Muslim Distinction:

Imitation and the Anxiety of Jewish, Christian, and Other Influences

Youshaa Patel

Graduate Program in Religion
Duke University

Date: _____________________

Approved:

___________________________
Ebrahim Moosa, Supervisor

___________________________
Bruce Lawrence

___________________________
Leela Prasad

___________________________
Carl Ernst

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Religion in the Graduate School at Duke University

2012
ABSTRACT

Muslim Distinction:
Imitation and the Anxiety of Jewish, Christians, and Other Influences

by

Youshaa Patel

Graduate Program in Religion
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

___________________________
Ebrahim Moosa, Supervisor

___________________________
Bruce Lawrence

___________________________
Leela Prasad

___________________________
Carl Ernst

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Religion in the Graduate School at Duke University

2012
ABSTRACT

Contrary to later Muslim tradition, the first Muslims initially looked favorably upon assimilating Jewish and Christian religious and cultural practices. As Muslim collective religious identity conjoined with political power, Muslims changed their religious policy from imitation to distinction; they began to define themselves both above and against their arch-religious rivals. They visibly and publicly materialized their unique brand of monotheism into a distinct religious community.

This dissertation is the first attempt to map the Muslim religious discourse that expressed this deliberate turn away from Jews, Christians, and others across pre-modern Islamic history. First, I argue that this discourse functions as a prism through which to view the interplay of religion and politics; a key function of both empire and religion in a pre-modern Muslim context was to uphold hierarchical social distinctions. Next, I show that Muslims imagined these distinctions in very concrete terms. In contrast to conventional studies that emphasize the role of abstract doctrine in making Islam a distinct religion, this study highlights the aesthetic mediation of Muslim distinction through everyday quotidian practice such as dress, hairstyle, ritual, festivals, funerary rites, and bodily gestures - what Sigmund Freud has called, “The Narcissism of Minor Differences.” These acts of distinction illustrate that Muslim religious identity was not shaped in a social and cultural vacuum; its construction overlapped with that of ethnicity, gender, class, and the even the human. What this study reveals, then, is how Muslims attempted to fashion more than just a distinct religion, but an ideal moral order, or social imaginary. In this robust Muslim social imaginary, human beings were mimetic
creatures; becoming, or subject-formation, was inextricably related to belonging, being part of a community. Despite the conscious attempt of religious scholars to normalize Muslim distinction, this study contests that both elite and ordinary Muslims continued to imitate, and ultimately assimilate, foreign practices within a Near Eastern cultural landscape of sharedness.

Drawing upon approaches from religious studies, history, and anthropology, this interdisciplinary study foregrounds both text and theory. It interweaves theories of difference, imitation (mimesis), power, embodiment, semiotics and aesthetics with a broad range of Arabic literary texts spanning theology, law, Quranic exegesis, prophetic traditions, ethics, mysticism, historical chronicles, and biography. More specifically, this study highlights the critical role of prophetic utterances (hadith) in shaping the Islamic discourses of Shari‘a and Sufism. It foregrounds the contributions of two pre-modern Damascene religious scholars in their historical contexts: the controversial Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), and the underappreciated Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 1651), who authored a remarkable encyclopedia of mimesis and distinction hitherto ignored in both Euro-American and Islamic scholarship.
A person belongs with the one he loves

To my mother
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .............................................................................................................................. iv
List of Tables ................................................................................................................... viii
List of Figures .................................................................................................................... ix
Acknowledgements ..............................................................................................................x
Preface: “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them” ...................................................... xiv
Introduction: The Mimetic Self ...........................................................................................1

Part One: Cultural and Political Landscapes .................................................................55

Chapter 1. Empire of Distinction: The Social Order of Early Islam .........................56

Part Two: Discursive Landscapes ..................................................................................111

Chapter 2. From Imitation to Distinction: Tashabbuh and the Beginning of Islam ....112
Chapter 3. The Innovation of Imitation: Ibn Taymiyya’s Anxieties of Influence ......167
Chapter 4. “A person belongs with the one he loves”: Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzi’s
Affective Poetics of Belonging and Becoming ............................................................224

Part Three: Semiotic Landscapes ...............................................................................276

Chapter 5. Embodying Distinction: Sartorial Style......................................................281
Chapter 6. Gestures of Distinction ...............................................................................324
Chapter 7. Senses of Distinction ..................................................................................379

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................418

Appendix 1: “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them”: Transmission, Authenticity,
and Classification .............................................................................................................429
Appendix 2: The Treatises Against Imitation: A Bibliographical Survey .................463

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................474

Author biography .............................................................................................................503
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 Pact of ʿUmar ................................................................. 93
Table 2.1 Traditions of Distinction .................................................. 162
Table 5.1 Pact of ʿUmar: Sartorial Styles ....................................... 387
Table 7.1 Pact of ʿUmar: A Sensory Analysis ................................. 491
Table 7.2 The Sunnī Adhān .............................................................. 398
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Imitation Hadith Transmission Network (Isnād Map) .....................................443
Figure 2: Ibn ʿUmar Transmission Network .................................................................444
Figure 3: Abū Hurayra Transmission Network ..............................................................445
Figure 4: Ṭāwūs Transmission Network ......................................................................446
Figure 5: Anas b. Mālik Transmission Network .........................................................447
Figure 6: Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān Transmission Network .............................................448
Figure 7: Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī Transmission Network .....................................................449
Figure 8: ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb Transmission Network ..............................................450
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am only a placeholder for the many wonderful people that helped bring this doctoral
dissertation to completion. I want to first thank my dissertation supervisor, Ebrahim
Moosa, who miraculously merges into a single person two bodies: the alim who is
anchored in the Islamic discursive tradition and the imaginative academic who breathes
into this tradition new life. More than anything, he dared me to think big. I would also
like to thank the other members of my committee: Bruce Lawrence, whose impeccable
adab, brilliance, and energy infect all who have the honor of meeting him; Leela Prasad,
who taught me how to appreciate the poetics of everyday conduct; and Carl Ernst, the
sober mystic across Tobacco road, who made reading texts in Arabic, Urdu, or Persian a
great pleasure through his humor and insight. At Duke and UNC, I would also like thank
miriam cooke, Omid Safi, David Morgan, and Engseng Ho for valuable guidance. I am
extremely grateful to Rob Rozehnal who invited me to spend the 2011-2012 academic
year at the Center for Global Islamic Studies at Lehigh University. His encouragement,
patience, and good cheer were vital during the final stages of this study.

I also had the good fortune of studying with many great teachers during stays in
the Middle East, India and elsewhere. I wish to recognize them: in Lucknow, Mawlana
Hifz al-Rahman Nadwi; in Doha, Qatar, Shaykh Mushtaq Nadwi and Dr. Abdallah
Abdallah; in Amman, Jordan, Shaykh Aminoeallah Abderoef; in Damascus, Syria Dr.
Isam Ido and Shaykh Ali al-Zaytun al-Azhari; in Tarim, Yemen, Dar al-Mustafa and the
Habaʾib; and in Chicago, Il. my first teachers, Shaykh Husain Sattar and Mohammad Amin Kholwadia.

I want to give special thanks to Michael Cook who encouraged me to go forward with this project when I doubted its potential, and who provided feedback on early drafts. I am also grateful to Sherman Jackson and Muhammad Qasim Zaman for engaging my work during our enlightening conversations.

I have been the lucky recipient of several sources of funding that enabled me to carry out this study. I want to first thank the Duke University Graduate School for generous financial support throughout my graduate career. I am also grateful to the Fulbright-Hays Foundation for funding dissertation research in Damascus, Syria (2009); the Mellon foundation for funding my fellowship at the Center for Global Islamic Studies at Lehigh University (2011-2012); the University of Qatar for supporting a yearlong stay in Doha (2005-2006); the American Institute of Indian Studies, the American Institute of Yemeni Studies, and FLAS fellowship programs for funding language study in Arabic and Urdu.

Several libraries provided me with very bookish companionship during the many phases of this research project. First, I am very grateful to Duke University’s library system for providing me with whatever I needed within reason and even some things that were beyond reason; Columbia University's Department of Religion for facilitating access to the Butler library from 2007 – 2009; the Asad National Library in Damascus, Syria, the Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul, Turkey and the Chester Beatty library in Dublin, Ireland for giving me access to their valuable manuscript collections.
I have been given the opportunity to present portions of this project at different venues. The invaluable feedback I received during these moments greatly expanded the horizons of this study. I wish to thank the American Academy of Religion; American Oriental Society; Duke’s Franklin Humanities Institute dissertation writing group; and the Departments of Religion/Religious Studies at Lehigh University, Stanford University, and the University of Tennessee - Knoxville. I would also like to thank Joel Blecher for his kind invitation to present at the Princeton University Islamic Studies Colloquium.

While at Duke or abroad, I have encountered many different personalities who shared their friendship and/or valuable assistance at different stages of my graduate career. I wish to thank some of them here: Brett Wilson, Mashal Saif, Ali Mian, SherAli Tareen, Karen Ruffle, Abdallah Lipton, Younus Mirza, Bart Scott, Kelly Jarrett, Peter Wright, Kathleen Foody, Jocelyn Hendrickson, Darryl Li, Eric Tagliacozzo, Jonathan Brown, Fareeha Khan, Attiya Ahmad, Sherine Hamdy, Jamila Karim, Scott Kugle, Isa Washington, Leila Elmergawi, Hanna McCloskey, Mathilde Zederman, Roweena Potts, Brian Tilley, Brad Underwood, Eilene Bizgrove, and Ayat Elnoory. I offer a special thanks to the household of Umm Zaheer for giving me a second family in Damascus.

Finally, let me thank my first family. I have mentioned them last, although they deserve to be mentioned first. My father, Yusuf Patel, and brother, Zubair, have been great sources of blessing throughout my life. My mother, Zainab Patel, has always been the most worthy model of emulation. She has been the greatest inspiration for me to complete this project. I dedicate this study and its future iterations to her. To be clear, all errors and mistakes are my own.
PREFACE:

“WHOEVER IMITATES A NATION IS ONE OF THEM”

Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.

— The Prophet Muhammad, from the *Sunan* collection of Abū Dāwūd (d. 889)

“The imitation - individually and socially - of the Western mode of life by Muslims is undoubtedly the greatest danger for the existence - or rather, the revival - of Islamic civilization,” warned the prominent Austrian Jewish convert to Islam, Muhammad Asad in the fall of 1933. At this time, the collapse of the Ottoman caliphate still haunted Muslims as European colonial powers strengthened their grip on Muslim lands in South and Southeast Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Asad was acutely aware that Muslims were experiencing a crisis of confidence, magnified by the immense disparity in power - political, economic, cultural and intellectual – between “Islam and the West.” Asad, in fact explained the Muslim tendency to ape the West as being due to “a feeling of inferiority,” a psychological internalization of the geopolitical disparities of the time.

---

1 Muhammad Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads* (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1982), 75. Asad penned this work at the still youthful age of thirty-three. Originally named Leopold Weiss, Asad converted to Islam at twenty six and traveled across the Middle East. He eventually made his way to India where he helped craft the vision for the Muslim state of Pakistan. Along with being jailed by the British for three years during World War II, where both his Jewish parents were exterminated, he then went on to author nearly forty works on Islam, including is famous autobiography, *Road to Mecca*, and his famous translation of the Quran, *The Message of the Quran*. He became known for his “Modernist” and Mu'tazali sympathies, which pitted him against blind imitation of past religious authorities (*taqlīd*) in favor of creative and vigorous intellectual engagement with the sources of Islam.

2 Muhammad Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads* (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1982), 72.
Asad, however, was particularly upset about Muslims imitating the aesthetic practices of Western civilization in areas such as fashion and dress. He argued that aesthetic values were not insignificant and superficial markers of a civilization. On the contrary, they endangered the very inner-spirit of Muslim self and community. “As soon as we begin to adopt the outward forms,” Asad wrote, “… its inherent currents and dynamic influences set to work in ourselves and mould slowly, imperceptibly, our whole mental attitude.”3 Exterior practices thus carry the potential to engulf completely one’s interior being. Taking the example of dress, Asad explains, “Fashion corresponds to the aesthetic conceptions of that people, and so to its inclinations” which, in the case of Europeans, “thoroughly correspond to the intellectual and moral character of the modern West.” So when a Muslim imitates European fashions, he “unconsciously adapts his tastes to those of the West and twists his own intellectual and moral Self in such a way that it ultimately ‘fits’ the new dress.”4

Therefore, according to Asad, trying to fit into a pair of jeans one size too small is like imitating the foreign aesthetic habits of non-Muslims; it leads to an unnatural and inauthentic Muslim self. Asad even claims – albeit wrongly - that Europe “never imitated the outward appearance and the spirit of Arabian culture.”5 With biting sarcasm, Asad argued that the only way that Muslims should imitate Europe is in “how they did not imitate Arabs.”6 In other words, Muslims should follow Europe only in how they crafted an independent and distinct collective identity. Asad concludes his discussion of dress with the claim that there was no distinction “between "important" and

---

3 Ibid., 77.
4 Ibid., 78
5 Ibid., 79-80
6 Ibid., 79.
"unimportant" aspects of social life.” In other words, the collective self was always embedded in its social context. Presciently anticipating the “Clash of Civilizations,” Asad believed that the cultural encounter between Islam and Europe was a drama that unfolded on the stage of everyday life.

Ultimately, the slippery slope of imitation ultimately leads to assimilation. Asad supports this claim by invoking a famous saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.” He explains, “This well-known prophetic tradition (hadith) is not only a moral admonition but also an objective statement of fact - in this case, the fact of the inevitability of Muslims being assimilated by any non-Muslim civilization which they imitate in its external forms.” Asad insightfully recognizes that this concise statement of the Prophet blurs the dichotomy between prescriptive and descriptive statements – that it is both an objective observation about human sociology and a speech-act that seeks to pattern human behavior according to particular normative standards. Yet his interpretive gloss, like many before him, implicitly imposes a negative value judgment: the inevitability of Muslim assimilation into non-Muslim civilization. For Asad, the dire consequences of assimilation not only impact the present, but erase a Muslim’s relationship to his Islamic past. He employs the metaphor of a tree being blown away by a strong wind in order to dramatically illustrate how Muslim civilization was in danger of being completely uprooted from its illustrious past by the overwhelming force of Western influence. Muslim civilization was on the verge of “collapsing.” For Asad, there was only one solution:

---

7 Ibid., 77-78.
8 Ibid., 77.
A Muslim must live with his head held high. He must realize that he is distinct and different from the rest of the world, and he must learn to be proud of his being different. He should endeavor to preserve this difference as a precious quality, and pronounce it boldly to the world instead of apologizing for it and trying to merge into other cultural circles.9

Thus, the solution to the ills of Muslim decline was the obverse of imitation: distinction. Nearly a half century after its initial publication, Asad’s 1981 preface to the republication of his first book, *Islam at the Crossroads*, restates his initial intent for Muslims to be “socially and culturally different from the all-powerful Western society.”10

Asad’s rich analysis of imitation’s multidimensional role as a conduit between individual and collective, interiority and exteriority, aesthetics and politics, as well as the abstract and material dimensions of human life furnishes an appropriate point of departure for this study of Muslim distinction. It is important to note that Asad’s first enunciation of these ideas predated important developments such as the vast diffusion of Western cultural practices across the globe via mass communication technologies and the migration of diasporic Muslims across Europe and North America, which have since complicated simple Islam versus West dichotomies. Moreover, while many might perceive Asad’s disquiet as an alarmist reaction characteristic of only a small number of Muslim fundamentalists, Asad’s anxieties over the influence of Western civilization still resonate very deeply among many Muslims around the world today as they did when he first expressed them.

---

9 Ibid., 79.
Appeals for Muslim religious distinction have actually intensified in modernity. Colonial and post-colonial Muslims have stigmatized specific cultural practices because of their associations with “non-Muslim” (secular Western) practices and identity. In Kemalist Turkey, Iskilipli Atif Hoca’s (d. 1926) small booklet, which condemned Muslim imitation of the European hat, resulted in his execution; it was perceived as a threat to the new republic’s Westernizing aspirations. As part of Mustafa Atatürk’s reforms, the Turkish hat law of 1925 mandated European hats and forbade the traditional fez cap. The new law was anything but insignificant. According to one historian, “This reform prompted a stronger reaction than the abolition of the caliphate a little more than a year before.” The Iranian intellectual and cultural critic, Jalal Āl Aḥmad (d. 1969) popularized the term, Gharbzadegi, or Westoxification, to describe the plague-like spread of Iranian infatuation with all things Western. In the contemporary United States and Europe, some Muslim religious figures have proscribed celebrating holidays such as Halloween and Valentine’s Day, and spoke out against modes of dress such as jeans and baseball hats. Others have sought to emphasize practices that visibly project a distinct

---


14 Not all Muslims have vehemently opposed such cultural markers of Western civilization. When Egyptian reformer and jurist, Muhammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), was asked to issue a fatwa (legal opinion) on the permissibility of wearing European hats, he responded that the practice was permissible as long as the intention was not to abandon Islam; further, it was not detested (makrūh) if a social or political benefit was gained by adopting these foreign sartorial styles. ʿAbduh’s opinion actually echoes the opinion of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) who issued a similar verdict on Muslims living in foreign lands. See C. C. Adams, “Muḥammad ʿAbduh and the Transvaal Fatwā,” in *The Macdonald Presentation Volume* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1968); Malcolm Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad ʿAbduh and Rashid Ridā* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 145. See chapter three of this study for a detailed analysis of Ibn Taymiyya’s opinion.
Islamic identity onto the public sphere such as Muslim men growing beards and Muslim women wear headscarves.

The question of Muslim religious distinction has jumpstarted recent Euro-American debates over the place of religion – and Islam especially - in public life. The public visibility of Muslim difference has exacerbated hostility and fear of the potential of Muslim fundamentalism to spread across and eventually take over North America and Europe. In the United States, the specter of the Shariʿa, “Islamic law,” overriding national values of democracy, liberty, and free speech continues to haunt the American public. In Europe, ongoing debates over the apparent inability of Muslims to assimilate reached a climax in 2004 with France’s decision to ban the headscarf in universities. The ban drew attention to dilemmas over the public display of religious difference, especially Muslim difference.

As Mohammad Asad’s impassioned appeal indicates, pleas for Muslim distinction reflect deeply-felt anxieties of influence. Muslims across the world, from the United States and Europe to the Middle East and South Asia, have become alarmed at what they perceive as a Western cultural war against Islam (al-ghazwa al-fikrī). This alarmist response reveals modern Muslim anxieties over the loss of political, cultural, and

---

15 A brief note on the usage of the term, anxiety, in this study. While Harold Bloom coined the phrase, “Anxiety of Influence” to describe the poet’s struggle for originality amidst his ambiguous relationship to past poets, it also captured the universal human struggle to shape an original identity against the overwhelming tide of outside influences. For Bloom, the anxiety of influence is inevitable. See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Although the term influence connotes a unidirectional vector that obscures the inevitable bidirectional change that accompanies any social or discursive encounter, influence accurately describes how Muslims have perceived their interaction with a variety of foreigners throughout their history. It is the perception of Muslims and their representations that this study is mainly concerned with. And so, despite the pejorative association of the term influence with the European and American Orientalist search for Islam’s Jewish and Christian origins, in this study, I use the term to describe the Muslim anxiety in attempting to distinguish themselves from Jews, Christians and a variety of other groups.
economic power and influence to a simultaneously secular and Judeo-Christian West. This anxiety also suggests that Muslims often viewed alterity, being other, with great anxiety and categorize it as a “danger” or a “threat” to their individual and communal identity.

Yet, such anxieties are not new. Since the beginning of Islam, Muslims have harbored anxieties over Jewish, Christian, and other influences. Like Asad, they often anchored these anxieties in the authority of the Prophetic tradition, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.” While modern Muslims have molded this Prophetic tradition into a slogan that warns against aping the West, pre-Modern Muslims invoked the same tradition in order to stigmatize the practices of Jews and Christians especially. However, they applied it to all sorts of foreigners and strangers. In fact, its usage became so prevalent that, over the course of Muslim history, it eventually developed into a full-blown religious discourse. This discourse sought to regulate the harmful effects of imitation by stigmatizing or outlawing certain mimetic practices as reprehensible. This Islamic discourse of reprehensible imitation became a powerful way of constructing, imagining and naturalizing boundaries between “us and them.” It became a key rhetor in the grammar of Muslim identity and alterity.

In this study, I narrate how Muslims mobilized this discourse of imitation into an appeal for Muslim distinction during the first millennium of Muslim history. I contest that cross-cultural and inter-religious encounter is not just a modern phenomenon and challenge the misconception that Islam formed in a cultural vacuum. I illustrate how Muslim religious identity has always been dynamically configured in relation to politics and culture. This study is the first attempt to map the Muslim religious discourse that
expressed this deliberate turn away from Jews, Christians, and others across pre-modern Islamic history.

While there have been a few previous studies of this topic, they are limited to articles or chapter length treatments that summarize its basic content. As such, they fail to contextualize Muslim distinction within a greater historical and discursive landscape and they do not adequately challenge and contextualize the dominant Muslim narrative that portrays imitation of foreign practices in a negative light. General studies of early Islamic history tend to fall between two extremes; they either portray Islam as remarkably out of step with its Near Eastern historical context, or they portray Islam as merely a derivative composite of its surrounding culture.

This study attempts to intervene in this polarized debate. It shows that, contrary to later Muslim attitudes, the first Muslims initially looked favorably upon incorporating Jewish and Christian religious and cultural practices into Islam. As Muslim collective religious identity conjoined with political power, Muslims changed their religious policy from imitation to distinction; they began to define themselves both above and against their arch-religious rivals through a regime of aesthetically mediated social practices.

While telling this story, I ask a series of historical questions along the way. What is the significance of distinction for the formation of the Muslim community and identity? Could imitating others – whether Jews, Christians, or Pagans - ever be positive? What sorts of mimetic practices did Muslims stigmatize, and why did Muslims stigmatize some practices and not others? Why did they stigmatize some groups (religious, political etc.) and not others? More broadly, how did Muslim appeals for distinction alter with
changes in historical, cultural and geographic context? What do we learn about the
discursive function of hadith in Islam? What can a study of distinction tell us about the
social function of those who invoked this discourse – Muslim religious scholars?

The main contribution of this study, however, is not a reappraisal of the dominant
Muslim historical narrative, but a focus on the meaning and significance of distinction to
both religion and politics in an Islamic context. This study shows how aesthetically
mediated practice – understood as corporeal, sensational, and symbolic – is a central
mediating mode of Muslim distinction. In contrast to conventional studies that
emphasize the role of abstract doctrine in making Islam a distinct religion, this study
highlights the concrete aesthetic mediation of Muslim distinction through everyday
quotidian practice such as dress, hairstyle, ritual, festivals, funerary rites, and bodily
gestures - what Freud has called, “The Narcissism of minor differences.”

Inevitably, an emphasis on the concrete mediation of Muslim religious distinction
takes us beyond the social category of religion. Muslim religious identity intersected,
shaped, and was shaped by ethnic, gender, class, and human identity as well. What this
study reveals, then, is how Muslims attempted to shape an ideal moral order, what the
philosopher Charles Taylor has called, the social imaginary.\footnote{Charles Taylor declares that “the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society.” This observation suggests that: first, ideas and practices are interconnected; and second, that the social imaginary is not just descriptive, but prescriptive, or normative. It therefore represents a “conception of moral order.” Taylor states that modern and pre-modern social imaginaries as fundamentally different. Charles Taylor, \textit{Modern Social Imaginaries} (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.} We arrive at a vibrant,
dynamic, but hierarchical pre-modern Muslim vision of an ideal Islamic cosmological
order. Such a robust approach to the study of Muslim distinction contrasts prior studies
that have artificially insulated the construction of Muslim religious identity from the other social categories of identity that helped shape it.

This dynamic integrated approach to Muslim distinction enables me to challenge several conventional binary categories and epistemological classifications across a range of fields. By examining how religious elites respond to social, cultural, and political transformation, I explore the permeable boundaries between representation and reality. By highlighting the always already socially-constituted self, I blur conventional distinctions between collective and individual. Throughout this study, I highlight the fluidity and interconnectness between the fuzzy categories of aesthetics and politics, religion and culture, discourse and practice, interiority and exteriority, affection and cognition, believer and infidel, self and other.

In order to highlight the interpenetration of Muslim religious discourses and their socio-political contexts, I locate Islamic literary and religious sources in their historical contexts. I map a wide range of pre-modern Arabic religious texts in hadith, jurisprudence, Quranic exegesis, theology, Sufism, and literature upon the information provided in Arabic historical chronicles and biographies. For the first time in Western scholarship, I highlight the remarkable contribution of Ottoman Syrian mystic-jurist, Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 1651) to Islamic conceptions of imitation and distinction, becoming and belonging. His twelve volume encyclopedia of ethics is an exhaustive meditation on the dialogical construction of the self as it interacts with human and non-human collectivities across the cosmos.17 I also highlight a different dimension of the

---

thought of the controversial medieval jurist from Damascus, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). While many studies have emphasized his crusade against religious innovations, I argue that Ibn Taymiyya was more concerned about imitation as a disruptive force in Muslim society.

