and reject what does not agree.[37]

This approach epitomizes the scholarly grammar of religion in that all religious knowledge, regardless of its type, can be gained through a comprehensive study of revelatory texts. In other words, through the exercise of one's mental faculties a cognitive apprehension of the texts leads to a correct knowledge of religion in all cases.

Ibn Taymiyyah's text-based methodology is a direct reflection of his Nominalist philosophical position, which is distinguished by a rejection of all universals and hence all metaphysics.[38] As such, true knowledge cannot be gained through apprehending the universal laws or forms behind appearances as the philosophers propose, or through experientially realizing religious truth as the Sufis propose, but rather, such knowledge can

---

34. Wael B. Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), xii–xiii.

35. Memon, *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle against Popular Religion*, 8.

36. Ibid., 97.

37. Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari, *Sufism and Shari'ah: A Study of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi's Effort to Reform Sufism* (London: The Islamic Foundation, 1986), 130.

38. Memon, *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle Against Popular Religion*, 35.

be gained only through understanding God's guidance to humanity in the form of the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*: authentic knowledge comes exclusively from the Revelation, which manifests only in the revelatory texts. Hence it is the sincere scholar who has made a comprehensive study of these texts that inherits Prophetic knowledge and is to be the guide of the community of believers.

Ibn 'Arabi, in contrast, presents his works within a paradigm of sainthood. Most notably, Ibn 'Arabi's famous (and infamous) *Fusus al-Hikam* is presented not simply as a work that Ibn 'Arabi composed based on a rigorous study of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, but rather as a revelation received from the Prophet Muhammad. The *Fusus*, written towards the end of Ibn 'Arabi's life, is intended as a summation of his life's work.[39] The text is composed of 27 chapters, each of which explicates the metaphysical meaning of a particular Prophet, most of whom are mentioned in the *Qur'an*. His account of the text's revelatory genesis is worth presenting at length. In the preface to the *Fusus* Ibn 'Arabi writes:

> I saw the Apostle of God in a visitation granted to me during the latter part of the month of Muharram in the year 627, in the city of Damascus. He had in his hand a book and he said to me, "This is the book of the Bezels of Wisdom; take it and bring it to men that they might benefit from it." I said, "All obedience is due to God and His Apostle; it shall be as we are commanded." I therefore carried out the wish, made pure my intention and devoted my purpose to the publishing of this book, even as the Apostle had laid down, without any addition or subtraction.[40]

The *Fusus al-Hikam*, based on this account of its origin, makes a different demand on Muslim readers than does a text presented in the scholarly mode. Rather than being a work that scholars can evaluate based on its textual, jurisprudential, or analytical merits, the *Fusus* demands consideration as a revelatory text originating with the Prophet Muhammad himself. Ibn 'Arabi remarks in the above passage that he has not altered the text of the *Fusus* in anyway. The text's reliability directly results from his inactivity in regards to it. This mode of literature, as revelatory in origin, is characterized by

---

39. R. W. J. Austin, "Forward," Ibn al-'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), xvii.
40. Muhyi ad-Din Ibn al-'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 45.

passivity on the part of the author, in that the saintly recipient of a sacred text ceases to act of his or her own accord, but rather is compelled by God, or in this case His Prophet to transmit the text.[41] Hence the literary actions of saints are not 'active' per se; their writings are not chosen activities, but requirements they are to fulfill, or openings of divine knowledge they experience. Indeed, Ibn "Arabi's *Futuhat al-Makkiyyia* indicates this in its title. As William C. Chittick notes, *futuh*, which means "opening," is also synonymous with a series of terms that reflect Sufi conceptions of knowledge, such as "unveiling, tasting, witnessing, divine effusion, divine self-disclosure, and insight."[42] These terms indicate a radically different epistemic ground than that of scholarship. To describe a text as an opening, or *futuh*, is to invoke a "mode of gaining direct knowledge of God and of the unseen worlds without the intermediary of study, teacher, or rational faculty. God "opens up" the heart to the infusion of Knowledge."[43] Hence, within the saintly grammar of religion, it is through the heart that religious knowledge is gained first and foremost, rather than the mind.