What both these important figures held in common is their engagement with the genre of traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, or hadith. The bulk of academic scholarship on this notoriously misunderstood and understudied topic has focused on questions of authenticity. By asking broader thematic questions about how the hadith helped shape a Muslim social imaginary and by illustrating how their usage and deployment shifted with discursive and historical contexts, my study charts a different path; I foreground the hadith’s broader social, political, and religious meanings. Ultimately, I am focusing on the history of Muslim discourses of imitation and distinction, their beginnings, shifts, and transformations, not the actual history of Muslim practices of imitation and distinction.

In a real sense, this study is a genealogy and commentary of the prophetic utterance, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them” (“the imitation hadith”). It illustrates how this apparently benign prophetic tradition about imitation transformed into the keynote expression of a religious discourse that advocates the very opposite: distinction. The historical trajectory of the discourse that built around this hadith corresponds to what Ebrahim Moosa has called the two bodies of the Prophet Muhammad: the bifurcation of Prophetic authority into the dual roles of lawgiver and
moral exemplar. The former highlights the arrangement of collective political order while the latter highlights the Prophet’s everyday conduct as a pattern for individual spiritual excellence. This conduct is later captured and perpetuated by a distinct Muslim learned tradition. After the Prophet’s death, although Muslim political governance inherited the former authority while religious discourse inherited the latter, the line separating these fields was not so clear. Religious discourse, in particular, was very much concerned with collective political order as well. The semantic multivalence of the imitation hadith expresses both voices of the Prophet. Through a single speech act, the Prophet functions as both lawgiver and moral exemplar. Over the course of Muslim history, different genres of Islamic discourse appropriated the Prophet’s authoritative voice for different ends. In this study, I trace how the interpretation of the imitation hadith diverged into a dialectic of Muslim distinction: a negatively-charged interpretation that enforced collective distinction qua difference, and a positively-charged interpretation that advocated individual spiritual-moral distinction qua excellence. The study plays on the double meaning of distinction to conceptually frame how this hadith shaped imaginations of Muslim belonging and becoming over history.

This study also marks the first step in a more extensive engagement with Muslim distinction that extends through global modernity. Here, I limit myself to the texts and contexts that are most crucial to the pre-modern history of Muslim distinction, ending in

---

18 From a forthcoming article, “Revival and Reform,” in The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought. I thank Ebrahim Moosa for graciously sharing this article with me.

19 In this study, which spans the first millennium of Muslim history (roughly the seventh through the seventeenth century), I draw the historical distinction between pre-modernity and modernity at the Enlightenment. I recognize the porous borders separating this arbitrary conceptual distinction; many historians refer to early Ottoman period as “early modernity.” However, in my examination of Muslim discourses of distinction, I observed a remarkable shift in the focus of post-enlightenment Muslim discourses on the rise of Euro-American power and influence. In this study, I therefore wanted to historically mark this break by concentrating on what I refer to as pre-modern Muslim period.
seventeenth century Ottoman Damascus at the eve of the Enlightenment. The most significant literary production tended to occur during periods of crisis or upheaval - at crucial transitional moments of political and cultural transformation in Muslim history.

This study is divided into three parts. Part one, Cultural and Political Landscapes illustrates how early Muslims built an imperial regime of hierarchical social distinctions upon the broader landscape of sharedness with other cultures, religions, and polities. It highlights the fundamental but persistent interconnectedness of religion and politics in Islamic history, which informs the rest of the study. Part two, Discursive Landscapes, examines how Muslims fashioned discrete oral traditions into a dialectical religious discourse on Muslim distinction, beginning with the formative period of Islam before concentrating on the city of Damascus. Part three, Semiotic Landscapes, builds on the previous two sections to highlight how Muslim imaginations of distinction foreground aesthetically-mediated practices. Its highlights how body, sense, and symbol pivot the mediation of religious and other distinctions in public life.

Finally, I wish to clarify my intentions for examining an admittedly polemically-charged topic that appears to focus on the “negative” and “exclusivist” forces in the Islamic tradition. Rather than justify prevailing stereotypes that depict Islam as inherently opposed to modern secular-Western values of multiculturalism, pluralism, and tolerance, I aim to highlight the contingency of Islamic discourse - its dynamic ability to respond to its myriad social, cultural, and political contexts. Rather than portray a uniform and static Islamic engagement with the social world, I make clear that imaginations of Muslim distinction are vigorous, relational, perceptual and always
already constituted by history. This dynamic conceptualization of religion creates the
discursive space for reimagining the future possibilities of Muslim distinction.

**Note to Readers on Translation and Transliteration**

I use a modified version of the Arabic transliteration system established by the
*International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. I do not use diacritics for words that
have gained common usage in the English language such as Quran, hadith, Sufi, Abbasid,
Mamluk, and fatwa. When I use a proper name on its own I usually drop the al- for
simplicity. On occasion, I also add –s to pluralize an Arabic term. I generally base my
dates on the Gregorian calendar for simplicity. Translations are mine unless otherwise
noted.
INTRODUCTION:
THE MIMETIC SELF

I make, remake, and unmake my concepts along a moving horizon from an always decentered center, from an always displaced periphery which repeats and differentiates them.

— Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

But isn't the *same* at least the *same*?... Then are two things the same when they are what one thing is? And how am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things?


In this chapter, I map the key themes and concepts that are made and remade throughout the course of this study. First, I establish the imitative or mimetic basis of the self; that contrary to modern prejudices against imitation, it remains an essential and fundamental component of human experience. I then illustrate how difference, or distinction, is built upon this mimetic contagion; both imitation and distinction are relational concepts that shape identity and alterity. Although at first blush, the chaos of imitation appears to oppose the order of distinction, upon further reflection, the two concepts interpenetrate each another in numerous ways. This relationship becomes clear when we examine how Muslims mobilized imitation to regulate religious and other distinctions. Classical Greek and modern Western thinkers, as well as Jewish and Christian doctrines also make this relationship clear. Sigmund Freud’s theory, “Narcissism of Minor Differences,” and René Girard’s theory of “mimetic rivalry”

---

illustrate the hidden mimetic basis behind the emergence of collective Muslim distinction.

Next, I illustrate how imitation and distinction, as both concept and practice, highlight the pivotal role of aesthetically-mediated practices in the Muslim religious imaginary. Imitation and image share the same Latin root, *imitari*. Although this etymological relationship foregrounds the importance of representation, the domain of these aesthetic sensibilities is not limited to the production of art and architecture. I argue that by recovering an Aristotelian aesthetic sensibility, we can better appreciate the degree to which imitation and distinction are mediated by the corporeal, sensual, and symbolic. Instead of restricting our aesthetic sensibilities to an elite social space, this enriched semiotic framework helps us to appreciate how aesthetic sensibilities encompassed the quotidian practice of everyday life. Even more, we are better positioned to understand why Muslims highlighted the importance of embodied practices to the mediate of individual and collective distinction. We also appreciate the deeply symbolical culture that Muslims inhabited.

Acts of Muslim distinction did not have uniform or stable meanings. On the contrary, they overflowed with social, cultural, political and religious meanings that changed with time and place. They functioned as discursive sites that illustrate the dynamic interaction of religion, culture, and politics. I argue that this insight helps us to break away from conceptualizations of religion that artificially isolate it from its historical context, treating it as “sacred” and abstract. On the contrary, in order to understand the role of religion in a given historical context, one must examine its *relations* to society, culture, and politics. We inevitably learn that religion is deeply felt
and embodied in both private and public life. This approach to the category of religion also helps us to appreciate why Muslim religious differences naturally intersect with ethnic, class, and gender differences; and why Muslim imaginations of distinction blurred boundaries between nature and culture, self and other, space and time.

Finally, I close this chapter with an overview to the primary textual source of this study: prophetic utterances, or hadith, before I further elaborate this study’s methods, assumptions, and limits.

The Innovation of Imitation

“In the science of man and culture today there is a unilateral swerve away from anything that could be called mimicry, imitation, or mimesis,” observed René Girard. When pressed to explain why, he reasoned, “The role of imitation would unduly emphasize…all that transforms us into herds.” This transformation began in the Enlightenment, when innovation began to overshadow imitation. The German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, eloquently captured this change of perspective through his conception of genius as “the very opposite of the spirit of imitation.” This understanding honors the rational virtues of innovation and creativity and denigrates the embodied virtue of imitating past masters. It values individuality over conformity.

This perspective not only marks a stark contrast to earlier Western literary theorists and litterateurs, but also to many pre-modern and modern Muslim religious

---

3 Ibid.
scholars who taught that innovation meant deviation from the paradigmatic past. Muslim religious scholars stigmatized the concept of innovation through the concept of bidʿa, or reprehensible innovation. They loaded the concept of innovation with a negative value in order to prevent deviation from the normative Islamic past (see chapter three). It was better to imitate the Prophet’s divinely guided normative precedent (sunna) than to innovate whimsically.

However, innovation and imitation are not just opposites; as both concepts and practices, they overlap. The assonance between the final syllables of imitation and innovation therefore signifies far more than a mere rhyme. This nuanced perspective is inferred by the Antique Roman philosopher Seneca (d. 65) who harnesses the example of the bee to illustrate how innovation saturates imitation (and vice versa):

We should follow, men say, the example of bees, who flit about and cull the flowers that are suitable for producing honey, and then arrange and sort in their cells all that they have brought in… we should also blend those several flavors into one delicious compound, even though it betrays its origin, yet it nevertheless, is clearly a different thing from whence it came.5

The Quran also makes use of the bee and honey metaphor to highlight God’s role in inspiring creativity:

And your Lord inspired the bee, saying, ‘Build for yourselves dwellings in the mountains, trees and the habitations of people. Then eat of all fruits, and follow the ways of your Lord, made smooth (for you).” There comes forth from their bellies a drink of diverse hues, wherein is healing for mankind. Surely, therein is a sign for a people who reflect!6

6 Quran, 16:68 – 69
Both descriptions first recognize the bee’s labor. Seneca observes that the bee must “cull the flowers” while the Quran observes that it must “eat of all fruits” in order to produce a new product, honey. The Quran describes honey as a “drink of diverse hues…” that “comes forth from their bellies,” while Seneca describes it as “one delicious compound.” Seneca urges the reader to imitate the bee’s synthetic activity by taking existing products and combining them into something new: to transform multiplicity into singularity.

Despite its heterogeneous and humble origins, honey’s final composition is qualitatively different, endowed with new attributes such as the power to heal. Making honey is therefore a creative and original process, which, in a Quranic imaginary, draws its inspiration from the origin of all creation, God. Like the bee, Muslims fashioned the ritual prayer into a new product that was ontologically different than its original constituents. They incorporated bowings and prostrations present in pagan Arab practice into ritual prayer, but refashioned these embodied movements in new ways, orchestrating performances of gestures, postures, and movements at specific times and places.

Creativity then need not begin from scratch, but can assume the practice of synthesizing existing things. Imitation, then, may be a creative and innovative act that builds upon and even supersedes its original. From this robust classical perspective, imitation and innovation are not opposites, but constitute a mutually reinforcing dialogical pair.

This study therefore aims to re-center the significance of imitation in everyday practice. Despite the enlightenment repression and devaluation of imitation, the concept continues to flourish in various, and often subtle guises. The attention that modern European and American thinkers such as Theordore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, René Girard, and Michael Taussig have given the conceptual
cluster of imitation, mimesis, and simulation mark what can be called a “mimetic turn” in post-enlightenment thought.\textsuperscript{7}

“If human beings suddenly ceased imitating all forms of culture would vanish.”\textsuperscript{8}

Imitation such a rudimentary existential fact of human experience that it often goes unnoticed. Human history, itself, proceeds via a mimetic relationship with the past. No piece of writing is void of some imitation; even the practice of translation evokes the binary distinction between an imitation and its original. All forms of pedagogy are rooted in imitation. It is also a powerful force in the spread of fashion and popular culture, which has only intensified with new media and communication technologies. With catchy poetic assonance, commercials during the 1990’s encouraged viewers to “Be like Mike” - to imitate and become like the famous basketball player, Michael Jordan. Contemporary movements to ban violence and sex from television, music, movies and videogames argue these harmful representations mimetically impinge upon human behavior in real life. Cognitive scientists have discovered that imitation is hardwired into our brains through the presence of mirror neurons. These examples from modern life illustrate the enduring power of imitation to shape self and society.


\textsuperscript{8} Girard, \textit{Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World}, 7.
Imitation, Distinction and Alterity

Paradoxically, Muslims expressed the necessity of distinction through the vernacular of imitation, its opposite meaning. The key Arabic term was *tashabbuh* (*ta-shab-buh*). This semantic detail alone indicates how imitation and distinction were inextricably connected in the Muslim religious imaginary. *Tashabbuh* is the verbal noun of “imitate” (*tashabbaha*) in the key tradition, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.” The author of the most authoritative Arabic-English lexicon, E. W. Lane, defines *tashabbuh* as: “He became assimilated to him or it. He assumed, or affected, a likeness, or resemblance to him, or it. He imitated him or it. He made himself to be like, or resemble him or it.”

In other words, the semantic field of *tashabbuh* exceeds imitation, encompassing assimilation, mimesis, resemblance, and becoming. The relational idea of being or becoming other is clearly conveyed by the imitation hadith.

---

9 See the entry in E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*. Turning to the fifth form *tashabbuh*, the 18th century lexicon, *Tāj al-‘Arūs* relates the following saying, attributed to the caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and rendered by Lane as: “Verily one becomes like (yutashabbahu or yushbahu) by feeding upon milk.” (*inna al-laban yutashabbahu/yushbahu ‘alayhi*) In other words, the infant who is nursed comes to resemble the personal qualities of the wet nurse. The saying implicitly warns parents to be careful when selecting a wet nurse for their child. Eerily, the narrator of this saying, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and his son, ʿAbd-Allāh b. ʿUmar appear as narrators in numerous *tashabbuh*-related hadith. Arabic lexicons also record the following saying, “Whoever resembles his father, he has not done wrong (*man ashbaha abāhu ma ẓalama*).” This saying means that when a person resembles his father, he embodies positive masculine qualities of strength and courage. And so, he can only do right by resembling his father, not wrong. However, when someone says “the man resembled his mother” (*Ashbaha al-rajulu ummalahu*), it means that he carries stereotypical feminine characteristics of weakness and incapacity.

10 While the morphology of *tashabbuh* indicates that it is a relational concept, it also suggests that the nature of this relationship is indirect. *Tashabbuh*’s morphology (fifth form) means that it is a self-reflexive concept – one that turns back upon its doer; it is a practice that happens to the doer herself and therefore places the emphasis on the imitator and not the one being imitated. Grammatically, *tashabbuh* also requires a preposition (*ba*) to link it to its object. Many of its linguistic relatives, on the other hand, do without a preposition; their access to their objects is direct. This suggests that an unbridgeable ontological distance divides the one practicing *tashabbuh* – the imitator - from the object of imitation.

11 In the Roman and Hellenic tradition, great emphasis was placed upon the imitation or mimesis of specific literary forms. A rich body of literature has thus developed concerning the practice of mimesis in art, poetry and literature. This study, however, does not focus on this intellectual tradition of imitation, but
In his magisterial encyclopedia of imitation/distinction, Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī of Damascus (d. 1651) stipulated his own definition of tashabbuh: “Humans seeking (sometimes by artifice or deceit) to be a likeness of the imitated (shibh al-mutashabbah bihi) - its appearance, qualities, characteristics, and attributes. It means undertaking (both) its intention and implementation.”

Ghazzī describes tashabbuh as a dynamic, holistic, and relational process of crossing over the boundary between self and other – a process of becoming. Ghazzī was not alone in recognizing the power of imitation to shape human subjectivity. When Aristotle observed that the human being “is the most imitative creature in the world,” he recognized that imitation is hardwired into human behavior.

Modern European and American thinkers have followed the insights of Greek and Muslim thinkers by linking imitation to becoming. Both the German-Jewish intellectual, Walter Benjamin, and contemporary anthropologist, Michael Taussig, observed that imitation, or mimesis, is a faculty. Building on Benjamin’s definition, Taussig defines mimesis as “…the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other.” A close friend of Benjamin and philosopher in the Frankfurt School, Theodore Adorno elevated the ontological significance of imitation by making it a condition of humanity: “A human being only becomes human at
all by imitating other human beings,” he observed. Imitation is therefore far more than flattery; it is an existential and irreducible feature of human experience.

However, Ghazzā also suggests that imitation, as a technology of becoming, has its limits. Ghazzā states that the imitator desires “to be the likeness of the imitated.” He does not say that the imitator desires “to be the one imitated.” Rather, the imitation is limited to being only a likeness, a simulacrum, of the one imitated. This definition suggests that the imitator can only approximate the reality of the one imitated, and can never be exactly like the one imitated – the original. An imitation is always derivative, weighed down by an ontological lack. The ontological distance between imitation and original highlights the epistemological dualism of appearance and reality that governed Plato’s critique of the poets. According to Plato, poets could only imitate the appearance of an original, while always falling short of its reality. Yet, despite suggesting that an ontological barrier separates an imitation from the original, Ghazzā does not indicate that it is necessarily inferior. On the contrary, his definition leaves open the possibility that an imitation may just be different, or perhaps even better than the original. Ghazzā would therefore appear to be open to Aristotle’s alternative perspective on imitation as poeisis – a creative process that can supersede the original.

Querying the relationship between an imitation and its original naturally brings up the question of authenticity, or originality. Muslim religious scholars deployed the language of tashabbuh to stigmatize a Muslim guilty of unsanctioned or reprehensible

---

17 Likeness (shibh) derives from the same three letter root (sh-b-h) as tashabbuh. Ghazzā’s definition therefore performs the very mimetic act that he is defining.
imitation of another group such as the Jews with inauthenticity. They suggested that he had deviated from his true essence as a Muslim. Muslim anxieties over the absence of authenticity had different roots from modern authenticity talk, however. Post-enlightenment conceptualizations of authenticity has taken has a very different intellectual and cultural genealogy, which includes the newfound primacy of the individual, the rise of mechanical reproduction, and the quest to discover one’s “true” self. In contrast, Muslims foregrounded the social or mimetic self – a self always embedded and produced through its social relations. Muslims valorized authenticity, not in the modern sense of finding one’s true individual self, but in the sense of conforming to one’s true social self. A Muslim therefore ought not to deviate from his essential social categories of identity such as religion and gender in order to be authentic. From this perspective, authenticity is contingent upon conformity, not individuality.

Power is another key variable that shaped the relational dynamics of imitation. The pre-modern Muslim historian and social thinker, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), observed

---

20 For Theodore Adorno, the concept of authenticity masked its ironic falseness by feigning a distinct, singular and abstract self that could be conceptualized apart from its social *cum* mimetic relationships. As his praise of imitation above suggests, Adorno believed that the self was a mimetic surface effect – a product of social relations. Adorno therefore believed that the authenticity talk prevalent among intellectuals such as Heidegger and Nietzsche led to the illusion of a homogeneous self that obscured the truth of its mimetic heterogeneity. According to his close friend and interlocutor, Walter Benjamin, in an age of mechanical reproduction, the concept of authenticity - and therefore concept of an original - is itself produced through imitations. Therefore, for Adorno, humans were simply imitations bereft of a distinct original self. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, 152-55; see also Martin Jay, “Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity: Adorno’s Critique of Genuineness,” *New German Critique* 33, no. 97 (2006).

21 This Muslim conception of the self corresponds to Theodore Adorno’s critique of modern authenticity talk. Adorno criticized its implicit assumption of an a priori monadic self that privileges the original over its imitation. For Adorno, there was no original pre-social self – only a mimetic self. However, unlike Adorno, pre-modern Muslims did not eliminate the idea of authenticity altogether despite valorizing a mimetic conception of the self. Unlike Adorno they still believed in the presence of an interior self or soul.
that the weak tend to imitate the strong.\textsuperscript{22} This acute observation reveals that power-relations help direct the vector of imitation.\textsuperscript{23} Ibn Khaldūn applied this insight to a number of asymmetrical social relations: the conquered imitating the conqueror; children imitating their fathers; commoners imitating their rulers; students imitating their teachers; and, in his day, the Spaniards imitating the Galician nations. He then applies psychology to explain why the weak imitate the strong:

The reason for this is that the soul always sees perfection in the person who is superior to it and to whom it is subservient. It considers him perfect, either because the respect it has for him impresses it, or because it erroneously assumes that its own subservience to him is not due to the nature of defeat but to the perfection of the victor. If that erroneous assumption fixes itself in the soul, it becomes a firm belief. The soul, then, adopts all the manners of the victor and assimilates itself to him. This, then, is imitation.\textsuperscript{24} Ibn Khaldūn identifies a deceptive element in this type of imitation: a misperception on the part of the imitator to idealize and aggrandize the imitated. The imitator then internalizes this (mis)perception until he assimilates the qualities of the conqueror. Ibn Khaldūn recognizes that the imitator confers a degree of prestige upon the one possessing power that drives his desire to imitate – a key attribute identified by French sociologist, Marcel Mauss, in his concept of “prestigious imitation.”\textsuperscript{25} Both pre-modern and modern Muslims, from Ibn Taymiyya to Muhammad Asad, recognized this vulnerability of the weak to imitate the strong. Modern Muslim anxieties over imitating “the West” are

\textsuperscript{23} Michel Foucault, however, theorized power beyond the coercive relationship of strong versus weak to foreground how power produces new subjects. Instead of examining power’s capacity to restrict and set limits upon human activity, he examined its productive capacity. Resembling Adorno’s anti-essentialist conception of the self, he argued that power produces the subject; it is a surface effect of power relations. Michel Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison}, 2nd Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
\textsuperscript{24} Ibn Khaldūn, \textit{The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History}, 116.
\textsuperscript{25} Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body,” \textit{Economy and Society} 2, no. 1 (1973): 73.
rooted in the perception that they are in a position of political, cultural, military, and intellectual dependence upon Europe and America.

However, Muslims also recognized that the “strong” might actually imitate the “weak.” Even as conquerors, early Muslims had many qualms about imitating their non-Muslim subjects. This apparent contradiction forces us to rethink the meanings of “strength” and “weakness” beyond politics and military power. While early Muslim conquerors may have had greater political and military power over non-Muslims in the seventh century, they may have been perceived as culturally inferior to the Persian and Byzantine inhabitants they conquered – at least initially. Perhaps this realization helped spur both Muslim religious and political elites to limit Muslim imitation of non-Muslims in public life (chapter one).

What becomes evident is that imitation is a conduit of culture; it facilitates the movement and circulation of practices across place and time. It also facilitates the absorption of culture in its narrower sense, where elite sensibilities and tastes diffuse to other strata of society. Imitation can therefore lead to assimilation. If we think with Muslim jurists for a moment, we gain additional insights. Although Muslim jurists attempted to shape cultural practices in accordance with Islamic norms, they also had to adapt Islam to the norms of the local cultures they inhabited. This discursive interaction resulted in a dialectic between culture and law.²⁶ Muslims developed a rich legal

vocabulary for incorporating culture into ethico-legal corpus of Islam. This culminated in the Islamic legal maxim: “Custom is legally binding” (al-ʿāda muḥakkama). Custom is usage or practice shared among humans or “the familiar and customary as opposed the unfamiliar and strange.” Social practices, however, do not become familiar and customary unless they are repeated over a period of time. For a new practice to become a custom, to become ingrained in the social practice of a collectivity, it must be repeated over a period of time by members of that group. A key Islamic legal term for custom, ʿāda, can linguistically be defined as: “A practice that is returned to, and is named as such because its practitioner is habituated to or returns to it repeatedly.” As Gilles Deleuze observed, “Repetition is a transgression. It puts law into question.”

---


29 Kamali, Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence, 369.

30 “ʿĀda” in al-Mawsū’a al-Fiqhiyya

31 Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, 3.
When repetition inscribes a practice into the collective disposition, this practice may eventually become law.

Imitation is a form of repetition. Like repetition, imitation not only turns a practice into a habit, but it also enables the diffusion of a local customary practice across time and place. Muslim jurists recognized that the scope and scale of customary practices differed. They therefore contrasted universal customs (al-‘urf al-‘āmm) with local customs (al-‘urf al-khāṣṣ). Imitation can become a powerful means of transforming a local practice into a global norm. When a specific practice spreads beyond its historical, geographic or cultural origins, the memory of its origin soon fades. A customary practice that was once a distinctive marker of a collectivity no longer retains that same social and cultural symbolism in new contexts. Muslim elites therefore had anxieties over containing the “escalation of mimetic contagion.”

It should therefore be no surprise that imitation, in different formulations, became a crucial technique for regulating Islamic religious orthodoxy. Muslims developed a toolset of mimetic concepts to anchor correct belief and practice. The first of these focused upon the persona of the Prophet Muhammad who emerged as a paradigmatic exemplar worthy of imitation. Emulating and following his model conduct (ittibāʿ al-

32 Local customs (al-‘urf al-khāṣṣ) are associated with a specific group of people, profession, or location, whereas global customs transcend these limitations. However, Muslim jurists have generally not accorded custom the force of law, although general customs (al-‘urf al-‘āmm) often have. In cases where they have incorporated local custom into religious normativity, its enforcement is not binding across the Muslim lands, but only in the location in which that local custom is prevalent.
33 Girard, Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World, 19.
34 Western scholars following the interpretations of Joseph Schacht and Ignaz Goldziher have argued that the Prophet did not enjoy the religious status that he does today. They argue that until the hadith became a synecdoche for the Prophet himself some two centuries after his death, Muslim religious authority, and by extension the concept of sunna, was considerably more diffuse. However, this observation describes Islamic hermeneutical developments more than it does actual Muslim social practice, which remains somewhat opaque due to a paucity of early written sources from the formative period. It therefore does not
sunna) became a central theme in Islamic discourses. Second only to the Quran in the status of its normative authority, following the Prophetic Way signaled not only communal belonging, but also personal piety. In the field of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), the term, taqlīd came to signal the imitation of, or more properly, conformity to the methods and practices of a specific school of Islamic law (madhhab). Like tashabbuh, both sunna and taqlīd sought to advocate religious conformity and inculcate a sense of belonging to an imagined Muslim community that transcended the limits of time and space.

As Ghazzi’s definition of tashabbuh suggests, this term could have also signified similar positive meanings of Muslim becoming and belonging. And within certain groups of Sufi communities leading up to Ghazzi himself it did. However, this positive connotation was overshadowed by its formulation within Islamic jurisprudential preclude the possibility (and likelihood) that the earliest Muslims viewed Muhammad’s example as paradigmatic and worthy of imitation, even if this imitation was not as concentrated on his charismatic personality as the stages of Islamic history after the hadith movement took off. Ignaz Goldziher, Muslim Studies, ed. S. M. Stern, 2 vols. (London: Allen & Urwin, 1967-71); Joseph Schacht, The Origins of Muhammad Jurisprudence (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

In the early ninth century, the Sunnī jurist, Imam al-Shāfiʿī argued that the concept of sunna must be the second most authoritative source after the Quran, and must be limited to prophetic reports only. Muslims had previously included companion and successor traditions as well. Shāfiʿī’s appeal materialized later that century through the ṣaḥīḥ movement to publish collections of prophetic hadith only, which became the foundation of the canonical hadith collections in Sunnī Islam. For more on Shāfiʿī’s contributions to the development of Islamic legal norms see Schacht, The Origins of Muhammad Jurisprudence; Wael B. Hallaq, A History of Islamic Legal Theories (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 21-35; Joseph Lowry, Early Islamic Legal Theory: The Risāla of Muḥammad Ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Ahmed El Shamsy, "From Tradition to Law: The Origins and Early Development of the Shāfiʿī School of Law in Nth-Century Egypt" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2009).

For example, the Shaykh of the famous Muslim mystic Rumi, Shams-e Tabriz, is said to have criticized “The Greatest Shaykh,” Ibn al-ʿArabī, for his laxity in conforming to the prophetic example. While his persona and normative example (sunna) is enshrined most visibly and hermeneutically in both Sunnī and Shiʿī collections of hadith, the earliest surviving Muslim literary source, the Quran (33:21), describes the Prophet Muhammad as a worthy exemplar (uswatun ḥasana). Other Quranic verses (Quran 3:31) exhort Muslims to follow Muhammad: “If you love God, then follow me, and God will love you… (In kuntum tuḥibbūnī fa-ittabiʿūnī, yuḥbibkum Allāh).” Although Sunnis and Shiʿīs canonized their own collections of hadith, they both assigned Prophet Muhammad a foundational role in determining religious norms.

For Western scholars of Islam, the first semantic association with the English word imitation is often taqlīd. See for example Jonathan Berkey, The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the near East 600-1800 (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 219.
(Shari‘a) discursive contexts, which stressed its negative possibilities. This negative connotation dominated its semantic field within Muslim religious (legal) discourses. Within this formulation, tashabbuh regulated Islamic norms very differently from sunna and taqlīd.38 Muslim religious usages of sunna and taqlīd, generally maintained positive values; it was good to follow the Prophet, and it was good – at least for the common Muslim – to conform to a particular legal school.39 The positive values of these concepts were also connected to a prevailing Islamic temporal imaginary that cherished the pure and paradigmatic past over the corrupt and transitory present.40 When Muslims followed the sunna or conformed to a legal school (taqlīd) they emulated past Muslim authorities. The jurisprudential formulation of tashabbuh, on the other hand, signaled Muslim reverence of the present over the past. Muslims who committed tashabbuh emulated wayward contemporary models instead of past Muslim authorities. The negative value of

38 As chapter four demonstrates, tashabbuh took on a very different meaning and value in a Sufi context that more closely resembled the positive valuation of taqlīd and sunna.

39 Taqlīd does not have a good reputation among all Muslims. Modernist Muslims have condemned taqlīd in favor of ijtihād, or the exercise of independent reason. They associate the decline of Muslim civilization relative to Western civilization with slavish adherence to religious norms. Among jurists, taqlīd was a more diffuse concept that did not exclude the exercise of judgment but meant that one conformed to the specific forms of reasoning of a particular legal school. It is true, however, that even before modernists pre-modern Muslims had ambivalent feelings towards taqlīd. For many, it would have been blameworthy for someone with the requisite training and ability to merely follow religious authorities when he could have exercised his own judgment. Hallaq, Authority, Continuity and Change in Islamic Law, 86-120; ‘Ali b. Muhammad al-Jurjānī, Kitāb al-Ta‘rifāt (Beirut: Dār al-nafā‘is, 2007), 129; For modern Muslim responses see Charles Kurzman, Modernist Islam 1840 – 1940 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9-11 for overview and references to specific Muslim figures and sources; Marshall G. S. Hodgson, The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times, 3 vols., vol. 3, The Venture of Islam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 274-75.

40 Muslim religious scholars developed a principle called fasād al-zamān, literally, “degeneration of time.” In this schematic of time, the paradigmatic generation of Muslims was the Prophet’s generation and those that succeeded him in descending order. As a result of this inevitable thesis of decline, a reviver (muja‘addid) would emerge every century to restore something of what had been lost and forgotten with time. The deployment of this concept helped Muslim jurists to anchor religious normativity in an ideal past – a golden age that could never be recovered by future generations. This concept is analogous to the Halakhic principle Yeridat ha-hadarot, or decline of generations. Rabbis applied this concept to Torah scholarship especially. Kabbalah discourse diametrically opposed this perspective, however: mystical generations ascended through history. For a study of this concept in Judaism see Menachem Marc Kellner, Maimonides on the "Decline of the Generations" and the Nature of Rabbinic Authority (New York: SUNY Press, 2006). I am not aware of any academic studies of this important subject in Islam.
tashabbuh was therefore associated, in part, with a negative appraisal of the present itself. In contrast to sunna and taqlīd, tashabbuh signaled a negative type of imitation that could disrupt Islamic orthodoxy. Instead of marking social affiliation and belonging, imitating others, (tashabbuh bi’l-ghayr) signaled the opposite – disavowal, exclusion and, in some cases, excommunication from the Muslim community.

In this jurisprudential context, tashabbuh eventually became equivalent to “reprehensible imitation.” The reprehensibility of imitation can, in part, be understood from the association of imitation with doubt, uncertainty, and deception – the potential to blur or cross boundaries between self and other. An etymological survey of tashabbuh’s lexical derivatives, in fact, confirms the underlying theme of blurring or crossing boundaries. Meanings range from doubt (shibha), uncertainty (shubha), confusion (tashbīh), comparison (tashbhīh), and even fool’s gold (shabaha).41 While these meanings do not indicate the negative semantic value of tashabbuh in most Islamic contexts, they do signal the potential for disruption and disorder that often accompanies social, material or conceptual boundary-crossing. As we shall see, Muslim religious and political elites were intent on mediating religio-political boundaries through the language of tashabbuh. We can therefore include tashabbuh into what historian Fred Donner has termed, “boundary themes,” or those themes in early Muslim history that “define the community or group in relation to others.”42

The Muslim intelligentsia are not the only ones who have attempted to set limits on imitation. The classical Greek philosopher, Plato, also feared “the terror of

“The imitator cannot avoid a certain contamination by the object of imitation,” Plato pessimistically observed in *The Republic*. Plato extended this rationale to include all sorts of social inferiors and outcasts. Citizens of the Republic should not imitate women, slaves, corrupt men, animals or the insane. Instead, they should imitate positive role models such as the philosophers who strove to imitate God. Plato’s philosophy of imitation enabled him to construct a complex social hierarchy that extended to the natural world, which, as we shall see, anticipates Muslim cosmological imaginaries in significant ways.

Muslim languages of imitation developed in the rich social, cultural, and political milieu of the Late Antique Near East and Mesopotamia. Muslims were therefore not unique among the world religions in foregrounding the significance of imitation to human life. Early Christians also merged the concept of imitation into their religious discourses. Resembling Plato’s social hierarchy, early Christian notions of *Imitatio Christi* placed Jesus at the apex of models to emulate. Paul harnessed this concept when he commanded early Christians to “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ.” In this context, imitation signified more than mere copying, but became a keyword both for the imitative following required of obedience and the formation of an exclusive religious community. As one author has noted, “The call to sameness (with Paul)… is paradoxically bound up with the call to exclusivity (difference) from the rest of the world.”

---

43 Ibid. 10.
44 See Plato, *Republic*, 73-74. Plato argued that artists, imitators par excellence, should be sequestered from the Greek polis due to their potentially corrupting effects upon its citizens. In other words, those who imitated artists would assimilate their blameworthy character traits.
45 RSV Cor 11:1
In Judaism, this call for difference became officially enshrined in the Late Antique Jewish doctrine of *ḥukkat ha goyem*, which mandated that Jews not imitate the gentiles in areas such as dress, fashion and behavior.\(^{47}\) This doctrine, analogous to the Islamic concept of *tashabbuh*, encoded Jewish difference into a discourse of imitation. To imitate non-Jews signaled disavowal from the Jewish collectivity, resulting in potential exclusion and excommunication of the imitator from the community. Choosing who to imitate is not only a question of individual identity but also of social belonging and group affiliation.

These trends in religious discourse signal how imitating others in Late Antiquity became a religiously and politically charged phenomenon. During the fifth and sixth centuries leading up to the rise of Islam, Near Eastern religious communities emphasized marking their religious, and therefore social and political affiliation through visible distinctions through modes of dress, fashion, and other forms of embodied differences. Michael Morony argues that the convergence of individual and religious identity into one’s communal affiliation gained momentum in Late Antiquity and culminated in the rise of Islam.\(^{48}\) What is striking, then, is how paradoxically Muslims shared the anxiety over collective distinction with other religious communities.

*Tashabbuh* became a semantic space where the conceptual fields of imitation and distinction intersected and blended into one other. As Muslims charged the meaning of *tashabbuh* with the meaning of reprehensible imitation, it began to take on the meaning

\(^{47}\) See for example Lev. 18:3, which states, “you shall not follow their laws (customs).” See the entry, “*Ḥukkat Ha-goi*” in *Encyclopaedia of Judaica*. I would also like to thank Beth Berkowitz who generously shared her entire manuscript study of Lev. 18:3 and its relation to Jewish difference prior to publication.

\(^{48}\) Michael Morony, “Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq,” *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17(1974).
of distinction. *Tashabbuh* took on the paradoxical rhetorical function of limiting the disruptive capacity of imitation and assimilation. At the same time, it normalized specific acts of Muslim distinction. Identity theorists often discuss these sociological processes in terms of a similarity-difference dyad. In this scheme, acts of similarity bind a member to a group just as they become acts of difference that separate him from non-members.

The dilemma of how to balance the vectors of imitation and distinction highlight the dilemma of alterity, or being other. The problem of alterity transcends religious difference and includes differences of all kinds. In contemporary parlance, this dilemma is often framed as the “politics of difference” where the concept of difference becomes conflated with the meaning of identity.49 Structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers have extended the concept of difference beyond its social context to highlight the importance of rethinking difference as a multiplicity, not a binary.50

---

49 In contemporary liberal multiculturalist discourses, difference must not just be tolerated, but embraced. In this context, difference is an ideologically charged term that seeks to replace hierarchical social relations with egalitarian relations across race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality and religion. In this multicultural context, difference evokes what has become known as the problem of the “other” – the challenge of living peacefully in societies whose most basic feature is human diversity. Modern forces of globalization have only intensified these concerns. In the United States, the genealogy of this discourse stems from a confluence of historical factors including the civil rights movement, feminism, the 1965 immigration act, and more recently, the gay rights movement. See Bruce B. Lawrence, *New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

50 From Saussurian linguistics, which challenged the assumed correspondence between a word and its meaning, to Deleuze’s philosophical unraveling of binary oppositions into multiplicities of difference, structuralist and poststructuralist philosophies of difference have reshaped how modern subjects view themselves and their relationship to the world. The theorist of gender, Judith Butler, the French-Algerian literary theorist, Jacques Derrida, as well as Jewish philosophers, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, have reshaped contemporary understandings of the existential difference between self and other. In their own ways, they have all attempted to transcend the limitations of binary oppositions, which encode difference as a dialogic of “us and them.” Historically, the deployment of binary oppositions such as us and them, friend and enemy, believer and non-believer, male and female, white and black, native and foreigner have favored the powerful and marginalized the weak. Instead, poststructuralists highlight threshold spaces
The concepts of imitation and distinction also highlight the collective dimension of identity/alterity – the construction of community.”

How to build, regulate and publicly display community preoccupied Muslims from the beginning of Islam. The wide circulation of the prophetic tradition, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them,” suggests the same. The Arabic term, *qawm*, which I have translated as “nation,” also signifies people, community, collective, or simply, group. In the Quran, the term has overlapping ethnic, moral, and religious undertones, as in the following phrases: “nation of Noah”, “corrupt people,” and “community of infidels.” However, as I illustrate below, a *qawm* can also refer to the collectivities of animals, angels, and devils - non-human nations.

Anxieties over imitation and distinction, then, highlight the social dimension of Muslim identity. While the forerunner to modern sociology, Ibn Khaldūn, highlighted the importance of group solidarity (ʿ*aṣabiyya*) to the unfolding of human civilization, the pioneer of the modern discipline of sociology, Emile Durkheim, claimed that religion, itself, was “eminently a collective thing.” In fact, sociologists

---

51 Raymond Williams observes that community is a “warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships.” He mentions that “signs of distinction” are especially significant. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 76.

52 See for example Quran 11:89; 9:24; 10:87.

53 For this reason, I have avoided rendering *qawm* in its more common translation, “people.”

54 From the formative period of Islam, Muslims were very attentive to the social dimension of religious life. Inspired by the vocabulary of the Quran, Muslims conceptualized the collective of Muslims through many different terms: *umma*, literally womb, originally included Muslims as well as non-Muslims, but eventually signified the exclusive international (and now global) community of Muslims; the Quranic term, *dīn*, perhaps comes closest to the modern concept of religion, and emphasizes the collective way of life shared amongst the members of a group; *milla*, is very much an amalgamation of the meanings above, signifying “religious community” as in “the *milla* of Abraham”; *qawm* has ethnic undertones, and is perhaps best translated as people or nation as in “the *qawm* of Abraham.” Other Quranic terms such as *sha'ab*, people, and *qabila*, tribe, connote a more restricted sense of community than the entire collectivity of Muslims. All these terms can be applied to other forms of community as well.

have argued that both similarity and difference are really two sides of the same proverbial coin – the construction of community, and more broadly, identity.\textsuperscript{56} Beliefs and practices that members hold in common with one another to the exclusion of others constitute their social identity.\textsuperscript{57} However, recurrent Muslim attempts to enforce practices of distinction both within and beyond the Muslim community indicate that the boundaries of community were far from static and stable.

**The Narcissism of Minor Differences**

Pre-modern Muslims were especially concerned with collectively distinguishing themselves in both doctrine and practice from their monotheistic rivals – Christians and Jews. Affectionately named “The People of the Book” in the Quran, Christians and Jews were monotheists who were also recipients of divine scripture, yet they rejected Muhammad’s claim of prophecy. This position of ambivalence to the main truth claims of the Quran as well as to Muhammad himself is echoed in the Quran’s fluctuating attitudes towards the People of the Book. In chapter one, I summarize the positive attitudes that Muslims had towards Christians and Jews. The rest of this study, which explores Muslim religious distinction, inevitably highlights negative attitudes that Muslims may have had (chapters two and three). What I try to emphasize in this study, however, is that these sharp differences are ultimately built upon a discursive and cultural landscape of sharedness; Muslims and non-Muslims interacted and Muslims adopted


\textsuperscript{57} Of these practices, some practices are deliberate and conscious attempts to mark off the community from other communities. Those who emphasize such deliberate practices of distinction tend to form more exclusive communities than others, often forming strong social identities, and sometimes erecting high barriers to entry.
many of the practices indigenous to the cultures of the territories that they conquered. In this way, I hope to keep Muslim constructions of religious distinction in their proper cultural perspective. Rather than necessarily reflect eternally fixed norms, Muslim antipathy or ambivalence towards Jews and Christians over Muslim history suggest that inter-religious relations were often turbulent, shifting with changing cultural, political, and economic circumstances. The transformation in the discourses of Muslim distinction over time is one indicator of these continuously fluctuating social relations. Muslims configured their relationship to non-Muslims dynamically and gradually.

Sigmund Freud’s theory of the “Narcissism of minor differences” helps to explain the enduring Muslim preoccupation with not imitating their fellow scriptuaries - the religious communities they resembled most.58 He argued that “it is precisely the little dissimilarities in persons who are otherwise alike that arouse feelings of strangeness and enmity between them.”59 Freud made this initial observation in the context of gender relations – why men have a “dread of woman” – of “becoming infected with her femininity.”60 However, Freud believed that this theory had a much wider application. It insidiously infused “all human relations…combating feelings of fellowship and the commandment of love towards all men.”61 This “sudden and unexpected eruption of Christianity’s golden rule” underscores Freud’s recognition that such sensibilities animated Jewish persecution throughout history.62 It illustrates how gendered differences

59 Freud, Sexuality and the Psychology of Love.
60 Ibid., 67.
61 Ibid.
could easily spill into ethnic differences between Aryan and Semite, and religious differences between Christian and Jew. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, he reframes the narcissism of minor differences as “the inclination to aggression” that facilitates “cohesion between the members of the community.”63 Put more succinctly, difference begets similarity. Freud also adds new examples: existing national rivalries between the Spanish and Portuguese, and the English and Scottish. He then moves to religious history. He explains, sarcastically, that “the Jewish people, scattered everywhere, have rendered most useful services to the civilizations of the countries that have been their hosts; but unfortunately all the massacres of the Jews did not suffice to make that period more safe and secure for their Christian fellows.”64 Freud further clarifies the absurdity of this tendency. He declares that the “inevitable consequence” of the Apostle Paul’s command of universal love was “extreme intolerance” throughout Christendom.65 In sum, Freud is arguing that human beings need a scapegoat, someone to hate. Such tendencies ironically become most acute when the rival is most similar.

René Girard attempted to explain such instances of violence through his concepts of mimetic rivalry and mimetic desire. Girard first argued that desire is mediated; that an imitator desires an object that a model possesses. One can recall numerous commercials that deploy this logic to sell a product, for example. Girard observes that this mediated relationship creates a dynamic triangulation between imitator, object, and model – an observation also made by Ibn Taymiyya in his theory of imitation (chapter three). “The value of an object grows in proportion to the resistance met with in acquiring it. And the

64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 72-73.
value of the model grows as the object’s value grows,” explains Gerard. A problem arises, however, when that object is rare or valuable, such that a rivalry ensues between the imitator and model. As this rivalry intensifies, however, the object’s importance decreases:

As rivalry becomes more acute, the rivals are more apt to forget about whatever objects are, in principle, the cause of the rivalry and instead to become more fascinated with one another. In effect, the rivalry is purified of any external stake and becomes matter of pure rivalry and prestige. Each rival becomes for his counterpart the worshipped and despised model and obstacle, the one who must be at once beaten and assimilated. Ultimately, this rivalry can lead to violence in which the distinction between imitator and model blurs, leading to a cycle of violence in which once differentiated rivals become undifferentiated “doubles.”

The “object” of rivalry need not be concrete; it can even be something as abstract as religion. Both Freud and Girard provide complementary explanations for why Muslim anxieties of religious distinction tended to focus on their monotheistic rivals - Jews and Christians. Their theories also help to explain both how and why different collectivities within the Muslim community vied with one another; sectarian distinctions between Sunnīs and Shiʿī’s, also materialized through insignificant gestures or utterances during ritual and other practices (chapters six and seven).

Although Girard’s theory is especially useful for identifying the mimetic dynamics behind religious rivalry, Freud’s theory recognizes why these rivalries so often

---

66 Girard, Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World, 295.
68 Ibid, 12.
take the form of minor differences.\textsuperscript{69} Although Freud did not elaborate this feature of his theory, it is nonetheless robust enough to help explain why Muslims materialized distinction through small differences in sartorial styles, colors, and gestures. Eventually, these small differences made a big difference in distinguishing Muslims from others. Girard actually downplays this feature; he prefers the Greek term mimesis to the “exhausted word” imitation because the latter highlights representational practices such as gestures, speech, and appearance, while the former highlights the possibilities of conflict.\textsuperscript{70} In this study, I do not follow Girard’s conceptual distinction, and use the terms interchangeably.

Recognizing the mimetic basis of human interaction helps us to understand why Muslim social anxieties extended beyond religious distinction. Throughout pre-modern Muslim history, religious scholars sought to regulate ethnic, sexual, class, generational and other distinctions. They mediated relations between Arabs and Persians, men and women, free persons and slaves, young and old. Nor were these relations meant to be egalitarian. These distinctions were supposed to preserve established social hierarchies where Muslims were above Jews and Christians; Arabs above Persians, men above women; and free persons above slaves. As I argue in chapter one, the emphasis among religious scholars on maintaining hierarchies across society was at least partially a function of hierarchical social imaginaries inherited from Persian and Greek philosophical models on the one hand, and empire on the other. The Muslim religious imaginary was much bigger than religious identity; it encompassed the entire social order

\textsuperscript{69} Freud’s theory also has its limitations. For example, he does not highlight the variable of power in shaping perceptions of similarity and rivalry. He also does not highlight the importance of symbols to making minor differences into major differences.

\textsuperscript{70} Girard, \textit{Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World}, 18.
as well. Even more, sometimes a single practice such as growing out the beard mediated multiple distinctions at once – religious, ethnic, sexual, and generational (chapters five and six). This shows how the everyday practice of identity formation regularly defies neat compartmentalization into ideal social categories.

The Muslim social imagination extended beyond human society, encompassing the non-human animal and spirit worlds as well. Muslim religious scholars also strove to mediate human relations with animals, angels, and devils. They encouraged Muslims to imitate the angels; however, they urged Muslims to be different from the devil or animals such as camels, dogs, and roosters. These Muslim anxieties over non-human mimesis may seem a bit strange to moderns who are more attuned to the significance of religious, ethnic, and gendered differences. This modern social imaginary projects an ontological or metaphysical barrier between animals who inhabit nature and human beings who inhabit culture. The idea that Muslims should have anxieties over resembling and imitating animals is therefore strange. Anxieties over imitating angels and devils is perhaps even more strange to moderns who believe that such creatures are superstitious fantasies of the (pre-modern) imagination.

However, as Bruno Latour has pointed out, humans did not always perceive their relationship to the world through the bifurcation of nature and culture. This artificial way of assigning separate “ontological zones” to culture and nature is a uniquely modern

---

71 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are exceptions. They provocatively describe the disruptive possibilities of a human becoming animal: to “become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs.” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 13.

habit of the mind. In the pursuit of mastery and control over nature, moderns have artificially insulated the human self from its networked connections to the natural world of nonhumans.

The upshot is that in a pre-modern Muslim social imaginary, the self is mimetically produced not just in relation to human society, but also in relation to the entire cosmos. The self is not suspended in a social vacuum; it is embedded in a mimetic network of relations that cross society, nature, and the cosmos. The collective distinctions that saturate the genre of hadith reflect an Islamic cosmological and moral vision that seeks to configure the Muslim community around ideals of piety. In contrast to a modern social imaginary, a pre-modern social imaginary “…is organized around a notion of a hierarchy in society that expresses and corresponds to a hierarchy in the cosmos.” This hierarchical social imaginary underpinned pre-modern Muslim discourses of distinction (chapter one).