Although Ibn 'Arabi indisputably affirms the letter of the law, or *shari'ah*, and hence is not opposed outright to the *fuquha*, or scholars of the law, he does, in places in the *Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, refer to some of them as "pharaohs of the saints" and the "antichrists of the servants of God."[44] For Ibn 'Arabi it is not, ultimately, with the scholars that the most certain religious knowledge is found. It is not with their characteristically discursive, textual methods that religious knowledge is to be confirmed. To cite just one example, the verification of *hadith* or sayings of the Prophet is normally a textual science monopolized by the jurists. Ibn 'Arabi however, states that the veracity of a statement of the Prophet can ultimately be confirmed only through gnosis, or unveiling (*kashf*).[45] A prophetic tradition that has a weak chain of transmission and is hence classified as *da'if* (weak or unreliable) by *hadith* scholars may, in fact, be authentic, an authenticity that can only be confirmed trans-textually, through an unveiling experienced

41. Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 111.

42. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, xii.

43. Ibid.

44. Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints*, 108.

45. Ibid., 61.

by a saint. Chodkiewicz correctly notes that Ibn 'Arabi's perspective on this issue clearly "challenges the doctrinal authority of the doctors of the Law."[46]

Religious Implications

Ibn Taymiyyah's textual approach implies that the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* are monosemous, or limited to their literal or apparent meaning. If one simply refers to these texts to answer all questions of religion, then presumably the meaning of these texts is obvious and singular. In fact, for Ibn Taymiyyah's methodology to work, the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* must of necessity be monosemous, and obviously so. Otherwise referring to them to solve questions of religion would simply raise debates of interpretation. This methodological literalism further appears in Ibn Taymiyyah's works of theology, most notably his creedal statements *'Aqida al-Hamawiyya* and *al-Wasitiyya*. Both texts were paramount in fomenting scholarly opposition to Ibn Taymiyyah.[47] The *'Aqida al-Hamawiyya* and *al-Wasitiyya* articulate a position in which the attributes of God as mentioned in the *Qur'an*, such as God's "face" and "hand," are affirmed literally as *haqiqi* (real) attributes.[48] Ibn Taymiyyah's literal affirmation of these attributes brought on charges that he was a theological "anthropomorphist," or one who likened God to his creatures as a corporeal form.[49]

Ibn Taymiyyah's sense that all authentic religious knowledge is found exclusively in the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* leads directly to his conclusion that non-Muslims are fundamentally and inherently misguided. If they reject the one authentic source of religious knowledge, then their religious beliefs and practices cannot but be inauthentic. As such, for Ibn Taymiyyah non-Muslims, primarily the Jews and Christians living within Muslim societies, are a perpetual cause of religious contamination and corruption, and consequently need to be opposed, contained, and dominated. Ibn Taymiyyah writes in his *Kitab iqtida*, "Imitating the infidels in some of their holidays might give them a chance to rejoice in the falsity that exists in their hearts. This is especially true when they are vanquished under humiliation of *jizya*

---

46. Ibid.

47. Memon, *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle against Popular Religion,* 51–53.

48. Keller, *Reliance of the Traveller,* 1060.

49. Ibid.

and insignificance."[50] Hence the celebrations of non-Muslims should not be imitated as it may confirm for them their false practices and further give them an opportunity to rejoice rather than suffer the humiliation of domination. As Muhammad Umar Memon notes, "in Ibn Taimiya's vision of the true Islamic state there was very little, if at all any, room for the religious minorities."[51] He further remarks that Ibn Taymiyyah's vision is particularly harsh towards Jews and Christians, who are to live in isolation, contempt, and if possible humiliation. In this regard as in others, Ibn Taymiyyah practiced what he preached. He opposed developments that had begun in the Fatimid era in which Jews and Christians gave up wearing distinctive clothing and began to integrate into the administration of Muslim societies.[52] Throughout his career as a jurist Ibn Taymiyyah continually lobbied Muslim rulers to take restrictive measures against Jewish, Christian, and Shi'a minorities.[53] As people who were inherently misguided, they could not be allowed to contaminate Muslim society.