The term distinction, more than difference, highlights hierarchical social relations - vertical relationships of degrees and class. In this sense, distinction provides a sharper semantic field than the concept of difference for the purposes of this study. Pierre Bourdieu’s seminal work, Distinction, illustrates how French cultural tastes translate into hierarchical and recognizable social distinctions in public life between elites, non-elites, and those in between. Bourdieu’s analysis reveals the logic of distinction that underpins everyday practices. In this study, the concept of distinction highlights the

---

73 Ibid., 11.
hierarchical vision that underpins the pre-Modern Muslim social imaginary. Following Bourdieu, this study examines how Muslims embedded their imaginations of social distinction in the ordinary, concrete, and colorful practices of everyday life.

Distinction, however, has a double meaning. It not only means to set apart – usually with hierarchical implications – but it also means excellence, as when someone graduates with distinction. Both senses of distinction highlight hierarchical relations. The tradition, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them” evokes both these possibilities of distinction – the sense of collective difference or individual excellence. This study explores both interpretive possibilities.

**Aesthetically Mediating Distinction: Body, Sense and Symbol**

Moderns have excluded imitation, Girard complains, “from just about everything, including our aesthetics.” This is conceptually troubling because imitation highlights the exteriority of human experience. This study attempts to partially remedy this situation. The vocabulary of *tashabbuh* highlights the importance of aesthetically mediated practices to Muslim imaginations of imitation and distinction.

Social belonging in the early Muslim polity was far from an abstract, purely interior and disembodied experience. Muslim religious elites textualized the prohibition of a wide range of ordinary and extra-ordinary mimetic practices associated with different groups. Muslim belonging was mediated through sensational and embodied rituals, practices and symbols. Orthodox Sunnī Muslim theologians anathematized a Muslim just

---

76 Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 17.
for the intentional act of wearing a thick belt worn by Christians (zunnār, see chapter five).

Like Plato’s examination of mimesis, tashabbuh therefore draws our attention to the cultural and political significance of aesthetically mediated practices. Recently, some scholars have rebelled against the Kantian notion of aesthetics that emphasizes the rational contemplation of the sublime and beautiful. Instead, they urge scholars to recover its classical Aristotelian formulation. The aesthetikon encompasses the sensual soul and emphasizes the role of sensory experience in shaping human perception and subjectivity. This sensual approach to imagining aesthetics highlights the body; not only are all the senses embodied, but they are also attentive to the body - its movements, postures, gestures, and symbolic meanings. Tashabbuh. draws attention to the central role of embodiment and sensory experience in mediating Muslim aesthetic sensibilities. Muslim religious elites sought to discipline the body and the senses in order to operate in distinctively Islamic ways.

The prescient French sociologist, Marcel Mauss, recognized that imitation was a corporeal technique. He recognized that the body was a central site of cultural meaning. Muslims therefore had anxieties over regulating the imitation of simple and fleeting gestures, postures, and movements such as waving good bye, sitting and standing, as well as complex and choreographed performances such as ritual prayer and festival celebrations (chapter six). They also had anxieties over the imitation and diffusion of sartorial styles, which I argue is an extension of the body (chapter five).

78 Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," 73.
Further, a recurrent theme in this study is how the body does not operate in a vacuum, but shapes and is shaped by space, subjectivity, and society.79

Although the five senses – sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell - mediate the body’s interaction with the world, they also draw our attention away from the body. The senses – sight and hearing especially - can reach the peripheries of the public landscape, expanding the scope and scale of Muslim distinction. Muslim political and religious elites sought to materialize Muslim distinction in the architectural and acoustic landscapes as well as material culture; non-Muslim residences should appear smaller than those of Muslims, crosses should be invisible, and wooden knockers should be silenced during Christian worship. Yet, despite the prevalence of ocular-centrism, the overvaluation of vision, for state and religious surveillance, pre-modern Muslims recognized the power of all the senses to shape human perception. I argue that enduring Muslim anxieties over public festivals partially stem from their ability to overload all five senses and threaten the Muslim collective order (chapters three, four, and seven).

Not all aesthetically mediated practices became acts of Muslim distinction, however. Muslims only paid attention to those practices that became symbolically charged. Symbols are crucial to shaping aesthetic sensibilities. They are pivotal to understanding how and why Muslims sought to distinguish themselves in particular ways. Symbols can take material form such as a robe, coin, flag, building or even an entire city.

79 Henri Lefebvre has theorized how embodied practice corresponds to specific spaces, whether festival, mosque, market, public bath, dinner table or royal court. Michel Foucault has highlighted the significance of bodily techniques to shaping subjectivity. Mary Douglas has shown that the regulation of the physical body both constitutes and reflects regulation of the social body. See Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (Oxford; Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), 69-87; Foucault, Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison; Mary Douglas, Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).
They also occur in immaterial form on and through the body via hairstyle, gestures, and movements. As Clifford Geertz observed, understanding another culture means identifying the manifold meanings of its symbols.80 While some symbols are specific to a particular time and place, others, such as the Christian cross, attain universal significance. Like practices, symbols can also be transmitted across social boundaries. This capacity to diffuse and subvert established boundaries makes symbols potentially dangerous carriers of disorder and novelty, leading to anxieties over cultural contamination. Muslims, such as the Damascene jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), were attuned to the power of symbols, deploying the concept frequently to articulate the limits and possibilities of Muslim distinction (chapter three).81 I dedicate part three of this study to exploring the semiotic significations of key Muslim practices of distinction.

From Exteriority to Interiority: The “Complete Human Being”

What makes symbols potent is that they pique the physical senses, yet transcend them. They convey emotions, ideology, and correspond to a collectivity’s moral imagination. The Arabic language connects the concept of symbol to the senses. Derived from its trilateral root sh-ʿ-r the Arabic plural, mashāʿir (s. mashʿar), signifies the five senses: hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch. The semantic field of the related Arabic word, shuʿār, encompasses senses, feelings, perception and knowing.82 Shiʿār, another derivative the trilateral root sh-ʿ- r, means symbol or distinguishing marker; this linguistic

81 See Chapter three for Ibn Taymiyya’s theorization of symbols in the context of tashabbuh, and the introduction to part three for a discussion of symbols within a semiotic framework.
signification suggests that symbols have the capacity to draw together the physical and perceptive senses.

This densely layered concept corresponds almost identically to the multiple layers of meaning of the English word, sense. Sense, of course, is not limited to corporeal meaning. Its secondary meaning extends to human perception more generally. To sense something is to have a hunch, a feeling, or an intuitive grasp of a situation that may or may not be connected to the ordinary five senses. One who possesses sense also has a rationale grasp of a situation. In the other words, the concept of sense blends affection, cognition, and intuition into a robust and integrated conception of interiority.

What the double sense of both Arabic and English equivalents of sense reveals is how the effects of aesthetically mediated practices can plunge into the interior of the self. The power of aesthetically mediated practices to shape human perception and subjectivity highlights the interactivity of interior (bāṭin) and exterior (ẓāhir) dimensions of human subjectivity.

Explaining his concept of prestigious imitation, Marcel Mauss, explicitly identifies the “physio-psycho-sociological assemblages” that comprise the act of imitation:83

> It is precisely this notion of the prestige of the person who performs the ordered, authorized, tested action vis-à-vis the imitating individual that contains all the social element. The imitative action which follows contains the psychological element and the biological element.84

84 Ibid.: 73-74.
Mauss recognized that imitation was a powerful integrative force that drew together the interior and exterior dimensions of the human being. It helped construct the “l’homme total,” the complete human being, the concept that pivoted his holistic approach to the discipline of sociology.  

The problem, of course, is that interiority and exteriority did not always cohere. As already mentioned, one of the meanings in *tashabbuh*’s trilateral root is fool’s gold, or as a type of brass that resembles gold after having been yellowed. By its very substance, fool’s gold employs deception; it assumes the form of something of more value, although its substance belies its appearance. Put simply, fool’s gold is a pretender. And so through this definition, epistemological distinctions emerge between form and substance, appearance and reality, as well as between imitation and original. These epistemological distinctions are also hierarchical. The substance of gold is valued over its mere form. Likewise, the gold original is valued over its fake imitation. These complex epistemological dichotomies derived from a lexical analysis of *tashabbuh*’s trilateral root also surface in the religious discourse.

Muslims recognized that human beings resembled fool’s gold in their capacity to confound appearance and reality. The potential of interiority and exteriority to fracture is reflected in the emergence of mysticism and law into mutually-related but distinct Islamic discourses. Mystical, or Sufi discourses stressed interiority (*bāṭin*), while legal, or Shariʿa discourses stressed exteriority (*ẓāhir*). The distinct emphases of these discourses resulted in divergent

---


34
semantic approaches to \textit{tashabbuh}. Sufis emphasized the positive dimension of \textit{tashabbuh} as interior becoming, a powerful technique of self transformation. Jurists emphasized the negative dimension of \textit{tashabbuh} as a mechanism that regulated exterior belonging, a believer’s membership in the Muslim community.

However, the cleavage between Sufism and Shariʿa was not always so clear; neither was the conceptual distinction between \textit{tashabbuh} as a technology of individual becoming and as a technology of collective belonging. Belonging and becoming were ultimately inter-related processes that linked individual to collective. The mystic-jurist, Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī of Damascus (d. 1651) masterfully synthesized these two dimensions of \textit{tashabbuh} into a robust discourse centered on love in his encyclopedia of Muslim distinction, blurring discursive distinctions between Sufism and Shariʿa in the process (chapter four).

\textbf{Religion and Politics}

Highlighting the interaction between the domains interiority and exteriority helps us to understand why practices of distinction became both religiously and politically charged in pre-modern Muslim historical contexts. Muslim imperial and religious elites both sought to regulate Muslim religious distinction. Why? As chapters one through four illustrate, both constituencies perceived the maintenance of religious distinction as crucial to the maintenance of a normative social order. While political elites wanted to ensure their political sovereignty lived on in the hearts and minds of their subjects, religious elites wanted to instill a pious subjectivity that valorized God and the religion of Islam above all other religions. Muslim religious scholars therefore upheld a normative
religious order that mirrored the hierarchical social order upheld by the Muslim empire. Their social imaginaries overlapped in this crucial feature. I therefore claim that the pre-modern Muslim religious imaginary was infused by an imperial imaginary. This relationship becomes especially noticeable in the religious vocabulary of tashabbuh, whose primary, but not explicit function, was to normalize hierarchical distinctions across Muslim society. The landscapes of religion and politics were inextricably and intimately bound together in pre-Modern Muslim history.

A study of early Islam highlights how the first Muslims imagined religion beyond abstract doctrine; aesthetically mediated practice filtered through the body and the senses concretely shaped the configuration of Islam in early Muslim societies. One cannot appreciate how Muslims fashioned Islam into a distinct monotheistic religion without attending to the concrete acts of imitation and distinction that signaled membership in the Muslim community. It was through these acts that Islam bled into culture and politics.

Religion is therefore not a sacred category set apart from everyday life. Religion infuses everyday practice. In attempting to study Islam (or other religions) in its pre-modern contexts, it is important to recognize that moderns inhabit a far more compartmentalized world than the cosmically connected world pre-moderns inhabited. It is therefore a mistake to project hyper-compartmentalized imaginaries of Western modernity onto the study of pre-modern Islam. This study brings down the conceptual barriers that separate religion from culture and politics. It seeks illustrate how the

---

For a discussion of how religion and culture overlap in a modern context see Lawrence, *New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life*, 26-30.
category of religion must be understood in relation to politics and culture in order to appreciate how its configuration changes with time and place.

This approach to the category of religion disrupts conceptualizations of religion that suggest it is at once a desensitized, fixed, private, abstract, rational, disembodied, transcendental category. It highlights the opposite – religion as a sensational, dynamic, concrete, public, affective, embodied, and historically constituted category. Religion, then, to have value as a heuristic category for the study of pre-modern Islam, must be disaggregated from its modern Euro-centric conceptual baggage. This is especially important because religious practice in pre-modern Islamic history was integrated with political and public life in ways foreign to contemporary Euro-American Protestant-influenced conceptualizations of religion.

Hadith: Muhammad’s Mimetic Legacy

The term, *tashabbuh*, is absent from the Quran, but present in collections of the Prophet’s words and deeds that subsequent generations recollected in the fragmentary form of an anecdote or report called a hadith.\(^{88}\) Much of this study is preoccupied with mapping Muslim imaginations of distinction in the collections of hadith - the textual repository of the Prophet’s charismatic persona. In fact, the genre of hadith became a synecdoche for the normative example of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunna*), himself.\(^{89}\)

---

\(^{88}\) Alternative forms of the root, sh-b-h, can be found such as *mutashābihāt*, which refers to those verses of the Quran whose meaning is vague. Although the specific form, *tashabbuh* is not found, commentators of the Quran interpreted some verses with *tashabbuh* in mind. See chapter two.

When the Prophet Muhammad died in 632, according to Muslim tradition his successors quickly canonized the Quran within a period of thirty years. However, although many successors had either memorized or written down oral traditions attributed to Muhammad during the first Islamic century, a movement to canonize them did not emerge until about two hundred years after his death, during the ninth century. This resulted in publication of collections, some of which categorized these fragmentary reports under subject-headings such as prayer, fasting, jihad, and dress among others. Collecting and canonizing hadith was complicated by the historical distance separating collectors from the Prophet as well as multiple political and theological schisms that fractured the early Muslim community from its birth. The hadith are historically useful because they are full of contradictions. These textual contradictions document disagreements among early Muslims that later Muslims attempted to resolve. Unlike the Quran, the question of hadith authenticity - deciphering the truth-value of a Prophetic utterance - became paramount. Hadith verification therefore became akin to a diachronic game of telephone, an extremely meticulous process of listening to oral transmitters and judging their veracity.

These hadith collections were called Musannafs. These collections represented an individual collector’s normative vision of Islam in the form of a classificatory system. Another type of collection, Musnads, arranged traditions according to the primary transmitter. Ascertaining the historicity of orally transmitted reports (hadith) has been a controversial matter since the beginnings of their collection where Muslim scholars attempted to assess their authenticity. While the earliest collections such as the Musannaf of ʿAbd al-Razzāq did not apply the categorization familiar to Muslims today, they did legitimate the inclusion of these reports by providing their chain of narration that led back to a Successor, Companion, or the Prophet himself. The presence of the chain of narration compensated for the absence of the “originator” of the report by providing its medium of conveyance. Subsequent collections that focused only on amassing prophetic reports such as the Sunan of Abī Dāwūd included just over 4800 hadith out of more than 50000 that he had collected, which accounts for less than 10% of the possible total. It is therefore not wrong to argue that hadith collectors approached the collection of hadith materials with a skeptical attitude.
While Western historians – and even Muslims - may disagree about whether or not the hadith actually reflect the words and deeds of the Prophet, they can agree that the collections of hadith tell us not only how early Muslims remembered their past, but also sought to shape their present and future. The preceding discussion of mimesis illuminates the significance of the genre of hadith within the wider context of Muslim history. Each transmitter in a hadith’s chain of transmission is said to have passed down an utterance that began with an original transmitter. In other words, transmission, much like translation, is imitative. Hadith critics sought to authenticate the origin of a given utterance in order to ascertain whether the Prophet had said it. However, they recognized that the original form of an utterance may have transfigured during its transmission across time and place; it was most important to hadith scholars that the meaning (ma’na) of an utterance be retained even if the actual wording of an utterance had changed. In order to minimize the possibilities of meanings getting “lost in transmission”, hadith scholars valued transmission chains that minimized the number of transmitters; this ensured that there were fewer opportunities for textual alterations.

Of course, meanings were not only lost in transmission, but also gained. With each transmission, mimesis was constantly producing its difference. The genre of hadith therefore functioned as a discursive forum both to retain the old and incorporate the new under the guise of the old. The possibility of this epistemic hybridity gave rise to the cult of authenticity that characterized the movements in the ninth and tenth centuries to

---

92 Muslim hadith scholars distinguished between riwāya bi’l-lafẓ (transmission in accordance with the form of an utterance) and riwāya bi’l-ma’na (transmission in accordance with the meaning of an utterance). Had the hadith scholars required that an utterance be transmitted exactly as it was originally stated, such a high standard would have disqualified a majority of hadith from determining Muslim normative practice.
collect prophetic hadith. The canonization of hadith was crucial to the construction of an imagined Muslim community that revolved around a fluid and dynamic collective memory of the Prophet’s paradigmatic conduct.

It should therefore not be surprising that the genre of hadith became crucial to sharpening the differences between Muslim sects. Although Sunnīs and Shiʿīs shared the Quran, each sect canonized their own distinct hadith collections. This points toward a larger function of the hadith genre itself: to regulate social and normative boundaries by textually canonizing difference beyond and within the Muslim community.

European and American scholars of Islam are divided into two basic camps over the historicity of hadith. Skeptics do not believe that hadith contain a historical kernel of truth, or at least that there is no reliable empirical way to judge a hadith’s authenticity. More sanguine scholars on the other hand, argue that with proper methods, one can confidently determine the historicity of certain hadith. A relatively new and less empirically-driven approach attempts to determine the social meanings of hadith. Approaching hadith as a repository of Muslim collective memory highlights what early Muslims felt was important to remember and transmit to other Muslims. This mode of inquiry marginalizes the importance of determining the authenticity of a given hadith – its exact place and date of its origin. It values the hadith literature for its potential to trace the circulation of ideas and practices. The hadith are small portals into the social imaginary of early Muslims.

93 For this basic binary typology see Herbert Berg, “Competing Paradigms in the Study of Islamic Origins,” in Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins, ed. H. Berg (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003).
94 This approach is effectively applied in Leor Halevi, Muhammad's Grave (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
In this study, I follow this latter approach by examining a cross-section of the hadith literature that foregrounds the role of religious and other distinctions in shaping the Muslim social imaginary. Despite their politically and polemically-charged content, these traditions vividly illustrate how Muslims attempted to shape society according to their normative religious ideals. These utterances also illustrate Muslim attempts to distinguish Islam from competing monotheisms, and helps to explain why the hadith literature tends to overplay religious distinction (chapter two).

The enduring authority of hadith was made possible by two crucial developments in early Islam: the emergence of writing and canonization. Opposition to writing existed in all major centers of Islamic learning, yet was overcome by the eighth century.\(^95\) The movement to collect prophetic hadith piqued in the ninth century, eventually gaining wide acceptance among both Sunnī and Shiʿī Muslim religious scholars, many of whom had preferred discursive reason (\(raʾy\)) to transmitted reports. Jonathan Brown eloquently expresses the symbiotic relationship between these two trends: “Canonization and writing thus constitute a mutually generating complex in the history of early Islamic law: the former endows the revelatory sources with authority and meaning, and the latter encases them in a stable form that lends itself to systematic analysis.”\(^96\) Before this, transmission of knowledge relied upon an amalgam primarily oral and some written works, which functioned primarily as memory aids.\(^97\)

\(^97\) El Shamsy, "From Tradition to Law: The Origins and Early Development of the Shāfiʿī School of Law in Ninth-Century Egypt", 34.
Writing and canonization enshrined and preserved Muslim cultural memory. Jan Assman argues that while ritual gave rise to cyclical time in which the sacred could continuously inhabit the profane, text gave rise to linear time. In linear time, the temporal distance between reader and text widens into a distinct past and present—a sacred past and a profane present. Historian, Ahmed El-Shamsy, poignantly describes the precarious new situation of the interpreter: “The growing distance from the sacred text is perceived as the source of inevitable corruption”, which in Islamic terms came to be known as fasād al-zamān, or the degenerating impact of time. This temporal imaginary also infuses the Islamic concepts of bidʿa and tashabbuh, which sought to preserve a sacred and pure past from a profane and contaminated present. “The circumscribed sacred past,” writes El-Shamsy, “thus provided an unchanging and authoritative measuring stick—a canon…”

Writing and canonization were also crucial factors for the emergence of a scholarly elite who eventually became differentiated into a distinct social class. They helped materialize an imagined interpretive community whose authority revolved around a body of canonical texts. Moreover, they indicate an important social function of the religious elites (ʿulamāʾ), especially the Partisans of hadith (aṣḥāb al-hadīth): to assert and impose a particular Islamically based moral and cosmological vision upon Muslim society. Religious scholars, of course, were themselves divided along political, sectarian, ideological, geographic, and disciplinary lines. Despite these internal tensions, they...

100 Ibid., 54.
ultimately collaborated with Muslim political elites to determine the normative contours of a cosmopolitan Muslim empire whose vast territorial domain extended to Central Asia in the North, to Sind in the East, to Spain in the West, and to Yemen in the South. While recognizing collectively their distinct social position among Muslims, this study also highlights the differences among them. It illustrates how both religious scholars and the discourse they purveyed were not static and uniform, but fluid and differentiated. The canonization of hadith enabled *tashabbuh* to become a significant term in the Sunnī Muslim vocabulary. Despite sporadically appearing in Shiʿī sources, *tashabbuh* represents a distinctively Sunnī communal and religious spirit.

**The Treatises Against Imitation**

Muslims invocations of *tashabbuh* in a diversity of semantic registers and contexts are found across the Islamic disciplines, including theology, Sufism, hadith collections and commentaries, Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and collections of legal responsa (*fatwa*). However, it took seven centuries for someone to write a treatise against imitation. All pre-modern treatises on the subject originate from Damascus – an historically cosmopolitan city. Prior to Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), Muslims had written about the topic casuistically. When Ibn Taymiyya authored *The Necessity of the Straight Path in order to be Different from the Inhabitants of Hell* (*Iqtidāʾ al-Ṣiraṭ al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālabat Aṣḥāb al-Jaḥīm*), it marked a pioneering effort that transformed the

---

101 Maribel Fierro has listed among the “Treatises against innovations (*kutub al-bidʿa*).” However, as I argue in chapter three, this classification of Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise obscures the greater importance of imitation (*tashabbuh*) to Ibn Taymiyya’s attack on popular festivals. See Maribel Fierro, “The Treatises against Innovations (Kutub al-Bida’),” *Islam* 69 (1992).

102 See Appendix Two of this study for a complete bibliographical survey of this genre.
concept of \textit{tashabbuh} into a religious discourse.\textsuperscript{103} For the first time, Ibn Taymiyya provided the theory and assembled the religious source texts - Quranic verses, oral traditions, and legal opinions – into a coherent argument. His objective was to establish Muslim difference as a universal Islamic principle. His student, Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 1348), followed up with a brief digest aimed at a broader audience that summarized some of the main points of his teacher.\textsuperscript{104} What is also noteworthy about both treatises is that they mobilize \textit{tashabbuh} to criticize Muslim participation at festivals.

However, although Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise is the most widely referenced pre-modern work on this topic among modern Muslims, it is neither the most comprehensive nor the most imaginative. That honorific goes to \textit{The Beauty of Awakening to what has arrived regarding Imitation (Ḥusn al-Tanabbuh limā warada fī al-Tashabbuh)}, authored by the mystic-jurist from Damascus, Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 1651).\textsuperscript{105} Several features distinguish this work from its predecessors. First, this treatise is really an encyclopedia; it took Ghazzī nearly forty years to complete this project. He develops a mimetic theory of the human self that he applies to social relationships across the cosmos. Ghazzī therefore does not limit himself to emphasizing the difference between Muslims and non-Muslims. He applies his mimetic theory to relations between men and women, Arabs and non-Arabs, free persons and slaves, scholars and commoners, and humans and non-humans (angels, devils, and animals). It is nothing less than a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
seventeenth century depiction of the Muslim social imaginary. Most importantly, however, unlike any other treatise written against *tashabbuh* in Muslim history, Ghazzī stresses the positive possibilities of *tashabbuh* as well. Inspired by his Sufi sympathies, he devotes nearly half of his encyclopedia to good *tashabbuh*. Ghazzī’s encyclopedia of imitation *cum* distinction marks the culmination of the *tashabbuh* discourse in Islamic thought to date. It is remarkable how this truly magisterial work has been ignored by Euro-American and traditional Muslim scholarship alike.

Accompanying the rise of print technology, modern treatises against imitation spread across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia in response to European colonialism. Written in Arabic, Urdu, Turkish and Persian in the countries of Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and India, these treatises highlighted the dilemma of aping the (non-Muslim) West. More recently, treatises against imitation have been published in Saudi Arabia. This trend is partially an expression of the Saudi state’s official version of Islam, known as Salafism or Wahhabism, which emphasizes sharp differences between Muslims and others. Finally, the rise of the internet has expanded public discussions about the need for Muslim distinction from the official circles of religious elites to the unofficial everyday conversations of common Muslims.

---


Western scholarship on the formative period of Islam has had to navigate between the Scylla of similarity and Charybdis of difference. To assert that Islam was merely a derivative religious ideology that merely borrowed doctrines and practices from the sectarian milieu of the Near East (whether of Jewish, provincial Roman, Roman, or Zoroastrian origins) suggests both a lack of Muslim authenticity and originality. On the other hand, to assert that Islam was a religion that formed in complete isolation from its religious and cultural environment unrealistically denies the effect of history upon its genesis and reinforces negative stereotypes of Muslim exceptionalism. Fred Donner’s most recent entry into this debate asserts that Islam did not become a distinct “religious confession” until Islamicizing reforms of the Umayyad caliph, ʿAbd al-Mālik (r. 685 – 705).  

Although Donner is correct to highlight the fluidity and ambiguity of relations among early Muslims, Christians and Jews, his more dramatic historical claim relies upon an under-theorized conception of religion as defined primarily by abstract doctrine – a misconception this study aims to correct. While I do not attempt to present an alternative chronology to Donner’s, since that is not the goal of this study, I do maintain that recognizing the emergence of Muslim religious distinction means recognizing the affective, embodied, and sensual dimensions of religious experience, which inevitably preceded the textual development of abstract doctrine.

However, a serious history of the discourse of *tashabbuh* is still lacking. A small number of articles produced by Western scholars provide brief surveys. Previous article-
length studies of *tashabbuh* written in European languages over the past century are limited to early Muslim relations with Jews.\(^{110}\) Ignaz Goldziher first introduced the topic to Western European audiences over one century ago, but limited his analysis to a survey of prophetic traditions relating to Jews.\(^{111}\) Nearly a century later, M.J. Kister finally followed upon Goldziher’s pioneering contribution, and expanded his survey to include traditions relevant to Christianity, but ultimately focused his inquiry on the curious case of Jewish shoes.\(^{112}\) Albrecht Noth was the first to link the religious discourse of *tashabbuh* to the infamous Pact of ʿUmar, an agreement purportedly drawn up during the reign of the second caliph ʿUmar that mandated the public display of distinctions upon the newly conquered Syrian Christians.\(^{113}\) Other studies of subjects related to Muslim distinction such as dyeing beards or fasting ʿĀʾshūrāʾ focus on issues of provenance and dating.\(^{114}\) The emphasis and scope of these studies are therefore considerably narrower than what I attempt here. These studies are useful for providing fine-grain historical detail on a specific practice in early Islam, but do not provide a

---


112 Kister, "Do Not Assimilate Yourselves...’ Lā Tashabbahū...”.


synthetic picture of the *tashabbuh* discourse or its greater significance in Islamic history.\textsuperscript{115}

Most recently, Finbarr Barry Flood’s magisterial study of material culture in the early Islamic period breaks from these previous studies in several ways.\textsuperscript{116} Although he marginalizes the religious literature, Flood focuses his brief engagement with cross-cultural imitation through the material form of dress. His study is exceptional both for his focus upon historical narratives as opposed to religious literature, and for his reliance on social theory. He therefore contrasts the perception conveyed by religious literature of sharp differences between Muslims and others and foregrounds the “actual” historical practice of imitation between Muslims and non-Muslims. Building on Mauss’s concept of “prestigious imitation,” Flood concludes that the frequency of mimetic practices in dress reflect elite aspirations for prestige and authority rather than ethnic or religious causes.\textsuperscript{117}

However, while Flood and others may demean the prescriptive nature of religious texts as having little or no relevance to social history, recent works have demonstrated that this is in fact not the case.\textsuperscript{118} “Theory,” even religiously inspired theory, “is schematized in the dense sphere of common practice.”\textsuperscript{119} Only a completely nominalist view of the world renders religious texts irrelevant to the social world in which they were

\textsuperscript{115} An alternative method to the one employed in this study would be to trace a specific practice such as beard dye over time to see how its meanings of distinction change with context.


\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 74.

\textsuperscript{118} See for example Leor Halevi’s masterful study of early Muslim funerary practices: Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*.

born. In this study, I demonstrate how Muslim religious discourses of *tashabbuh* reflect Muslim social imaginaries, which historians have only just begun to explore.

Nonetheless, Flood’s insights on the distinction between religious representation and reality help us to read Muslim religious texts against the grain. Instead of assuming a perfect homology between Muslim discourses of distinction and the world they claim to represent, we can assume the opposite: that Muslim religious scholars were responding to social practices that they either feared would become prevalent, or were prevalent in their historical context. They sought to shape their societies by leveraging the prestige and authority of religious discourse - to impose the order of distinction upon the chaos of imitation.

This cross-disciplinary and cross-regional study illustrates how imitation and distinction are powerful techniques through which human beings fashion self and community. Balancing the practices of imitation and distinction is not a problem specific to Islam, but a problem of comparative religion and human identity more generally. Due to the virulent capacity of imitation and distinction to infect virtually all areas of human life, this study’s scope crosses the disciplinary limits of religious studies, history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. It advances scholarship on the study of Islam in several disparate but inter-related fields: identity and alterity formation across religion, ethnicity, gender and class; imaginations of the body, senses, and symbol; the role of religion in public life; and the social function of Muslim religious scholars. It encompasses a broad range of Arabic literary texts spanning theology, law, the Quran, prophetic narratives, ethics, mysticism, historical chronicles, and biography.
Although this study highlights the unique contributions of Muslims to fashioning a dynamic religious discourse, it also attempts to illuminate their literary production with the conceptual advances made in the modern humanities and social sciences. More specifically, I complement insights from Euro-American theory and philosophy with the theories of Muslims themselves. In this way, I decenter the West as the locus of rationality and the non-West as the archive of data to be examined. Although I am primarily concerned with documenting how Muslims have imagined the dual concepts of imitation and distinction, I also argue that Muslim theories are worthy of becoming part of the broader conceptual histories of imitation and distinction.

The locus of these theories are Islamic literary texts. In this study, I examine the representational practices of imitation and distinction, whether embodied, material or otherwise. In other words, I am examining discourse. Discourse identifies the production of knowledge as a social practice that both shapes and is shaped by the social world. Discourses are means through which actors mediate cultural memories of the past into the present, preserving old and gaining new meanings simultaneously. As Michel Foucault has shown, it draws our attention to the constellation of language, power and the body. Discourse, then, is not merely an abstract collection of ideas, but a rationalized and coherent (though possibly contradictory) set of concepts, forms of reasoning, and

---

120 The complexity and scope of this study make it ripe for both etic and emic approaches to history. Etic approaches are interventionist in that the perspective and framework of the historian conceptually enter into the subject matter of study. Emic viewpoints seek to reproduce history from the perspective of the historical subjects themselves. Emic approaches have prevailed in the European and American academic study of pre-modern Islamic history; theory, in its various guises, has been perceived as a smokescreen that obscures the purity of Islamic history, especially its illusive origins. By contrast, this study applies theories from a variety of disciplines in order to illuminate the study of pre-modern Islamic history.

121 A paradigmatic example from Foucault’s oeuvre that highlights how discourse can mobilize language, power, and the body is Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.
genres mediated through social relations; it asserts a normative way of knowing and being in the world.

Discourse is therefore not static, but is historically constituted and dynamic. As Reinhart Koselleck insightfully points out, “It is language above all that decides about the potentialities of history in actu.”122 By emphasizing the contingent nature of discourse, I aim to avoid the pitfalls of linear teleological histories that lead to a pre-determined result in the present. I reveal how its meanings are shaped by different variables – its literary genre, the subjective viewpoint of the author, and the wider historical context. I therefore show how Muslim authors themselves are constituted by history and their social context. However, I do not dwell completely on discontinuity and rupture. I show how the discourse of tashabbuh reveals remarkable consistency and durability over Islamic history.

In part one of this study, “Cultural and Imperial Landscapes,” I first attempt to contextualize Muslim discourses of tashabbuh by highlighting two key dimensions of early Muslim history. First, I argue that the rise of empire made the problem of cultural and religious diversity possible through Muslim territorial conquest. I illustrate that early Muslims adapted to their local cultural surroundings and assimilated many practices of the indigenous populations. They were part of a cultural landscape of sharedness. I also argue that they built a society of hierarchies underpinned by an imperial imaginary. In other words, part of what makes an empire an empire is the maintenance and regulation

of social hierarchies. The formation of a Muslim empire was no different. This cultural and political context inevitably helped shaped Muslim religious thought as well.

In part two of this study, “Discursive Landscapes,” I explore the discursive formation of tashabbuh over Muslim history. In chapter two, I have two different but inter-related goals. First, by examining early lexicons, legal manuals and hadith collections, I map tashabbuh’s semantic field in order to show how it came to signal its opposite: an imperative to be different and distinct. Through this semantic transformation, we gain a glimpse at the formation of Muslim religious identity. Second, I show how the vocabulary of tashabbuh in Sunnī and Shiʿī collections of hadith encompassed key areas of Muslim life from ritual and dress, to festivals and food; it reveals Muslim anxieties over the diffusion of foreign cultural practices and the possibilities of Muslim assimilation. I also show how Muslim anxieties of influence encompassed religious, ethnic, sexual, class, and human distinctions. We learn that the social imaginary of the partisans of hadith had a cosmic scope.

In the next two chapters of this section, I show how the meaning of tashabbuh took two different semantic trajectories: a Shariʿa-oriented meaning that stressed the exteriority of collective difference, and a Sufi-oriented meaning that stressed the interiority of individual excellence. This semantic distinction illustrates how genre can shape the meanings of texts. I foreground two transitional moments in Muslim history, both of which take place in Damascus, when the two most significant treatises on tashabbuh in Muslim history were authored. These cases support Mary Douglas’s assertion that regulation of the physical body intensifies when the social body is
threatened. In both historical contexts, Muslims were experiencing a sense of crisis across society, politics, and culture. First, I examine the pioneering contribution of the controversial scholar of the Mamluk period, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). He was the first religious scholar to assemble a body of texts - mainly hadith traditions – in order to argue that being different was a fundamental principle of Islam. He also provided tashabbuh with a sophisticated theoretical basis by explicating the relevance of intention, historical context, symbolism, and the analogous concept of bidʿa, reprehensible innovation. Next, I examine the majestic contribution of the mystic-jurist, Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 1651) at the eve of modernity, during the early Ottoman period. Ghazzī brings us in a full circle back to the heart, through his emphasis on the affective dimension of social belonging, which comprised his robust Sufi poetics of love.

In part three of this study, “Semiotic Landscapes,” I explore the manifold meanings and significations of specific practices of Muslim distinction. Semiotics examines the meanings that signs and symbols project, whether visual, textual or aural. So, rather than focus on whether or not hadith condemning dying the beard black is authentic, I explore what this quotidian gesture tells us about the significance of hair as a marker of social affiliation, religious piety, and political ideology in early Islam. A semiotic approach therefore enables us to understand not only how but why Muslims imagined difference in particular ways. The fruits of this analytical labor highlight how the multiplicity of cultural meanings of tashabbuh is entangled in a constantly shifting socio-symbolic code. It therefore illustrates how Muslims infused the social world with meanings that changed across time and place. I highlight three semiotic dimensions of

Muslim distinction across three separate chapters: sartorial style, gesture, and sensory experience.

And finally, some notes on the limits of this study. As already mentioned this study is not a factual account of what happened - but a discursive and semiotic depiction of a dynamic pre-modern Muslim social imaginary. Although identity and alterity formation, whether individual or collective, is bidirectional, I focus almost exclusively on how Muslims see others, not the other way around. This study also marks the first step in a more extensive engagement with Muslim distinction that extends through global modernity. Here, I limit myself to the texts and historical contexts that are most crucial to the pre-modern history of *tashabbuh*, ending in seventeenth century Ottoman Damascus at the eve of modernity. The most significant literary production tended to occur during periods of crisis or upheaval - at crucial transitional moments of political and cultural transformation in Muslim history. Aside from a brief study of two Cordoban jurists of the eleventh century, it does not give due attention to Andalusía, Muslim Spain, which remains an extremely rich site for Muslim imaginations of distinction by scholars better equipped with knowledge of this region’s unique languages and histories. My hope is that this study inspires others to take on additional studies of Muslim distinction in other cultural geographies applying different methods and approaches.
PART ONE:

CULTURAL AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPES
CHAPTER ONE

EMPIRE OF DISTINCTION:
THE SOCIAL ORDER OF EARLY ISLAM

We have divided between them their livelihood in the present life and raised some of them above others in rank so that some of them may take others in servitude.

— Quran 43:32

Religion, Culture, and Politics

“Empires are large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people,” according to a recent definition. According to the authors, all empires in history have met this criterion, from the Mongol Empire to the British Empire. They all sought to “maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people.” Distinction is therefore a technique of empire. In this chapter, I highlight this key feature in the formation of the early Muslim empire. I show how the construction, maintenance, and enforcement of hierarchical social distinctions became a crucial technique in the formation and administration of the early Muslim empire. We can thus appreciate how early Muslim religious discourses were mapped onto an imperial imaginary.

1 Quran 43:32. I have used A. J. Arberry’s translation here.
3 When I use the phrase “imperial imaginary” in this study, I am referring primarily to the definition of empire given above, while stressing the specific attribute of maintaining “distinction and hierarchy.”
I also argue that this order of imperially-backed social distinctions did not appear *ex nihilo*, but emerged from a chaotic cultural landscape of sharedness. This recognition is important because Islamic religious discourse tends to suppress memories of cultural overlap between early Muslims and their Jewish and Christian religious rivals, pre-Islamic Arab forefathers, and Byzantine/Sasanian competitors. Yet, even before the great conquests, Arab-Muslims shared a common geographical, social, cultural, political and religious landscape with these three wellsprings of Late Antique civilization. “To an extraordinary extent, both culturally and politically,” observes historian Garth Fowden, “Islam and its empire was already implicit in late antiquity.”

Stressing continuity over rupture, Fowden highlights the importance of the Late Antique historical context, its cultural and political landscape, in shaping Islamic imperial ambitions. According to Fowden, the Islamic empire represented the most complete fulfillment of the imperial potential implicit in the other monotheisms; the universalism implicit in the symbiosis of empire and monotheism made possible the formation of a world empire.

And so it should not surprise us that Muslims imitated, adapted, and reconfigured the existing cultural landscape into a new civilization. As one historian of early Islam observes, “…The distinctions built up by religious leaders were broken down by the ordinary faithful in their everyday relations with the members of other religions,

---


5 Fowden also cites the tendency of monotheism to result in the disruptive binary of orthodoxy and heresy as the primary explanatory cause for the dispersion of an empire into a commonwealth. Compared to empire, a commonwealth is characterized by plurality and division that dilutes the center’s authority over the periphery. However, Fowden’s attribution of such importance to religious causes for the dissolution of empire is problematic because he bases his argument upon the construct of orthodoxy and heresy. One could just as easily attribute political causes to religious fragmentation in the formation of orthodoxies and heresies.
especially though commerce and participation in each other’s festivals."6 This observation brings the second main argument of this chapter, and a recurring theme of this study, into relief: that Muslim imaginations of social distinctions emerge from and are mapped onto a cultural landscape of sharedness.

Muslim distinction was therefore not so distinct. As I argue below, Muslims paradoxically imitated their imperial forerunners in constructing a hierarchical society, despite the strong egalitarian spirit of the Quran. The greater civilization of the Late Antique Near East - whether Judeo-Christian religious practice, or Persian-Byzantine-Arab cultural norms - shaped Muslim empire-building and religion-making. This observation, of course, does not change the fact that Muslims devised a new social order that was itself distinct from its Pre-Islamic Arab and Byzantine-Persian civilizations.

Both religious and political elites had a shared interest in maintaining social distinctions over the course of Muslim history. However, Muslim religious and political elites responded in different ways to the pressures of assimilation that stemmed from this shared landscape. As I demonstrate in this study, some attempted to limit the assimilating processes by mandating Muslim distinction in specific ways, at specific places, and during specific times. However, in order to place this apparent isolationist reflex in perspective, we must first understand how the landscapes of politics and culture helped shape the social landscape. Muslim hierarchical social distinctions were built upon the landscapes of empire and cultural sharedness. This shared political and cultural backdrop lays the historical foundation for the remainder of this study of Muslim

---

6 Michael Morony, "Religious Communities in Late Sasanian Ad Early Muslim Iraq," *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17(1974): 134.
religious discourses of distinction. This integrated perspective also helps us to recognize how an imperial imaginary underpinned pre-modern Muslim religious discourses more broadly.

I advance the central arguments of this chapter by first examining the landscapes of empire and cultural sharedness during the formative period of Islam. Next, I map the hierarchical order of social distinctions that sprung from this cultural and political backdrop. By stressing the interaction of religion, politics and culture, I illustrate that “religion” did not operate in a historical vacuum in early Islam. In order to understand the religion of Islam we must look beyond it. Muslim religious distinction intersected many other distinctions such as ethnicity, class, gender. Freedmen were differentiated from slaves, men from women, Arab-Muslims from non-Arab Muslims, and even human from animal. The formation of these social hierarchies made the Muslim empire an empire of distinction.

**A Muslim Empire of Distinction**

Why does the early Muslim polity deserve the status of empire? The historian, Hamilton Gibb, observes that “the two facets of its policy, the military assault and the

---

7 Some useful summaries of the early Muslim social order have already been attempted. However, they have not attempted to draw larger connections to empire or balance the formation of social hierarchies against the greater cultural landscape of sharedness, which I attempt in this chapter. See the relevant chapters in Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 332-57; Reuben Levy, *The Social Structure of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 53-90.

8 I am not interested in dating precisely when the Muslim polity became an empire. What is important is that the first century of Islamic history witnessed a rapid teleological progression toward imperial rule. It is possible to date the formation of empire during the caliphate of ʿUmar who saw the first great expansions into Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Iran, the fall of the Sasanian Empire, and the creation of a system of stipendiary payments for Muslims, or the first Umayyad caliph, Muʿāwiya, who inaugurated hereditary succession and attempted unsuccessfully to conquer the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, or ʿAbd al-Malik who built
administrative adaptation, point clearly to the real ambition of the first century caliphs, which was nothing less than to establish their own imperial dynasty.” Gibb cites two crucial factors for the creation of the early Muslim empire: jihad and administration. To these, we can add the following key features. As Garth Fowden argues, monotheism was a crucial factor. A less appreciated contributing factor is the administration of territory (as opposed to the administration of fiscal policy and government bureaucracy). Building cities, defending frontier territories, and constructing new buildings were all key means of materializing the memory of imperial power in everyday life. Creating, maintaining, and enforcing hierarchical social distinctions in the public sphere was another key factor that materialized through these parallel techniques of empire-formation. In sum, these different imperial techniques converged to produce asymmetrical relations of power between ruler and ruled. I will now discuss some of these features of Muslim empire in more detail and their role in shaping early Muslim imaginations of social distinction.

Jihad issued early Muslims a divine mandate to conquer and extend the political dominion of Islam. Originating during the Prophet Muhammad’s life, the concept of jihad oscillated between the signification of individual spiritual effort and collective armed struggle – to fight in God’s path. It therefore denoted a potent and multivalent concept of sacrificing or expending oneself. The call to jihad animated the activist spirit of the early Muslim polity, fueling its spread across the Arabian Peninsula and the Near East. Within one century under the banner of jihad, a relatively meager and ill-equipped
Arab-Muslim elite toppled the long-established Sasanian Empire, and forced the Byzantine Empire to retreat from its territorial sovereignty in Syria, Egypt, and North Africa. It legitimated military conquest through the promise of a righteously governed kingdom of God in this world, and paradise in the next. Jihad therefore played a crucial role in linking formative Islam to an imperial imaginary.

A culture of martyrdom and holy war predated Islam, however. The Sasanian and Byzantine empires also legitimated military operations through appeals to religion and piety. According to historian, Patricia Crone, “Holy war in the Near East was divinely sanctioned imperialism.” To die in war was the ultimate declaration of faith. The Muslim martyr was literally a “witness (shahid),” which also corresponds to the meaning of the Greek root of martyrdom. Within the Arabian Peninsula, war was a default state among the various Arab tribes who frequently fought with one another excepting the four holy months. The potent convergence of war, conquest, and religion that crystallized during the early period of Islam took shape in, and was partially a product of this greater Arabian and Near Eastern civilizational milieu. It is important to note that military jihad was not the only alternative to Muslim territorial expansion. Some territories capitulated voluntarily and peacefully, signing treaties with their new Arab Muslim rulers.

Yet, the emergent doctrine of jihad fundamentally shaped how Muslims dealt with others. It was instrumental for enabling a minority Arab-Muslim elite not only to gain dominion over fellow Arabs, but also over non-Arab Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian and other communities across the Near East. In other words, the practice of jihad made the problem of diversity possible for the nascent Muslim empire. Jihad and conquest also

---

"Crone, God's Rule: Government and Islam, 366."
framed how Muslims engaged with other ethnic and religious communities. It was so fundamental to how Muslims imagined the other that Muslim jurists classified Islamic laws governing relations with non-Muslims under the heading of jihad in legal treatises.\footnote{See for example, \textit{The Motherbook (Kitāb al-Umm)} of al-Shāfīʿī in the “Chapter of Jihad and Taxation” (kitāb al-jihād wa al-jizya) in volume five. See especially the section (p. 281) where he outlines the template for an agreement with the non-Muslim subjects (ahl al-dhimma) that I discuss below regarding the Pact of ‘Umar: Muḥammad b. Idrīs Al-Shāfīʿī, \textit{Kitāb al-Umm}, 11 vols. (al-Manṣūra, Egypt: Dār al-wafāʾ, 2001).}

The imperial mandate of jihad projected asymmetrical relations of power that enabled crude hierarchical distinctions between ruler and ruled, between an Arab-Muslim minority and a predominantly non-Arab and non-Muslim majority.

Jihad also sourced economic wealth into the Muslim polity. It enabled the accumulation of booty, slaves, tax revenue, land, and human resources. While Muslims paid a land tax and the zakāt tax, newly-conquered Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians paid both a land tax and a poll tax, at generally higher rates than Muslims.\footnote{Both land and poll-taxes had roots in Sasanian and Byzantine administrative practice.} The government imposed a variable tax rate that corresponded to the different communities living within its territory. In \textit{The Book of Taxation (Kitāb al-Kharāj)}, written for the Abbasid caliph, Ḥarūn al-Rashīd, the jurist Abū Yūsuf (d. 798) enumerated religious hierarchy in Muslim society via a variable tax rate: Muslims paid 2.5%; native non-Muslim subjects (dhimmīs) paid 5%; and non-Muslim resident aliens (ḥarbī) paid 10.0%.\footnote{Yaʿqūb b. Ibrahim Abū Yusuf, \textit{Kitāb al-Kharāj} (Beirut: Dār al-maʿrifa, 1979), 133; ———, \textit{Taxation in Islam: Abū Yusuf’s Kitāb al-Kharāj}, trans. A. Ben Shemesh, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 140.} There was an economic imperative to convert to Islam. Conversion therefore created a conflict of interest for the Muslim state since it reduced tax revenues. In one instance, the Umayyad governor of Iraq, al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 714) drove rural non-Muslims who converted to Islam (mawālī) out of the Iraqi garrison city of Kūфа and
imposed upon them the poll tax, a tax exclusive to non-Muslims. This decision aroused the ire of Muslim pietists who believed that political or economic barriers should not inhibit conversion to Islam. A political and economic logic reinforced hierarchical social distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim.

Imperial conquest also shaped how Muslims imagined space. The binary mapping of territory into Muslim territory (dār al-Islām) and combat or infidel territory (dār al-ḥarb or dār al-kufr) corresponded to the political theology of jihad, which divided the world into friends and enemies. Muslim territory was further differentiated into urban, rural, and frontier territories. As we shall see, these territorial differences corresponded to social differences as well. Frontier territory, a threshold space between Muslim and combat territory, was especially crucial for the practice of jihad against the arch-rival Byzantines. Along this frontier territory Muslims developed the architectural structure called the ribāṭ, or fortress. The ribāṭ later became a synecdoche for frontier towns, especially in North Africa and Central Asia, where Muslims gathered for jihad, religious learning, and ascetic practice. These frontier areas became a tool of Muslim territorial expansion and defense. They also played an important imperial function by harmonizing religion and politics into a shared objective of protecting the Muslim polity. As we shall see in chapter two, the twin institutions of the ribāṭ and jihad framed early Muslim scholarly interpretations of tashabbuh.

---

Despite the religious and political significance of frontier territory to the early Muslim polity, Orientalists still claimed that “Islamism [sic] is a religion of cities.”

Putting aside this essentialism for a moment, cities did become crucial symbols of Muslim empire. According to the Andalusian historian, Ibn Khaldūn, “royal authority calls for urban settlement and control of the cities.” Cities became an important space for the fluorescence of the Muslim empire’s cultural, political, and economic life. Although cities concentrated political and religious authority within a defined space, its influence radiated outward and incorporated proximate regions into the orbit of the city.