Regardless of whether he was writing a theological tract or a polemical treatise, Ibn Taymiyyah's methodology is remarkably consistent in its text-based literalism, a methodology that implies Ibn Taymiyyah's particular grammar of scholarship: it is only through the apprehension of the apparent meaning of religious texts that authentic religious knowledge is to be had. The religious implications of this grammar include an understanding of sacred texts that limits their meaning to a singular, literalist reading of the texts, a literalism in theology that tends towards anthropomorphism, and a view of non-Muslim beliefs as inherently inauthentic and misguided.

In contrast to Ibn Taymiyyah's assumption of the monosemous nature of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, for Ibn 'Arabi the openings experienced by the saint reveal the infinite polysemous possibilities of the *Qur'an*. Although Ibn 'Arabi affirms, along with Ibn Taymiyyah, the literal meaning of the revealed texts, he further articulates interpretations of the *Qur'an* that directly contradict the text's apparent meaning. For example, in the third

---

50. Memon, *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle against Popular Religion,* 216.
51. Ibid., 79. For Ibn Taymiyyah's most comprehensive articulation of his vision of the Islamic State, see Taqi ad-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Siyasah al-Shari'ah Fi Islah al-Ra'i Wa al-Ra'iyyah,* ed. Muhammad al-Mubarak (Beruit: Dar al Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, 1966).
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.

chapter of the *Fusus al-Hikam*, entitled "The Wisdom of Exaltation in the Word of Noah," Ibn 'Arabi interprets verses 71:23 to 71:25 of the *Qur'an* in direct opposition to their literal sense. These verses describe how those who rejected Noah called upon their people not to abandon their gods. Noah's rejecters are then described as wrongdoers who have gone astray, and are hence drowned by God in the flood, and then thrown into the fire of hell.[54] Ibn 'Arabi interprets these verses as meaning rather, that the rejecters of Noah were right not to abandon their gods, as if they had done so, "they would have become ignorant of the Reality, to the extent that they deserted them, for in every object of worship there is a reflection of the Reality."[55] Further, by drowning in the flood, they were in fact "drowned in the seas of the knowledge of God," and similarly the fire they are thrown into is the fire of the knowledge of God.[56]

It is important to note that these inversing interpretations can in no way be derived from either a literal reading of the *Qur'anic* text, nor from a reasoned extrapolation of the text's possible meanings. From both a literal and logical standpoint they make no sense. Rather, such interpretations, if they are to be taken seriously at all, can only be grounded in *futuh*, or an opening in which God infuses the recipient's heart with the abundance of the divine text's possibilities, including those that at first sight seem contradictory, or paradoxical. Again, we see a contrary religious grammar to that of scholarship, one that posits the heart rather than the mind as the true locus of knowledge and religious experience. What is more, we see a depiction of non-Muslims as worshipping God in the particular form of their religion, as God is the Real (*al-Haqq*) who discloses Himself in all forms of belief and practice.[57] Hence religious diversity is not a contamination to be contained, but an inherent expression of the diversity of God's manifestation.

Conclusion

For Ibn 'Arabi it is the realized Sufi saint or friend of God (*wali*) who is the true heir of the Prophet, whereas, for Ibn Taymiyyah, it is

---

54. Majid Fakhry, *An Interpretation of the Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 71:23–25.

55. Ibn al-'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 78.

56. Ibid., 79.

57. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 160.

the righteous scholar (*'alim*) who inherits Prophetic knowledge. This difference is paramount as it underlies both writers' views of Islam, and the different modes of religiosity these views imply. It is precisely these different understandings of the nature of knowledge and religiosity in Islam that comprise the different grammars that separate Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn Taymiyyah's approaches so markedly.

The implications of Ibn Taymiyyah's and Ibn 'Arabi's differing grammars of religion continue to reverberate to this day. Following the resurrection of Ibn Taymiyyah's thought by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century, and later by Rashid Rida in the nineteenth century, Ibn Taymiyyah's long forgotten works have emerged as some of the most important referents for those seeking to purify Islam of medieval accretions such as speculative philosophy and Sufism.[58] Ziauddin Sardar notes that, through the auspices of the Wahhabi-based Saudi state, Ibn Taymiyyah's literalism and quest for doctrinal purity have informed a new vision of Islam that is being exported around the Muslim world.[59] Since the 1960s, Saudi petrodollars have funded the building of Salafi-influenced mosques and libraries throughout the globe, libraries replete with books by Ibn 'Abd-al Wahhab and Ibn Taymiyyah, or by those schooled in their thought.

In Bosnia, for example, Islamic relief organizations, many of which are based in Saudi Arabia, are replacing ornate Ottoman-era mosques damaged in the war with mosques that reflect the "prevalent architectural style of the donors' countries."[60] Replacement mosques built by such organizations are marked by their discordant size, location, and décor. Newly constructed mosques are much larger than the traditional Bosnian mosques they replace. They frequently occupy hilltops, in contradistinction to the lower-ground traditionally occupied by Bosnian mosques. The décor of replacement

---

58. "In addition to their literalist adherence to the text of the Koran and the Traditions, the Wahhabis have in common with Ibn Taymiyah the emphasis on ritual observance and the condemnation of the cult of saints and similar excesses of the *Sufi* orders." Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 2ⁿᵈ *Ed.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 318.

59. Ziauddin Sardar, *Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Sceptical Muslim* (London: Granta Books, 2004), 145.

60. Asim Zubcevic, "Islamic Sites in Bosnia: 10 Years After the War," *Islamica Magazine, Issue 15 (Winter 2006)*, http://www.islamicamagazine.com/Issue-15/Islamic-Sites-in-Bosnia-10-Years-After-the-War.html.

mosques, which frequently consists of simple white walls and green carpets, bears little resemblance to the traditional Bosnian mosque aesthetic. The Bosnian Muslim scholar Asim Zubcevic observes that this monolithic, streamlined, and decontextualized vision of Islamic architecture contributes to "the loss of cultural memory," and hence "undermine[s] Bosnian Muslim identity."[61]

More importantly, Saudi oil wealth has funded university educations in Saudi Arabia for thousands of *da'is* or Salafi missionaries to spread the message of a purified, monolithic Islam, an Islam that rejects most of Islamic history as innovation and corruption.[62] Ibn Taymiyyah's emphasis on opposing non-Muslims has also informed the more extreme religious approaches embodied by such politico-military actors as *al-Qa'ida*, who have targeted Jews, Christians, and Shi'as in their suicide attacks or kidnappings in Iraq and around the world.[63]

Following the events of September 11, 2001, an increasing number of Muslim voices are re-affirming Sufism as an integral part of Islam, and putting forth its emphasis on spiritual reformation, inter-religious tolerance, and hermeneutical plurality as an antidote to the totalizing ideology, theological literalism, dry legalism, and violence of radicalized Muslim groups, most of whom have been intellectually shaped by the thought of Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, and their derivative thinkers, some of whom include Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966 CE), and Abul Ala Maududi (1903–1979 CE). According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Sufism is the most powerful antidote to the religious radicalism called fundamentalism."[64] As Ibn 'Arabi remains Sufism's most prolific metaphysician, and one of its greatest teachers, his work is vital in revivifying Sufism's appreciation of both the diverse meanings of the *Qur'an*, and the inherent plurality of humanity's religious expressions.

It must be acknowledged that this paper simply 'scratches the surface' of the thought of both Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn Taymiyyah. Both authors are

---

61. Zubcevic, "Islamic Sites in Bosnia."

62. Sardar, *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, 145–152.

63. John L. Esposito writes, "Perhaps no medieval scholar-activist has had more influence on radical Islamic ideology than Ibn Taymiyya." John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 45.

64. Jane Lampman, "Sufism may be powerful antidote to Islamic extremism," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 5, 2007.

renowned for the number, range, and depth of their works. As such, many monographs have and will continue to be written on one particular concept or aspect of their thought. Regardless, it is hoped that this discussion has provided a basic outline of the critical difference of grammar that underlies Ibn 'Arabi's and Ibn Taymiyyah's different approaches to religious knowledge and some of the religious implications of this difference. These approaches remain vitally important, as they under gird much of the contemporary debate between Sufi and Salafi-oriented Muslims on the nature of religious authority, practice, and the ways in which Muslims are to read scripture and relate with the religious "other."