Urban landscapes therefore extended beyond the city proper. The “Pious Caliphs” and their Umayyad and Abbasid successors conquered cities and built new ones. Depending on who was in charge, the capitals of the early Muslim polity shifted from Arabia to Iraq to Syria and back to Iraq. After all, “Each nation must have a home.” These geographic shifts also brought cultural transformation. Relocating to Baghdad in Iraq, for example, positioned the Abbasid empire within an Iranian-Persian cultural milieu – a change from the Greco – Roman milieu of Umayyad Damascus. While former Byzantine elites had an especially strong hand in the Umayyad administration, former Sasanian elites wielded power in the Abbasid administration. Early Muslims also built garrison cities that initially served as military outposts aimed to protect early Arab-Muslims from the forces of acculturation. These cities included Kūfa and Baṣra in Iraq.

17 Paul Wheatley, The Places Where Men Pray Together: Cities in Islamic Lands, Seventh through the Tenth Centuries (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 228.
Fusṭāṭ in Egypt, and Qayrawān in what is today, Tunisia. Despite the initial Arab-Muslim homogeneity of these garrison cities, they gradually incorporated non-Arab slaves and converts (mawālī). The greater Persian or Byzantine cultural milieu also suffused the cultural life of these garrison cities; eighth century Muslim religious scholars in Arab Medina exoticized the Iraqi cities of Kūfa and Baṣra for being especially vulnerable to foreign influences.

Conquered cities such as Damascus and Jerusalem were established cosmopolitan centers where Muslims lived alongside Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Many centuries passed before a Muslim minority became the majority in these cities. Compared to rural areas, cities concentrated large numbers of people in small spaces, not only decreasing the physical distance, but also the social distance between inhabitants.

The intimacy of urban life intensified both cooperation and conflict among different

---

19 Kūfa and Baṣra, and Qayrawān eventually fell into ruin because, according to Ibn Khalīdūn, with regard to choosing an appropriate site on which to build a city, “The Arabs have no interest in these things. They only see to it that they have pastures for their camels.” Ibid., 272.


21 For an innovative approach that uses naming patterns taken from biographical dictionaries to determine the rates of conversion for a particular region see the still classic study by Richard W. Bulliet, Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). For an overview of conversion as an historical problem see: R. Stephen Humphreys, Islamic History: A Framework for Inquity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 273-83. Converting to Islam was a public declaration, even if private conviction in the new religion was minimal or absent. This religious act had social, political and economic implications. The practice of conversion transported the new Muslim from one recognizably distinct collective identity into another – even if on the ground, the distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim materialized primarily through different rates of taxation. Early Muslim policy did not force, nor did they even make a collective effort to convert their non-Muslim subjects to the new faith (unless they were avowedly pagan); the People of the Book were permitted to keep their faith, and many did, although social mobility became easiest during the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods if one obtained membership in the Muslim community. Muslims viewed themselves as possessors of the latest and best version of monotheism – not the only version. Jews and Christians still shared in this heritage, even if their respective versions were outdated. For the most part, this moderated Islamic theological inclusivism translated into public life as well.
religious communities. Cities mediated social distinctions and shaped religious and political landscapes.

The regulation of social distinction in the cityscape, then, became a crucial function of Muslim empire. As this study shows, both political and religious elites sought to limit and regulate interaction in urban spaces where social contact and potential upheaval to the social order was greatest: mosques and churches as well as markets and public baths. Ensuring the Islamic character of the city correlated with the Islamic character of the empire. Muslim pietists, many of whom lived in cities, were especially concerned about the contaminating influence of this social contact upon Muslims and Islam. For Ibn Khaldūn, cities were both sites of learning and culture as well as of vice and corruption. As discussed earlier, Ibn Khaldūn recognized the importance of cities to empire. However, he also observed that the materialization of Islam in everyday life did not need cities, and, in fact, more easily flourished outside them.  

This difference between rural and urban life owed primarily to the existence of luxury in cities, which corrupted its inhabitants, and, eventually, a civilization. This perspective contrasted the views of some Muslim philosophers like al-Fārābī (d. 950) who inherited the Platonic concept of the virtuous city or polis (al-mādīna al-fāḏila). For them, the city was the minimum social unit for human virtue and happiness to flourish. By nature and necessity, human beings needed to cooperate with one another in order to fulfill one another’s needs. However, the realization of this ideal vision required not only a wise

---

23 Ibn Khaldūn cites Quran 17:16: “When we wish to destroy a city, we order its inhabitants corrupted by luxury (to reform), but they persist in their transgression. So, our sentence is passed, and we destroy it entirely.”
and just ruler, but also the harmonization of professional differentiation and social hierarchies. These social hierarchies, however, were built upon a cultural landscape of sharedness.

**Cultural Landscapes of Sharedness**

Three cultural sources played key roles in shaping the new Islamic empire: the religious communities of Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and Pagans; non-Arab Byzantine and Sasanian imperial culture; and pre-Islamic Arab history. This shared cultural landscape illustrates the Islam was not so strange to its environment. It also illustrates that Muslims adapted, acculturated and assimilated to their surroundings. The following macroscopic overview of this cultural landscape of sharedness helps to place the Muslim discourses of sharp differences examined in the remainder of this study in their proper historical and cultural perspective.

**The People of the Book: Jews and Christians**

Muslims were very conscious about positioning Islam in relation to Judaism and Christianity from the beginnings of Islam. I draw upon the recently published study, *Muhammad and Believers*, authored by historian, Fred Donner, in order to explore the landscape of sharedness among these religious traditions during the formative period of Islam. To clarify, I am not trying to portray an “objective” account of general relations

---

25 While I have many problems with Donner’s thesis, I will withhold my critique of his argument until chapter two. In addition to Donner’s study, There is an extensive secondary literature on the general status of non-Muslims in Islam, some more objective and rigorous than others. There are also more specialized studies of particular geographic and historical contexts. For general surveys, one can read the relevant chapters in the following studies: Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-86 (intro. and ch. 1
among Jews, Christians, and Muslims that balances the forces of religious inclusion and exclusion. In this brief section, I highlight the common ground shared by these religious traditions in order to contextualize the remainder of this chapter (and this study), which focuses on Muslim distinction.

Donner’s study emphasizes the affinities between Muslims and the People of the Book, or those who had been given scripture before, namely the Jews and Christians. Donner draws upon a variety of sources from the early Islamic period. Let us begin with the Quran, since that remains the most authoritative source for shaping Muslim normativity. The Quran suggests that Jews, Christians, and Muslims had a shared theological and ritual platform that naturally familiarized them with one another. The Quran emphasizes shared creedal beliefs in God, angels, prophets, heaven, and hell, as well as ritual practices such as praying, fasting, charity, and pilgrimage. Donner points out that the Quran mentions the term, “believer” (muʾmin), far more than Muslim. This difference suggests that the Quran emphasizes a broader interconfessional and less parochial notion of religious membership than later “Muslims” would eventually

---

26 The referent of the term, “People of the Book” was far from stable, and was somewhat elastic, depending on the historical context. Over history, Muslim religious scholars might include Hindus and Zoroastrians in the category. Still, Muslims continued to understand the term as a way to bracket Jews and Christians into a single religious category that differentiated them from outright polytheists. In its dominant formulation, it became an in-between category to signify imperfect believers who refused to accept Islam. For more about Muslim classifications of non-Muslims see chapter two in Friedmann, Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition, 54-86.

promote. For this reason, Donner favors the ecumenical phrase, “Believers movement” when referring to the first community of “Muslims.” Beyond this lexical detail, there are many Quranic verses that exude a positive attitude towards Christians and Jews:

The believers (Muslims), as well as Jews, Christians, and Sabians - whoever believes in God and the Last day, and does good - shall have their reward from their Lord; they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.  

They are not all alike; among the People of the Book, there is an upright community. They recite the verses of God throughout the night and bow down in prayer. They believe in God and the Last Day; they command what is right and forbid what is wrong; and they hasten to do good. It is they who are among the pious. Whatever good they do will not be denied. God knows the God-fearing.

(O’ Believers!) Only dispute with the People of the Book in the most beautiful way…

This first set of verses above suggests that Muslims, Jews, and Christians have an equal opportunity for salvation as long as they maintain the most rudimentary features of a pious life - a radically meritocratic proposition. In addition to these kind words for fellow monotheists, the Quran confirms the prior revelations of the Torah and Gospel, and makes frequent references to prophets such as Jesus, Moses, and Noah in order to establish a shared history of divine communication. The absence of ritual details in the Quran suggests to Donner that Muslim ritual distinction was a later historical development.

---

28 Ibid.
29 Quran 2:62
30 Quran 3:113-115
31 Quran 29:46
Donner argues that early Muslims, Christians, and Jews not only shared many core beliefs and practices in common, but also came together around their collective opposition to the sinful world around them. Their sense of community and common purpose crystallized in part through the immoral practices they condemned, such as theft, adultery, and disobedience to Muhammad. According to Donner, “The earliest believers thought of themselves as constituting a separate group or community of righteous, God-fearing monotheists.” Yet, he argues, “…there is no reason to think that the Believers viewed themselves as constituting a new or separate religious confession.”

Donner claims that a distinct corporate religious category of Muslim only emerged after the expansion and the emergence of the early Arab-Muslim polis, which sought to demarcate clear boundaries between Muslims and others for social, cultural, political and economic interests. Donner dates the moment of Muslim communal distinction to the late seventh century, during the reign of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Mālik (r. 685-705). It was at this point, he surmises, there was a “need” and “desire” to distinguish the Muslims from competing religions.

Their religious commonality also surfaced in their earliest political arrangements. Donner draws upon the vaunted “Constitution of Medina” (ṣaḥīfat al-umma, lit. “Document of the Community”) to provide additional evidence for the “Believers movement.”

Upon his arrival from Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad forged this document with the different Arab tribes of Medina – including the various Jewish

---

34 Ibid., 69.
35 See chapter 5, “The Emergence of Islam in Ibid., 194-224.
communities. While each tribe and religious community followed their respective religion (dīn), they each retained membership in the greater community of believers. The agreement governed political, economic, and legal relations among the different constituencies. According to Donner, under this arrangement Muhammad did not function as the “religious” leader of the various tribes and communities, but only as a political leader.\(^{37}\)

Donner sets forth additional evidence to strengthen his case for the shared co-existence among the early believers.\(^{38}\) Although Muslim tradition reports that Muhammad had either exiled or dispatched three Jewish tribes during his career in Medina, according to Donner, these events were the exception, not the norm. In fact, they may never have happened.\(^{39}\) After the Prophet’s demise, the first Umayyad caliph, Muʿāwiya (r. 660 – 680), forged relationships with the Christian tribe of Kalb, even marrying one of their women. One of his top administrators was a Christian from this tribe suggesting that Christians participated in imperial rule. The earliest coins display the “single” testimony of faith (shahāda), “There is no deity but God”, and omit the second part, “Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” For Donner, this suggests that the earliest Muslims were not intent on distinguishing themselves religiously through the

---


\(^{38}\) It is noteworthy that, for the most part, Donner ignores the traditions of hadith.

\(^{39}\) Donner casts doubt on the authenticity of these Muslim narratives since the three Jewish Tribes who were either exiled or dispatched were not even named in the Constitution of Medina. Michael Lecker, a recognized authority on the history of Arab Jewish tribes during the Prophet’s life, argues that their absence does not indicate that the tribes did not exist. It only indicates that they were not mentioned in the treaty. Considering that Donner does not place much historicity in this document to begin with, it is puzzling that he would use it as evidence to suggest that the named Jewish tribes never existed. See Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, 74; Michael Lecker, “Glimpses of Muhammad’s Medinan Decade,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad*, ed. Jonathan E. Brockopp (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
persona of Muhammad. Later, Muslims added the second component to the testimony of faith in order to religiously distinguish themselves. Architectural evidence demonstrates that early Muslims often shared churches with Christians during worship. Even, the earliest non-Muslim sources do not refer to Muslims as Muslims, but deploy derivatives from the Arabic word, *muhajirūn*, or emigrants. Muslim theological polemics with non-Muslims do not begin until the second century, indicating to Donner that Muslims did not initially challenge the Christian version of monotheism. For Donner, all this evidence suggests that early Muslims had a lot more in common with Jews and Christians than we normally think.

**Pre-Islamic Pagan Arabs**

Early Muslims not only positioned themselves in relation to other religious communities but also in relation to their pre-Islamic Arab past. The construct of *jāhiliyya*, the pre-Islamic period of ignorance or barbarism, functioned as a narrative device to rewrite history from an Islamic perspective. The label, *jāhiliyya*, carried an unmistakable pejorative connotation towards pre-Islamic Arabia, its values, customs, and culture. Early Muslim representations of their pre-Islamic predecessors tended to emphasize their historical difference. A speech to the Abyssinian King, Negus, attributed by Muslim

---

41 See chapter seven in this study for an examination of the significance of the direction of prayer for Muslim religious distinctions, and references to other studies of this subject.
42 This term inspired the title of the controversial and perhaps overly-skeptical, but still important study of early Islamic history: Patricia Crone and M. A. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Numerous studies have since attempted to revise some of the more skeptical conclusions of this study. For a thorough overview of the debates, see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, 545-59.
historians to the Prophet’s nephew, Ja‘far b. Abī Ṭālib, provides an eloquent expression
of this perspective:

“O King, we were a people in a state of ignorance. We used to worship
idols, consume the flesh of dead animals, commit all sorts of shameful
deeds, break the ties of kinship, dishonor our guests, while the strong
among us exploited the weak. We remained like this until God sent us a
prophet, one of our own people, whose lineage, truthfulness,
trustworthiness, and integrity we knew well. He summoned us to worship
God alone, and to renounce the stones and the idols which we and our
ancestors used to worship besides God. He commanded us to speak the
truth, to honor our promises, to maintain the ties of kinship, to be kind to
our neighbors, to cease all forbidden acts, to abstain from bloodshed, to
avoid obscenities and false witness, and not to misappropriate an orphan’s
property nor slander chaste women. He ordered us to worship God alone
and not to associate anything with him, to uphold prayer, to give the poor
its due, and to fast…

The speech suggests that Muslims wished to distinguish themselves both theologically,
ritually and morally from pre-Islamic culture. This new set of virtues also stressed the
observance of praiseworthy social ethics with neighbors, orphans, and women.

Despite this cultural critique, the 18th century Indian polymath, Shāh Walī Allāh
of Delhi (d. 1762), argues that Islam shared much more with its pre-Islamic past than
Muslims normally recognize. Contrary to Muslim convention, he lauds pre-Islamic
Arabian religious practice. Walī Allāh states that, prior to Islam, Arabs believed that God
was one, without equal partner, the Creator of the world. They even believed in divine

---

44 In areas where the Quran explicitly uses a form of the term, ignorance (jāhiliyya), the Quran condemns
certain pre-Islamic temperaments and practices such as arrogance and female infanticide. It repeatedly
condemns Pagan Arab worship of idols, such as the “daughters of God”, naming Lāt, ʿUzza, and Manāt
explicitly. It also condemned other practices that were ostensibly pervasive in pre-Islamic Arabia such as
gambling, divination and drinking.
45 Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawi, The Conclusive Argument from God: Shāh Walī Allah of Delhi's Ḥujjat
predestination, a core component of later Islamic creed. They would pray, fast, give in charity, and make the pilgrimage to Mecca. According to Walī Allāh’s historical representation, the foundations for the five pillars, the most fundamental practices of Islam, were in place before Islam. This suggests that Muslims merely altered existing ritual practices, giving them new meanings and forms.

Walī Allāh argues that Arab culture also supplied Muslims with social norms and ethics that infused Islam as well. The Quran incorporates pre-Islamic methods of keeping time, by endorsing a twelve-month calendar, including the Arab custom of observing four “holy months” of peaceful relations. In contrast to Jaʿfar’s speech, Walī Allāh claims that pre-Islamic Arabs transmitted to Muslims a culture of hospitality, as reflected in the reassuring words of the Prophet’s first wife, Khadija, who allayed the doubts of her husband: “…God will never debase you since you honor the bonds of kinship, entertain the guest, support the family, and aid those struck by God’s calamities.” Walī Allāh suggests that these qualities embodied by the Prophet were common to pre-Islamic Arab culture as well. Thus, the Prophet retained “whatever remained of the true religion (of Abraham),” specified and made precise the acts of worship, continued the sound customs and prohibited the corrupt ones.

Walī Allāh’s observations provide a springboard for identifying other points of convergence between early Muslims and their Arab forerunners. These continuities not only suffused Muslim religious life, but also cultural and political life as well. The Prophet realized that he could not obliterate existing Arab social and cultural norms.

---

46 Ibid., 367.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 368-69.
completely; he could only tame them. Despite the egalitarian spirit of the Quran, he was unable to phase out completely the role of tribes and tribal hierarchies in shaping Muslim social and political life. The Prophet maintained distinctions between “Emigrants,” or those Muslims who had emigrated from Mecca to Medina, and “ Helpers,” or those Muslims who were indigenous to Medina. Even during the Battle of Badr the Prophet assigned the converted Aws and Khazraj tribes separate battle cries despite their common geography and religion. After his death, old tribal rivalries resurfaced and intensified. When Abū Bakr was selected as the first caliph, his Qurayshī lineage – at least we are told – played an important criterion in the decision: “They (Quraysh) are the most noble of the Arabs, in tribe and lineage.” ⁴⁹ The third caliph, ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān, was accused of allegedly favoring his Umayyad relatives with government posts, which led to his eventual assassination. Both the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties each legitimized their right to rule through the prominence of their respective clans prior to Islam.

Some pre-Islamic cultural practices survived into Islam as well. Patriarchy and chivalry remained strong components of early Muslim culture. Framed within the ideal of jihad, chivalry in combat became a religious devotion instead of a way to personal and tribal honor. Slavery remained a social institution after Islam, although the Prophet encouraged the freeing of slaves and Muslims developed new regulations governing the ownership of slaves. Eloquence in the Arabic language and poetry remained valuable attributes of social prestige. Pre-Islamic (jāhilī) poetry was preserved and transmitted, along with their explicit tales of sexual conquest, by Muslims. Norms of dress and

fashion also continued, although, as we shall see, Muslims gave new meanings to many of them. Hair-dye, beards, turbans, leather socks, and sandals are styles that were popular in pre-Islamic Arabia, but gained new meanings and significance after Islam. Arabian dates ranked among the Prophet’s favorite foods; he would regularly break his fast with them. Islamic tradition transformed this personal habit into a normative ideal to be emulated (sunna) by all Muslims.

Although Arabia was dominated by a pagan religious culture prior to Islam, monotheists of differing varieties survived. Anecdotes and reports suggest that even prior to Islam, the Prophet had affinities and encounters with ḥanifs, monotheists who did not subscribe to an official religion, as well as Christians such as the famed, Waraqa b. Nawfal, who informed Muhammad that should he remain alive he would support his prophetic mission. The refashioning of the central site of Arab pagan worship – the kaʿba - into the central site of Muslim worship provides a concrete example of how Muslims sought to reshape, not obliterate its Arab past. While Muslim collective memory tends to overdetermine the religious, cultural, and moral distinctions between pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, in practice, early Muslims did not issue a blanket dismissal of pre-Islamic heritage, but instead incorporated and offered measured criticism of specific practices.

Byzantine and Sasanian Civilization

Early Muslims shared a common cultural landscape not only with their Arab past, but also with their non-Arab past. Pre-Islamic Arabs gained exposure to Byzantine and

Sasanian civilizations across the Near East and Mesopotamia through diplomacy, trade, and travel. However, the early Arab-Muslim conquests not only increased this exposure, but also fundamentally transformed how they interacted with these two great civilizations due to the dramatic shift in the dynamics of power.

Pre-Islamic poets considered Byzantine textiles and commodities of exchange such as silk and gold coins high quality objects of beauty. In the Meccan period of the Prophet’s career, the Quran acknowledges the rivalry between the Byzantine and Sasanian empires prior to the rise of Islam as an imperial power; Muslims named one of the chapters of the Quran, al-Rūm, or Byzantium. Ostensibly referring to the Byzantine loss of Palestine and Jerusalem to the Sasanians in 614 – 615, the Quran assuages the Muslims and forecasts that the Byzantines will soon avenge their defeat so that “The believers will rejoice!” This passage also suggests that Arabs were concerned with international affairs despite their own preoccupations, and seems to anticipate direct Muslim involvement in these “international” political matters. On a more mundane level, the Prophet is said to have worn a Byzantine robe without raising any objections, an indicator that Byzantine fashions had diffused into Arab lands. According to one anecdote, Abū Bakr placed a bet with Meccan Pagans on whether the Sasanians and Byzantines would claim victory. Indicating Muslim preference for the Byzantines, Abū

Bakr rooted for the Byzantines while the Pagans rooted for the Sasanians. The semantic multivalence of *Rūm*, however, suggests another important relationship that helps explain this Muslim preference. In addition to its political associations with the Byzantine Empire, *Rūm* has linguistic associations with Greek speakers, geographical associations to Anatolia, and religious associations with Christianity. Early Muslim preference for the Byzantines is also an expression of monotheistic camaraderie toward fellow scriptuaries.

Muslim sentiments toward the Byzantines, however, turned from sympathy to hostility. Towards the end of the Prophet’s life, as Islam transformed into an imperial religion, a new spirit of civilizational rivalry took root. Muslims wiped out the Sasanian Empire completely in the middle of the seventh century, and conquered Byzantine provinces in Egypt, Syria, and North Africa. However, they failed to conquer Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire survived, which resulted in perpetual war between the two remaining superpowers for three centuries.

Yet, Arab-Muslims still built their imperial and religious distinction upon a shared cultural platform with their Persian and Byzantine cultural rivals. They needed to learn how to run an empire, and it was only natural that they learned from those who were far more experienced than they were. Their encounter with the Byzantines and Sasanians shaped almost every aspect of Muslim life: art and architecture; music and entertainment; politics and war; society and religion.


55 For this word’s multiple valences see Shboul, “Byzantium and the Arabs,” 236.; E. W. Lane’s entry in *An Arabic-English Lexicon*; “*Rūm*” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition.
The early Umayyads looked toward Byzantium as a civilizational model to follow. From the upkeep of roads to revenue collection, the early Umayyads imitated their Byzantine predecessors. They hired their former Byzantine subjects, Greek-speaking Christians, to help administer the new Muslim polity in Damascus. They even sought their assistance to help build new architectural projects such as the Great Mosque of Damascus and the Prophet’s mosque in Medina. Seeking their main rival’s assistance in these projects is especially significant because these monuments clearly indicate early Umayyad imperial ambitions.56

However, as the Muslim polity slowly began to style themselves after Sasanian imperial rule, they also assumed an imperial Sasanian posture towards the Byzantine Empire. During the latter part of their reign, Umayyad policy turned away from the Byzantine tradition and reoriented itself “towards the East.”57 A tenth century jurist of the Abbasid caliphate and author of a treatise on taxation wrote: “…it behooves the Muslims to be most wary and on their guard against the Byzantines, from amongst all the ranks of their adversaries.”58 In the three centuries starting from the rise of Islam, Muslims and Byzantines remained arch-rivals in an ongoing clash of civilizations. This state of foreign affairs framed both Muslim and Byzantineimaginations of one another.

As suggested above, during the Abbasid period, with their new capital in Baghdad, Iraq, Sasanian administrative culture took root at the Muslim imperial court;

56 Gibb, “Arab-Byzantine Relations under the Umayyad Caliphate.” Reprinted in Bonner, Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times.
57 Gibb, “Arab-Byzantine Relations under the Umayyad Caliphate.”; Reprinted in Bonner, Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times, 77. According to Gibb, “The whole policy of the Umayyad caliphs swings decisively away from the Byzantine tradition and becomes oriented in the true sense, i.e. Towards the East.”
58 Bonner, Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times, xiii. Bonner is quoting the 10th century Iraqi administrator and author of a treatise on taxation, Qudāma b. Ja’far.
Muslims inherited and wrote their own versions of the Sasanian “mirror for princes” and political wisdom literature. The secretary who survived the transition from the Umayyad to Abbasid empires and who served both Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs, Ibn al-Muqaffa translated a Persian treatise, *The Testament of Ardashir*, into Arabic. It posited that religion and kingship were twins: a concept absorbed by Muslim religious thought, and evoked in the *tashabbuh* discourse. The ninth century Abbasid litterateur, Jāḥiẓ (d. 868), penned a separate treatise condemning the strong political influence of non-Arab secretaries, who sustained Persian-Sasanian administrative norms in the Abbasid government. In matters of war, Muslim tradition records the famous appropriation of Salmān the Persian’s knowledge of the Iranian strategy of trench warfare. Traditions also record early debates over the Muslim appropriation of “the Persian bow” for combat.

The earliest Muslim coins displayed Byzantine and Sasanian iconography, before Muslim imperial elites crafted their own non-iconic symbols in literary Arabic to Islamically mediate imperial power beginning in reign of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Mālik. The historian, Oleg Grabar, has argued that Arab-Muslims instrumentally appropriated only what was necessary from Byzantine art forms in order to develop their

---

62 See chapter five for Muslim debates over the permissibility of using the Persian bow and its symbolism.
own artistic productions that was distinctive and original. Muslims converted the Great Mosque of Damascus, the Umayyad mosque, from a church; they revived Roman architectural forms that Byzantines had abandoned. Muslims even participated – to the strong disapproval of Muslim pietists - in Persian national celebrations of Nawrūz and Mihrājān, widely attested in early Arabic sources.

While former subjects of Sasanian and Byzantine empires slowly converted, they brought their cultural norms and practices with them. Many continued to hold on to their language as well, especially if they lived in segregated communities. As late as the fourteenth century, Ibn Taymiyya complained about the persistence of Persian as an Islamicate language in the Iranian region. Even after Muslims had conquered the Sasanian Empire and many former Byzantine territories, Arab-Muslim anxiety persisted over Sasanian and Byzantine cultural influence.

**Landscapes of Distinction**

Having summarized the essential features of the imperial and cultural landscapes that underpinned the rise of Islam, I now map the hierarchical social order that emerged. What becomes apparent is that Muslims paradoxically imitated and incorporated the Greek and Persian systems of hierarchy into their social imaginary. This adaptation at once amplified the hierarchical orders inherited from Pre-Islamic Arabia and contrasted the strong egalitarian impulse of Islam.

---


Louise Marlow has argued that egalitarian trends during the first century and a half of Islamic history gradually gave way to intensified hierarchies. On the one hand, the Quran inspired Muslims towards social and religious meritocracy: “O People! We have created you from male and female, and have made you into peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. The most noble among you in the sight of God is the most pious.” This new egalitarian spirit transformed the Muslim community. In one anecdote, the caliph ʿUmar signals this new social order by admitting into his presence “an Abyssinian, a Persian and a Greek” before a group of Arab nobles. The Arabs then complain about this reversal of the pre-Islamic social order. One Companion then takes the opportunity to provide justification for giving precedence to non-Arabs over Arabs:

Abū Sufyan, you [Qurashi’s] should blame yourselves, not the Commander of the Faithful. [These] people were called [to Islam], and they responded, while you, who were also invited, rejected the summons. On the Day of Resurrection, they [will be] of greater degrees and more favour [sic].

The new Islamic meritocracy enabled the formation of new but fluid hierarchies. As I discuss further below, non-Arab converts to Islam drew upon these textual moments of egalitarianism to legitimize their religious parity with Arab Muslims.

However, Muslim expansion into former Sasanian and Byzantine territories brought them into contact with societies that were considerably more stratified. The new Muslim conquerors absorbed this new cultural landscape. They were able to use the Quran to justify social stratification as well: “We have divided between them their

---

65 Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*. I draw most of the material in this section from her very thorough study of hierarchy and egalitarianism in Islamic thought. See chapters 1-3 especially.

66 Quran 49:13

livelihood in the present life and raised some of them above others in rank so that some of them may take others in servitude.”

From the eighth to the tenth centuries, the Abbasids patronized the translation of Greek texts into Arabic. Largely forgotten by Late Antique Byzantine civilization, Plato, Aristotle, and other Greek thinkers came back to life in the Muslim world. These translations spurred a new tradition of Muslim philosophical thinking that styled itself according to the Greek philosophical tradition. Muslim philosophers appropriated and reconfigured Plato’s tripartite cosmology of philosopher-kings, guardians, and producers. Agreeing with Plato, many argued that people should remain within their established professions. Switching professions would upset the social order since learning a new craft properly took time, and if one attempted to perfect multiple crafts simultaneously, he would inevitably fall short in all of them. It was just better to remain in one’s predetermined social station.

Muslims also absorbed Persian-Sasanian cosmologies as well. As the capital of the caliphate moved from Syria to Iraq, the caliphal administration incorporated Persian-speaking elites of the former Sasanian Empire. Muslims therefore incorporated Iranian structures of thought even faster than Greek thought. The Sasanians were also committed to a hierarchical society. The great Persian kings forbade their subjects from progressing from one rank to another. Instead of a tripartite division, they perpetuated a quadripartite division of society into priests, warriors, cultivators and artisans. This
quadripartite division materialized onto the symbolic four quadrants of late Sasanian coins.\textsuperscript{71} However, the bisection of people into elites (al-khāṣṣa) and common people (al-ʿāmma) was the most significant Persian framework that Muslims assimilated into their own models of society. This binary division of society eventually became a constituent feature of Muslim thought. It can be traced back to Umayyad and Abbasid secretary, Ibn al-Muqaffa\textsuperscript{72}. One of Ibn al-Muqaffa\textsuperscript{70}'s most important translations was Kalila wa Dimna, a selection of tales originally authored in Sanskrit that advocated the perpetuation of established social hierarchies:

> Each person has his station and [social] worth, and if he sticks to the station in which he finds himself, then he is likely to be content... As a man's station has been determined for him since the beginning of time, he has no alternative but to be satisfied with it, whatever it is.\textsuperscript{73} Muslims incorporated these modes of thinking, although not all agreed with the normalization of such inequalities.\textsuperscript{74}

The hierarchical social imaginary of Muslim religious scholars seems to have been clearly impacted by this movement. While the Abbasids were patronizing the translations, they were also patronizing the collection of hadith. It is hard to imagine that the social imaginary of the religious scholars went unaffected. Muslim religious elites also displayed a concern for maintaining social hierarchies, as demonstrated by numerous hadith addressed in this study. Their concerns were not limited to religious identity, but encompassed society and the cosmos more generally. Yet their hierarchical schemes

\textsuperscript{72} He was later killed for supposedly practicing Zoroastrianism in secret, despite his conversion.
\textsuperscript{73} Marlow, Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought, 76.
\textsuperscript{74} The medieval Iranian scholar, Al-Bīrūnī (d. 1048), for instance, compares the Sasanian "bureaucratic" model to his perception of Islam. He writes, "all men are equal except in piety." He perceived Indian civilization as essentially hierarchical in comparison to the egalitarian Islamic civilization. See Ibid., 88.
were not identical to that of the philosophers. As we shall see beginning next chapter, in contrast to Muslim philosophers who conceived social distinctions in the abstract, Muslim religious scholars perceived social distinction as an embodied, sensational, and affective phenomenon. Religious scholars were also preoccupied with religious distinction most of all. For them it was not just a philosophical exercise. They wanted to shape Islam and the social order in accordance with their divinely-inspired cosmic vision.

**Religious Distinction**

**Non-Muslims (Dhimmis) under Muslim Rule**

The process of “religionization” that continued after the Muslim conquests had pre-Islamic Near Eastern roots. In the Byzantine Empire, Jews were the only recognized religious community aside from Christianity. The Sasanian Empire, on the other hand, displayed a more pluralistic outlook by recognizing the communal integrity of Jews, Nestorian and non-Chalcedonian Christians, as well as Mazdaism – the state religion. Prior to the rise of Islam, in Sassanian Mesopotamia, Jews and Nestorian Christians lived as distinct communities.75 As the seventh century approached, these communities became increasingly isolated from one another due to an increasing emphasis on religious difference.76 Yet, they coexisted. “This coexistence of recognized and scriptural communities…provides the clearest precedent in the pre-Islamic world” for Muslim

---

76 Morony, "Religious Communities in Late Sasanian Ad Early Muslim Iraq," 116.
recognition of different scriptural communities. Sasanian recognition of scriptural communities anticipates Islamic toleration of the “People of the Book.”

However, despite this correspondence with Sasanian administration of religious communities, the Islamic approach was unique. The advent of Muslim imperial rule intensified and completed the religionization of public life, hardening boundaries among the different religious communities. Historian of Late Antiquity, Peter Brown, observes:

Under Muslim rule, the new style of Christian culture, that had been prepared in the later sixth century, came to harden around the Christian populations of the Near East….In this new culture, a man was defined by his religion alone. He did not owe allegiance to a state; he belonged to a religious community.

But even more than simply restructuring the primary category of belonging into religion, Muslims attempted to uphold a set of principles guiding their administration of these religious communities: “Unlike Christian Rome, the Islamic empire was prepared to preserve the religious life of any community that had a scripture; while unlike the Sasanian state, the caliphate was committed in principle to this policy, for it had been enjoined by Allah on the Prophet Muhammad.” To take one example, the jurist, Abū Yūsuf, exhorts the caliph Harūn al-Rashīd to treat their non-Muslim subjects (dhimmīs) with respect and dignity. He supports this claim through numerous traditions, including one attributed to the second caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb: “I recommend my successors to

---

78 Brown, The World of Late Antiquity: Ad 150-750, 186.
79 Fowden, ”Religious Communities,” 68.
treat non-Muslims well, to comply with their covenants, protect them from those who persecute them and not burden them with more than they can bear.”

Early Muslim policy did not force, nor did they even make a collective effort to convert their non-Muslim subjects to the new faith (unless they were avowedly pagan); those deemed People of the Book - Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians (Magians) - were permitted to keep their faith, and many did, although social mobility became easiest during the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods if one obtained membership in the Muslim community. Unconverted non-Muslims assumed dhimmī status, a protected status, whereby they would pay a poll-tax, the jizya, in return for their security and protection while living under Muslim rule. Muslims viewed themselves as possessors of the latest and best version of monotheism – not the only version.

Religious classification was not always a simple matter, however. While the Quran scripted relations with Jews, Christians, Sabians and pagans, other religious communities did not fit so neatly into existing religious frameworks. Abū Yūsuf recalls the caliph ʿUmar’s refusal to permit the Christian Arab tribe of the Taghlib to raise their children as Christians; Arabs should be Muslim. After conquering Mesopotamia, Muslims encountered large numbers of Zoroastrians. Attempting to devise an imperial policy, Abū Yūsuf grants them an intermediary status between pagan and scriptuary.

---

80 Abū Yūsuf, Kitāb al-Kharāj, 125; ———, Taxation in Islam: Abū Yūsuf’s Kitāb al-Kharāj, 86. I have adjusted Bin Shemesh’s translation slightly.
81 Abū Yūsuf writes: “They are a people from the Arab but not from the People of the Book so they must become Muslim and ʿUmar prescribed upon the Christians of the Taghlib tribe that they not raise their children as Christians.” Abū Yūsuf, Kitāb al-Kharāj, 121.
82 Ibid., 128-32; ———, Taxation in Islam: Abū Yūsuf’s Kitāb al-Kharāj, 88-89. In order to justify their intermediate status as dhimmī, Abū Yūsuf transmits the following entertaining myth about the Magian claim to a scripture: “The Magians were a nation who possessed a scripture which they used to study. One day, a king of theirs got drunk and took his sister to a place outside town. He was followed by four of his
He grants Zoroastrians dhimmī status, which enables them to pay taxes commensurate with Jews and Christians. However, in the sphere of marriage, Abū Yūsuf equates them with pagans. He forbids Muslim men from marrying Zoroastrian women; the Quran permits Muslim men to marry Christians and Jews, not pagans. This approach is a compromise solution that attempts to balance the sanctity of Quranic religious classifications with the pragmatic aim of incorporating large numbers of Zoroastrians into the Muslim polity. It indicates that deciphering and regulating religious identity was not always a clear-cut matter.

The Pact of ʿUmar

The political document known as the Pact of ʿUmar and the caliphal policies inspired by it are an expression of early Muslim imperial ambitions in general, and authority over its non-Muslim subjects in particular. Its primary goal is collective order, not individual

---

priests who witnessed him having sex with his sister. When he became sober, he was informed by his sister that the only way to save himself from punishment by death for what he had done in the presence of the four priests was to declare that act lawful and call it ‘Adam’s Law,’ because Eve was part of the body of Adam. He followed her advice and enforced it, killing all who opposed it. He then threatened to burn any objector. This (threat) spurred the people to submit to the new law. The Prophet accepted the poll tax from them due to their original scripture, but did not allow intermarriage and sharing food with them.”  
(Translation Bin Shemesh with some minor changes)

83 The first to have written about the Pact of ʿUmar in a Western language was A. S. Tritton, who devoted an entire monograph to it, *The Caliphs and their non-Muslim subjects*. Many studies have since followed attempting to demystify the ordinances. Most recently, Levy-Rubin has attempted to explain the origins of the ordinances of distinction to Persian courtly norms. The more notable studies are: Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant of ʿumar*; Mark Cohen, "What Was the Pact of Umar a Literary - Historical Study," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 23(1999); Chapter 4 in Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Albrecht Noth, "Problems of Differentiation between Muslims and Non-Muslims: 'Rereading the Ordinances of Umar' (Al-Shurūṭ al'Umariyya)," in *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society*, ed. Robert Hoyland (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). There are of course numerous discussions by pre-Modern jurists across the different schools of law on the subject as well. They usually address some features of the Pact, especially the regulations governing dress and houses of worship, in the sections addressing the regulations governing non-Muslims (ahl al-dhimm). A comprehensive discussion of the Pact’s ordinances, however, can be found in the classical work on the regulations governing non-Muslim subjects by the Damascene jurist and student of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn
piety and salvation. According to its canonical version, it takes place in Damascus. Alternative versions place the Pact in Arabia, however. The interchangeability of the urban space highlights the Pact’s literary nature; it does not really matter if and where it took place. The Pact of ʿUmar, so called, because it was said to have been drawn up during the reign of the second caliph, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634 - 644), assembles a polyglot group of ordinances to distinguishing clearly Muslims from non-Muslims in public life. Figure 1.1 below reclassifies the ordinances into four general categories: 1) dress; 2) public display of religious markers; 3) social segregation; 4) security and respect for Muslims. They symbolically infuse public life with new social, cultural, political and religious meanings. The Pact of ʿUmar attempts to deploy the coercive power of the state to replace Byzantine imperial and Christian religious memories with new Islamic ones in public spaces. Some of these ordinances appear quite draconian at first blush. It must be understood, however, that Muslims were a minority seeking protect themselves. Despite the political power they now wielded, they still perceived themselves as culturally vulnerable. In part three, I place some of these ordinances pertaining to the body in their greater historical context in order to elicit their social, cultural, political, and religious meanings. What becomes clear from the Pact is that

---


The translation is taken, with a few revisions, from Cohen, "What Was the Pact of Umar a Literary - Historical Study," 105-08.

Noth asserts that these stipulations are not discriminatory in a pejorative sense but only a “neutral” sense. He argues that Muslims were a minority who were interested in protecting themselves rather than oppressing the majority heterogeneous population. However, despite their apparent indigenous origins, Mark Cohen believes that, over time, the revival of these ordinances negatively discriminated against non-Muslim populations. Noth, "Problems of Differentiation between Muslims and Non-Muslims: 'Rereading the Ordinances of Umar' (al-Shurūṭ al-ʿUmariyya).”; Cohen, "What Was the Pact of Umar a Literary - Historical Study," 129-30.
aesthetically mediated practice is crucial to the construction of an Islamic imperial landscape - a landscape shared with the Late Antique Near East.

Historian Albrecht Noth claims that these regulations were not (all) foreign impositions of the conqueror; they reproduced the native practices of the conquered. Noth concludes, contrary to scholars who have questioned the Pact’s early provenance, that available historical evidence corroborates the Pact’s early genesis. According to Noth, the form of the Pact also conforms to other early treaties Muslims signed with conquered territories. The Pact, therefore, merely mandated that existing practices, which differentiated the non-Muslim majority from the Muslim minority in Damascus, remain in place. Noth provides a precautionary political logic to explain the genesis of these regulations: early Muslims were a minority living amongst strangers, and required protection. They were not only quantitatively less in number, but also their Arab civilization – in comparison to the Byzantine and Sasanian – was also qualitatively less sophisticated. As Ibn Khaldūn observed, the weak tend to imitate the strong, and so Noth astutely surmises that the Prophet would have had to ensure that the early Muslim minority remained distinct by exhorting them to be different from the non-Muslim majority. Noth concludes that the apparent existence of early Muslim practices of

87 In this essay, Noth bases his opinion on two main bodies of evidence. First, the Pact resembles the forms of other early Muslim treaties. Second, it resembles the tashabbuh hadith reports. Tritton surmised that the Pact of ʿUmar was of considerably later provenance. Based on his examination of comparable treaties in the histories of Baladhurī (d. 892) and Tabarī (d. 923) he argued that dress regulations would not have been a part of such a document. While the Pact does seem to have been an evolving document, there is good reason to believe that many of the ordinances do stem from the first century of Muslim interaction with non-Muslims. In addition to Noth’s argument, the existence of seventh century Christian Canon laws, to be examined below, reveal that Late Antique Christians shared Muslim anxieties of maintaining distinctions between believers and non-believers in public life. Furthermore, if we take seriously the definition proposed at the beginning of this chapter that empires produce hierarchies of distinction, then we must take seriously that many of the ordinances in the Pact of ʿUmar may have served this purpose for the early Muslim polity.
distinction, as illustrated by the *tashabbuh* hadith traditions, act as “confirmation” of his argument that the ordinances of ʿUmar are a product of their historical context. This rationale makes more sense when we take into consideration that, according to the preponderance of sources, the non-Muslim subjects of Damascus are the ones who proposed the ordinances.

This observation helps diffuse another objection to the Pact’s historicity: its confusing format. According to the most common version, the Christians are the ones requesting these ordinances. Yet, we must ask: why would Christians apparently impose upon themselves humiliating limitations on hair, dress, and public worship? Mark Cohen has authored a brilliant analysis of the Pact’s literary structure, arguing that it assumes the common form of a petition. He argues that the literary form of the Pact of ʿUmar contains the elements of a decree, which explains why Christians are petitioning ʿUmar for these stipulations. Whether or not its original form took such a format, the literary form of a decree suggests that both the conquered Christians played an important role in formulating the ordinances and that these ordinances were rooted in Christian norms and customs prevalent prior to the Muslim conquest.

---

88 Noth is the first Western scholar to draw an explicit historical connection between *tashabbuh* hadith reports and the Pact of ʿUmar. He argues that these hadith, while difficult to date precisely, echo the Pact of ʿUmar’s emphasis on Muslim distinction and difference. Noth fails, however, to emphasize one key distinction between the Pact of ʿUmar and the *tashabbuh* hadith that cannot be understated. The Pact applies to non-Muslims, while the *tashabbuh* hadith reports apply to Muslims - an observation Levy-Rubin also makes. The Pact of ʿUmar therefore marks a very different relationship of power between Muslims and non-Muslims. While the *tashabbuh* reports function as a Muslim religious practice of self-governance, the Pact functions as a political practice of Muslim governance over others. According to the hadith, Muslims are the objects who should *not* imitate. However, according to the Pact, Muslims are the subjects who should *not* be imitated. See Noth, “Problems of Differentiation between Muslims and Non-Muslims: ‘Rereading the Ordinances of Umar’ (al-Shurūṭ al-ʿUmariyya),” 17-18.

89 Cohen, “What Was the Pact of Umar a Literary - Historical Study.”
Like Cohen, Levy-Rubin suggests that early Muslims drew upon Byzantine regulations that attempted to distinguish Christians from Jews. However, she emphasizes the role of Persian social norms in shaping the Pact and downplays the relevance of *tashabbuh* hadith traditions. She argues that, especially with respect to the regulations on dress, hairstyle and other ordinances of distinction, the Pact appropriated Sasanian regulations that mandated tangible hierarchical distinctions between elites and commoners. They reflect the “Sasanian ideal of an immobile hierarchic society, where each estate is clearly discernible through its dress and paraphernalia.” While Levy-Rubin makes an important contribution to the historical debates regarding the origins of the Pact by contextualizing it within a wider Near Eastern cultural context, she tends to overdetermine the genetic relationship between Sasanian social norms and the Pact of ʿUmar.

---

90 Against Noth, she argues that the ordinances do not reflect an ethic of distinction as expressed by the *tashabbuh* hadith traditions. She observes that the *tashabbuh* traditions aim to manage Muslim conduct while the Pact manages non-Muslim conduct. Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence*, 127.

91 Ibid., 7.

92 The majority of her evidence is circumstantial. In other words, she provides evidence for parallels that may suggest a genetic relationship, but lacks evidence to assert anything more. In other cases, such as a ninth century law that ordered non-Muslims to speak in a low deferential voice when speaking to Muslims, she dismisses evidence that indicate the norm originated with the Arab-Muslims. For example, Quran 49:3 tells Muslims to lower their voice when speaking to the Prophet. She concludes instead that lowering the voice must have been appropriated from Persian norms. While Iranian-Sasanian norms may have played a key role in shaping the content of the Pact, there is no reason why other sources such as the *tashabbuh* hadith could not also have played a key role.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Prohibition</th>
<th>Regulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dress/Fashion</strong></td>
<td>We shall clip the forelocks of our heads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not attempt to resemble (tashabbuh) Muslims in any way with regard to their dress, as for example, with the qalansuwa, the turban, footwear, or parting the hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall dress in our traditional fashion wherever we may be and we shall bind the zunnār around our waists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not ride on saddles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Display of Religious Markers</strong></td>
<td>We shall not build new churches, monasteries, monk cells, nor shall we repair any of them that have fallen into ruin or that are located in the quarters of Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not hold public religious ceremonies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not display our crosses or our books anywhere in the roads or markets of the Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall only beat our clappers (drums) in our churches very quietly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not raise our voices in our church services, nor in the presence of Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not go outside on Palm Sunday or Easter, nor shall we raise our voices in our funeral processions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not display lights in any of the roads of the Muslims or in their marketplaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Segregation</strong></td>
<td>We shall not teach our children the Quran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not seek to proselytize to anyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not engrave Arabic inscriptions on our seals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not speak as they do, nor shall we adopt their names (kunyas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not come near them during our funeral processions/bury the dead amongst the Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Security and Respect for Muslims</strong></td>
<td>We shall not wear swords or bear weapons of any kind, or even carry them on our person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not sell alcoholic beverages to Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not give shelter in our churches and homes to spies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall provide three days and lodging to Muslim travelers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall keep our gate wide open for travelers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not prevent our kin from embracing Islam if they so desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall show deference to Muslims and shall rise from our seats when they wish to sit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not take slaves who have been allotted to Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not build our homes higher than theirs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Pact marks a stark contrast to the Constitution of Medina, discussed briefly above. They mark two different approaches to inter-religious relations. Perhaps the best way to explain the distinction between these two literary documents is through the variable of power. While the Constitution of Medina was drafted when Muhammad lacked the military might that his caliphal successors would, the Pact of ʿUmar is dated roughly to the early conquests - a time of rapidly increasing power and wealth. This shift in power is reflected in the way each political document depicts religious relations: the Constitution of Medina depicts symmetrical power relations between Muslims and their Jewish counterparts through the shared designation of “believer”; by contrast, the Pact, depicts asymmetrical relations between Muslims and Christians (non-Muslims). Muslims are the rulers, and Christians are the ruled. ʿUmar had the capacity to govern (theoretically) his new non-Muslim subjects at a microscopic level in a way that Muhammad could not. As a result, the Constitution lacks ordinances that coercively discipline and mark non-Muslim bodies. In sum, while the Constitution aims to bring the different religious communities together, the Pact aims to keep them apart. The Pact of ʿUmar reflects an Islamic imperial logic of distinction.

An overview of some late seventh century Christian canon laws strengthens the claim that regulating corporeal behavior in public spaces was a broader religious concern in the Late Antique Near East. While there is little evidence to indicate a direct genetic relationship between these canon laws and the Pact of ʿUmar, the existence of these canon laws does suggest that the mundane emphasis of the Pact of ʿUmar would not have been out of sync with the seventh century as some historians have claimed. These canon laws are of course literary products that bear the possible alterations and emendations that accompany their passage over time into written form.
laws strengthen the likelihood that the first Muslims were also concerned about
regulating religious distinction in tangible ways. These canons were issued at the
Council in Trullo convened in Constantinople in 692, but later rejected by the Pope.94
Their non-canonical historical position notwithstanding, they portray a Near Eastern
Christian religious imaginary very concerned about preserving Christian distinction from
other religions in public life. Canon XI reveals Christian anxieties over distinguishing
themselves from Jews in particular:

Let no one in the priestly order nor any layman eat the unleavened bread
of the Jews, nor have any familiar intercourse with them, nor summon
them in illness, nor receive medicines from them, nor bathe with them; but
if anyone shall take in hand to do so, if he is a cleric, let him be deposed,
but if a layman let him be cut off.95

Other canons from this council decreed that priests should not attend horse races and
theatre performances, nor eat meat cooked in a church; neither layperson nor cleric shall
play dice, hunt, leap over fires during the new moon, or plait their hair; students of law
should not adopt gentile customs or roll in the dust.96

The Pact of ʿUmar, usually at the whims of the Caliph, intermittently appeared
and disappeared in various forms throughout Muslim history.97 These “laws of
distinction” resurfaced in virtually every century up until the modern period: the Abbasid
caliph, al-Mutawakkil (r. 847 – 861), in the ninth century; the Fatimid caliph, al-Ḥākim
(r. 996 – 1021), in the tenth/eleventh century; the Ayyubids in the twelfth/thirteenth

95 Ibid., 370.
96 Ibid., 359-408.
97 See chapter four in Levy-Rubin, Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to
Coexistence. Levy-Rubin argues against the claim that the Pact of ʿUmar and its later manifestations were
sporadic interludes, but argues instead that it became a consistent feature of pre-modern Muslim history.
She adds several other instances of the reapplication of the Pact to the ones mentioned above.
century; the Mamluks in the fourteenth century; and the Ottomans in the sixteenth century. These recurrent flare ups often marked interfaith tension. These reoccurrences suggest that despite the gradual decentralization of political power over the course of Muslim history, a shared ideal of a social and religious order persisted across time and space. This social imaginary was no doubt shaped in part by Muslim jurists and theologians who normalized the Pact of ʿUmar by incorporating key features into their legal and theological treatises. In the eleventh century, Andalusian renegade jurist, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), classifies the Pact of ʿUmar in his chapter on jihad. It was a common feature among jurists to classify regulations concerning non-Muslims under their sections of jihad. Ibn Ḥazm explains the famous Quranic verse that tells Muslims to fight their non-Muslim enemies “until they (dhimmis) pay the poll-tax out of hand, while being humbled (ṣāghirūn).” \(^98\) He explains that the meaning of the term in this verse, ṣāghirūn (being humbled), is “summed up by the Stipulations of ʿUmar…” \(^99\) Ibn Ḥazm attributes to the Pact of ʿUmar the normative function of defining the proper religio-political relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The gradual absorption of the Pact of ʿUmar into the framework of normative Islam becomes clear when we survey its presence in Muslim literature. \(^100\) It can be found in administrative manuals, legal treatises, legal responsa, collections of hadith, historical chronicles, and interfaith polemics. The range of literary genres, itself, speaks

\(^98\) Quran 9:29.


\(^100\) The idea that the Pact of ʿUmar functioned primarily as a normative template for inter-religious relations was first put forth by A.S. Tritton. He uses this observation as part of his justification for arguing the Pact of ʿUmar should not be attributed to the second caliph, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb since the first Muslims could not have been thinking that far ahead. See Tritton, The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Covenant of ʿummar, 10.
to the Pact’s significance in shaping normative conceptions of Muslim relations with non-Muslims in public life. It also suggests that the Pact of ʿUmar had become an important signifier of imperial Islam.

**Differentiating Muslims**

Muslims not only sought to distinguish themselves from non-Muslims. They sought to erect distinctions among themselves. The caliph, ʿUmar, had instituted a government register (*dīwān*) that rewarded Muslims for their piety; those who had converted earliest, migrated from Mecca, and fought in the earliest battles, received the highest shares. Moreover, the widows and members of the Prophet’s clan also receive pensions from this registry. The register materialized spiritual distinctions into economic distinctions. Muslims hierarchically differentiated among themselves through the concepts of precedence and excellence.¹⁰¹

**Tribe**

This emphasis on precedence and excellence did not mean that tribal genealogy and lineage did not matter, however. As mentioned above, such pre-Islamic distinctions continued to matter after Islam as well. The Prophet’s family and tribe were exempt from receiving charity and had special entitlement to war booty. Shiʿīs stressed the significance of genealogy even more than Sunnīs by concentrating genealogical precedence in the Prophet’s clan, Hāshim, which issued ʾAlī the rightful claim to the

---

caliphate above all others. Jāḥiẓ penned a treatise demonstrating the superiority of the Abbasid tribal lineage over that of the Umayyads.

**Muslim Converts: Non-Arab Clients**

Tribal hierarchies also impacted the social structure of the patron-client relationship. According to Patricia Crone, “The key distinction was between Arabs and the rest, that is, the ‘ajam or barbarians.” While this appears to be a bit of an overstatement considering the Late Antique and early Muslim emphasis on religious distinction, the distinction between Arab and non-Arab was an important one in the early history of Islam. Throughout the Umayyad period, most, if not all non-Arab Muslims joined Arab-Muslim society through clientage (walāʾ), which required that they attach themselves to an Arab patron. Non-Arab Muslims who forged such relationships came generally either as freed slaves or converts to Islam. Crone has argued that the key features of this institution originated not from pre-Islamic practice, but from Roman provincial law. Regardless of its origins, clients were mainly free non-Arab Muslims who maintained inferior social status to Arab Muslims. Because large numbers of these non-Arab Muslim

---

102 Not everyone believed genealogy to be a requirement of leadership. The group who rebelled against ʿAlī and eventually became known as the Seceders (Khawārij) argued that piety should be the only criterion for leadership.


105 Patricia Crone has argued that this custom grew out of Roman Provincial law, or the local laws of areas ruled by the Byzantine Empire. See Patricia Crone, *Roman, Provincial, and Islamic Law: The Origins of the Islamic Patronate* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). A more recent collection of essays that contribute to debates over the origins and development of this practice can be found in Monique Bernards and John Abdallah Nawas, *Patronate and Patronage in Early and Classical Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). See the first three essays especially.

106 Technically they did not have to be Muslim, although most who secured such relationships were non-Arab Muslim, such that the term mawlā became synonymous with non-Arab Muslim.
clients tended to be freed slaves, docile farmers, or among the conquered, Umayyad Arabs harbored social prejudices against them despite the spirit of egalitarianism preached in the Quran. Clients were generally not considered fit to lead; and a client who married an Arab woman risked both having the marriage annulled and legal punishment. Yet, as Patricia Crone, observes, clients “penetrated Arab society extremely fast.”

Outside of politics, they quickly took on important roles in the field of scholarship and civil administration; many secretaries were non-Arab, a tendency that Jāḥiz lamented. The conquering Arabs had to learn how to govern their empire from non-Arabs. They needed the wisdom, skills, and manpower of their non-Arabs subjects. Their lot improved further during the Abbasid caliphate since freed slaves and converts no longer needed patrons in order to join Arab-Muslim society. Still, a culture of Arab privilege persisted in the Abbasid period as well, spurring a literary protest movement called the Shuʿūbiyya movement, which was led mainly by non-Arabs of Iranian descent who worked in the caliphal court.

Sectarianism

Early Muslims were not religiously homogenous. As early as the Battle of Ṣiffīn in 657 during ʿAlī’s caliphate, distinct ideological differences resulted in communal fragmentation. A group known as the Seceders (Khawārij) withdrew from his army, protesting his decision to arbitrate the intra-Muslim conflict with Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān over the caliphate. Instead, they argued sovereignty should not be decided according to human whims, but according to divine decree. They also believed that lineage and ethnicity were irrelevant criteria for religious leadership. Only piety

107 “Mawlā” in Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition.
mattered. Their commitment to such high standards of piety led them to claim that Muslims who committed major sins were apostates whose blood was lawful. In sum, the Seceders represented Muslim religious idealism at its maximum. While they were suppressed, they did not become extinct; they live on today in a more modest form.

Other conflicts and differences defined across theology, praxis (law), and authority hampered the early history of Islam. Of these, the most well-known is the gradual sectarian division of Muslims into Sunnīs and Shiʿīs. Both Sunnīs and Shiʿīs were also differentiated, however. Shiʿīs, for example, fractured into Zaydis, Ismāʿīlis and Twelvers, each marking a slightly different sacred lineage of imams back to the Prophet.\textsuperscript{108} The roots of the Sunnī/Shiʿī dispute also return to early controversies surrounding ʿAlī’s caliphate as well as the gruesome murder of his son, and grandson of the Prophet, Ḥusayn (d. 680), by Muʿāwiya’s son and Umayyad successor, Yazīd (r. 680 – 683).\textsuperscript{109}

The continued religious resonance today of these early political disputes over Muslim leadership illustrates the initial embodiment of religious and political identity in a single institution. Even after the spheres of politics and religion began to separate during the Umayyad dynasty, they remained connected. At least part of the dissatisfaction with

\textsuperscript{108} See the works of Wilferd Madelung who has written extensively on this subject over the course of his career: Wilferd Madelung, \textit{Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran} (Albany, N.Y.: Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988); ———, \textit{Religious and Ethnic Movements in Medieval Islam} (Aldershot: Variorum; Ashgate, 1992); ———, \textit{Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval Islam} (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985).

\textsuperscript{109} Madelung, \textit{The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate.} For less scholarly narrative approaches to the Muslim conflict over the succession to Muhammad, see Lesley Hazleton, \textit{After the Prophet: The Epic Story of the Shia-Sunni Split in Islam} (New York: Doubleday, 2009); Barnaby Rogerson, \textit{The Heirs of Muhammad: Islam’s First Century and the Origins of the Sunni-Shia Split} (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 2007).
Umayyad rule can be attributed to Shiʿī alienation from Umayyad ruling circles. In 750, the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads from power.

**Other Distinctions**

**Urban and Bedouin Arabs**

The most persistent distinction between Arabs in the Quran is between urban settled Arabs and nomadic desert Arabs – the Bedouin. While obliterating tribal differences in order to institute an Islamic egalitarian ideal is present in the Quran, so is a persisting disdain and prejudice toward Bedouin nomadic Arabs. They are accused of being harsh, hypocrites and even infidels.  

Hadith traditions also condemn Bedouins for attempting to tailor religious matters to their nomadic lifestyle, as with the case of prayer timing. They suggest both persisting rivalry between urban and nomadic Arabs and a privileging of urban life. During the formative period of Islamic history, city-dwelling Muslims struggled to enforce their understanding of Islamic normativity beyond the confines of the city. As part of their polemic against Arabs, non-Arabs in the Shuʿābiyya movement made fun of Bedouins for their uncivilized and uncouth ways. Despite his criticism of Bedouin Arab tendencies, Ibn Taymiyya argued that condemnations of the Bedouin in the Quran and hadith did not reflect their essential attributes. Bedouin Muslims could be pious, and even excel the urban Muslim in piety. Ibn Khaldūn preferred the Bedouin

**Notes:**

110 Qur'an 9:97.
Arab to the urbanized Arab because of the latter’s predilection for luxury and the spiritual diseases that sprung from it.\textsuperscript{113}

**The Shuʿūbiyya Movement**

Although its roots can be said to go back to the Seceder (\textit{Khārijī}) rebels of the first Islamic century, the \textit{Shuʿūbiyya}, or People’s movement, gained momentum in the eighth century during the Abbasid period.\textsuperscript{114} It was not a political or military movement, but a literary one; it consisted of poets, and especially secretaries mainly, but not limited to, those claiming Iranian descent. Under the Abbasids, these relative newcomers to Arab civilization received new opportunities for social advancement that enabled them to challenge Arab cultural and social privilege. They took their inspiration, as well as their name, from Quran 49:13 mentioned above that stresses the importance of diversity and the meritocracy of piety. \textit{Shuʿūbiyya} was inspired from the verse’s usage of the term, \textit{shuʿāb}, or peoples. Its proponents adduced many arguments to bolster Persian intellectual and cultural heritage while demeaning Arab claims to superiority based on genealogy. They criticized Arab heritage, such as their unsophisticated conduct of warfare, and their incompetence in matters of speech and rhetoric. Like most polemical barbs, they also stereotyped minutia, such as the Arab tendency to express themselves with stick in hand, and their predilection for eating lizards and herding camels. Arabs,

\textsuperscript{113} “...those government soldiers who are close to Bedouin life and (Bedouin) toughness are more useful than those who have grown up in a sedentary culture and have adopted the character qualities of (sedentary culture).” Ibn Khaldūn, \textit{The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History}, 297.

like Jāḥiẓ, and even those of Iranian origins like Ibn Qutayba (d. 885) responded with barbs of their own. They alluded to their incestuous and ignoble genealogical origins: Zoroastrianism permitted the marriage of brothers and sisters. In Arabic parlance, the label, ‘ajam, non-Arab or foreigner, became a marker of the uncivilized. Its semantic field included the following pejorative connotations: “dumb, speechless, barbarians, non-Arabs, foreigners, aliens and Persians.” Jāḥiẓ, for example, divides between animals that are faṣīḥ, or capable of speech, and animals that are ‘ajam, or incapable of speech! Such heated exchanges between the two sides sporadically reappeared, reaching as far as Spain in the Islamic West. However, as distinct Persian and Arab cultures within Islamicate civilization took shape, and non-Arabs became sufficiently incorporated within the ranks of the elite, these polemics died off by the twelfth century.

**Gendered Hierarchies**

Despite the persistence of patriarchal norms in early Islam, it was possible for an Arab-Muslim woman, the widowed wife of the Prophet, ʿĀʾisha, to lead Muslims into battle just decades after the Prophet passed away. However, such bold assumption of leadership was not the norm, and was later condemned by Muslim pietists. The Quran

### Footnotes

115 Ironically, some Muslims prohibited marriage with Zoroastrians, citing this law to justify this position. See footnote 82 above.
117 See E. W. Lane’s entry in *An Arabic-English Lexicon*.
119 The first, civil war, the Battle of the Camel in 656 pitted ʿAlī and his followers against some of the Prophet’s closest companions and his wife, ʿĀʾisha. ʿĀʾisha famously rode on a camel while spurring her side to victory, giving the Muslim civil war its name.
sets limits on women’s dress, what they can see and how they should speak.\textsuperscript{121} Men are the protectors of women; Muslim jurists legislated that a Muslim woman first ask permission from her husband before leaving the house, and that she travel only while accompanied by a male relative. The second caliph, ʿUmar, reportedly banned women from attending the mosque, although the Prophet had explicitly declared otherwise. Religious scholars attempted to limit women’s participation in the public sphere further. For example, they set limits on intermingling with men during funeral processions.

Of course, women remained publicly visible anyway. They attended the markets and public baths. Spiritually, women could excel men, as the Quran suggests on different occasions.\textsuperscript{122} Women also participated in religious learning, especially during the earlier periods of Islamic history. Jurists granted a Muslim woman the right to set limits in the marriage contract on the number of wives her husband could marry, and - in theory at least – she could demand her right to sex as well. On occasion, they even dressed like men, wearing men’s coats and turbans. However, men could resemble women, too – a


\textsuperscript{122} See Quran 4:124; 33:35
practice discouraged by religious scholars. In court life and in the harem, eunuchs continued to play an important role as go-betweens and entertainers.\textsuperscript{123}

**Slaves**

Pre-Islamic Arabs owned slaves, and the Quran views slavery as a normal part of everyday life.\textsuperscript{124} Muhammad, himself, was said to have an Arab slave, Zayd b. Ḥāritha, whom he later adopted as his son.\textsuperscript{125} Eventually, however, enslaving Arabs was prohibited, and slavery became a means of incorporating diverse peoples into the Muslim empire. Both the Quran and hadith, however, exhort Muslims to treat slaves with respect, and even to set them free as devotional acts of piety and a means to expiate sins.\textsuperscript{126} Although Muslims did not prohibit slavery outright, the religious merit attributed to freeing slaves indicates a push towards a more egalitarian and meritocratic society. After the conquests, Muslims conquerors enslaved large numbers of non-Muslim and non-Arab prisoners of war. Under the new order, however, wealthy non-Muslims were not permitted to own Muslim slaves. Once freed, former slaves became clients of their manumitter.

\textsuperscript{123} See sections in chapters five and six on cross-dressing and men imitating women and women imitating men in this study. Chapter six also includes a discussion on the social role of eunuchs in early Islam.


\textsuperscript{125} Zayd is the only Companion of the Prophet to be named in the Quran (33:37). David Powers has published a contrarian perspective on the Muslim claim that the Quran later abolished adoption, and questions the historicity of Zayd as well. He argues that the episode in the Quran permitting the Prophet to marry the divorced wife of Zayd was contrived by later Muslims in order to assert the finality of his prophecy. See, David Powers, *Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). Also see Leor Halevi’s review of Powers’ revisionist thesis: Leor Halevi, "David s. Powers. Muhammad Is Not the Father of Any of Your Men: The Making of the Last Prophet," *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 1 (2011).

\textsuperscript{126} See Quran 2:177 for example.
In Islamic law, different regulations applied to slaves; they were treated as less than fully-human. This marginalized status had both advantages and disadvantages. A slave, for example, was only entitled to half the inheritance of a free person. However, slaves were not obligated to perform duties expected of free Muslims because they were obligated to fulfill the demands of their owners. They were not expected to make the pilgrimage to Mecca or attend the Friday prayer for example. In addition, punishments were also reduced to half that of free Muslims. A freeman would be lashed eighty times for drinking alcohol; a slave only forty. The waiting period of a free woman after marital repudiation was four months and ten days; a slave girl, two months and five days.

Despite these concessions, dissatisfaction among the slave population persisted. The assassin of the second caliph, ʿUmar, was a slave who resented a judgment ʿUmar had made against him. According to Muslim tradition, ʿUmar refused to reduce the slave-master’s percentage of the salary generated by the slave from his trade. Perhaps the slave sought to buy his freedom, or was enduring hardship due to his paltry earnings. Regardless, while ʿUmar was remembered for his resolute commitment to justice, it did not prevent his own demise at the hands of a disgruntled slave.

**Animals**

Animals were also part of the social order. The Quran humanizes animals in several ways. Like humans, they have their own language, are capable of receiving divine revelation, and form their own communities (*umam*). One pre-Modern Muslim thinker

---

127 “There is not an animal on earth, not a bird that flies with its wings, but they form communities like yourselves.” Quran 6:38. For Islamic perspectives on animals a good place to start is Richard Foltz, “Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures,” (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006). For a more focused study
even surmised that God sent animals prophets! Six chapters in the Quran are named after animals, although perhaps surprisingly, camels and horses are not among them; they are however represented in the Quranic text along with cattle, mules, donkeys, sheep, monkeys, dogs, pigs, snakes, worms, ants, bees, spiders, mosquitoes, and flies.

Like Jews and Christians, most Muslims believed that they had dominion over animals, although compared to Latin Christians they had a stronger consideration for the suffering of animals. After all, Muslims considered humans animals too, although they were distinguished through the gift of speech. The Prophet was said to have disliked waking up a cat sleeping in his robe, declared paradise for one who slaked the thirst of a dog, and proclaimed hell for a woman who imprisoned a cat in her home. He is said to have permitted and even encouraged the killing of dangerous animals like scorpions. As in Judaism, dogs and pigs did not cultivate a very good reputation among Muslims, although these attitudes were not unanimous. Some Arab tribes exhibited a sort of totemism, while others named themselves after animals, such as the Prophet’s own tribe, Quraysh, which meant little shark. Jāḥiẓ was said to have composed the first encyclopedia of animals, *The Book of Animals (Kitāb al-Ḥayawān)*, which articulated a

---

of the status of animals in the Quran see Sarra Tlili, "From an Ant's Perspective: The Status and Nature of Animals in the Qur‘ān" (Ph.D Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2009).


129 The Chapters of the Cow (2), Cattle (6), Bee (16), Ant (27), Spider (29), and Elephant (105).


132 Ibid., 21.

primitive theory of evolution. Some pre-modern Muslims even professed vegetarianism; one famous litterateur, Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (d. 1057), did not eat meat for forty-five years.

In the tenth century, the Brethren of Purity penned an epistle, The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn. In a court case presented before a judge, animals deny the human’s claim to superiority over them and complain about continued human oppression and abuse. Although the epistle concludes that humans have dominion of animals by virtue of their superiority inhered by the immortality of their souls, it also emphasizes that animals should not be mistreated.

Angels and Devils

The Brethren of Purity’s epistle brings together humans, animals, and jinn into a single conversation. It eloquently illustrates how the pre-modern Muslim imaginary collapsed human, natural, and supernatural worlds into a single unitary cosmos. According to this cosmology, the earthly realm was the simulacrum of the unseen angelic realm. Early Muslim mythology therefore attributes the first political order to that of the jinn, or spirit-demon, led by none other than Iblīs, the devil, himself. The story of Iblīs’s fall from

---

134 Jāḥiẓ, Kitāb al-Hayawān.
power is well-known. The belief in angels not only constitutes a required portion of a Muslim’s creed, but angels are understood to participate in the daily life of humans.\textsuperscript{137}

What is significant is that the Muslim imperial order was part of a larger cosmology. In Iranian lore, the King was God’s shadow on earth. According to Muslims, the caliph assumed this lofty role. Upsetting the natural order of things therefore had supernatural repercussions. The stakes of maintaining social order superseded the boundary of the geographic territory of immediate political sovereignty and extended into the heavens. The fall of the earthly moral order had otherworldly implications, captured by the Quranic metaphor of the straight path, which leads either to eternal salvation or eternal damnation.\textsuperscript{138}

Conclusion

There are many social distinctions not covered in this chapter, but that became important to Muslims over history such as the distinction between young and old; student and teacher; as well as distinctions among different professions, which preoccupied Muslim philosophers. I have not intended to be exhaustive here, but wished to address the most salient social distinctions that eventually became enshrined in the Islamic discourse of \textit{tashabbuh}. I have also argued that the emergence of hierarchical social distinctions is a product of an imperial imaginary; the significance of the Pact of ʿUmar to early Muslims is perhaps the clearest literary illustration of this. I also argued that, paradoxically, these

\textsuperscript{137} Quran 2:285: “The Messenger believes in what was sent down to him from his Lord, and the believers; each one believes in God and His angels, and in His Books and His Messengers…” (Translation by Arberry)

\textsuperscript{138} Quran 1: 6-7: “Guide us on the straight path: the path of those whom you have blessed; not of those who have incurred your wrath or gone astray.” Each person is also accompanied by two angels, one who writes down his good deeds, and another who writes down the bad.
social distinctions were itself a product of Muslim imitation, adaptation, and assimilation to the civilizations that they conquered. In other words, despite the thick veneer of distinction erected by Islamic discourses, Muslims, both elite and common, were constantly imitating practices in virtually all areas of life. Drawing attention to Muslim cultural mimesis prevents us from overdetermining and overgeneralizing Muslim distinction into a universal fact of Islamic history.

It also helps us not to overdetermine the “religious” nature of these discourses, but to emplot them in their historical contexts, to place them in their cultural and political landscapes. The maintenance of these hierarchies became a shared objective of both religious and political elites who wished to maintain an Islamically-rooted imperial order and felt periodically threatened by the potential disorder that could result from such cultural mimesis. As I hope to show in the remainder of this study, this imperial imaginary underpinned Muslim religious discourses of tashabbuh, which aimed to regulate and maintain hierarchical distinctions across a range of social categories. In sum, it helps us to see that this “religious” discourse was also a social and political product of history.
PART TWO:
DISCURSIVE LANDSCAPES
CHAPTER TWO:
FROM IMITATION TO DISTINCTION:
TASHABBUH AND THE BEGINNING OF ISLAM

One who imitates others is not one of us. So do not imitate Christians and Jews...

— Prophet Muhammad, transmitted in the Sunan collection of al-Tirmidhi

How can a people so alike, united by language, tradition, and history end up confronting each other in situations that are so difficult to conceive of?

From Narrative to Normative

According to the Prophet Muhammad’s cousin Ibn ʿAbbās, “The Messenger of God used to love to agree with the People of the Book when he was not commanded to do otherwise.” Put differently, the Prophet preferred to assimilate or conform to the practices of Jews and Christians as his default religious policy. Ibn ʿAbbās made this statement in the context of the Prophet’s decision to “let his hair fall down over his forehead” so that he looked like the People of the Book, not like the Arab pagans. At once, Ibn ʿAbbās illustrates how the Prophet closed the social distance between him and the People of the Book and distanced himself from the pagan Arabs through his choice of hairstyle. In order to oppose the pagans the Prophet imitated the Jews and Christians. At the end of this anecdote, Ibn ʿAbbās adds, “but he (the Prophet) parted it afterwards.”

1 The first phrase transliterated into Arabic is: “Laysa minna man tashabbaha bi-ghayrina.” Sunan al-Tirmidhi, kitāb al-isti’ilāh, bāb mā jā’ a fī karrāḥiyat iṣhārat al-yad bi’l-salam. Al-Tirmidhi, himself, casts doubt on the hadith’s authenticity and grades the chain of transmitters as weak.
3 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-lībās, bāb al-faqr; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-faḍā’il, bāb fi sadl al-nabī sha’rihi wa farghi. Quotations are from Muslim’s version.
Without providing additional context or explanation, Ibn ʿAbbās indicates that the Prophet changed his hairstyle, and by implication, his religious policy towards Jews and Christians. This new hairstyle visibly marked a historical shift from Muslim imitation to distinction.

The shifts in the Prophet’s choice of hairstyle signal the different phases of his strategy for establishing a unique Islamic brand of monotheism. First, the Prophet intended to differentiate Islam from the pagan Arab religion by assimilating Jewish and Christian hairstyles and strengthening his nascent religion’s monotheistic credentials. When he gained political power and established sufficient common ground between his community and fellow Jewish and Christian monotheists, he obtained the religio-political clout necessary to distinguish Islam. According to the tradition, he visibly rebranded the community by adopting a new hairstyle. This hairstyle, however, was similar to what the pagan Arabs had initially adopted. Because Islam had become supreme in the Arabian peninsula by the end of the Prophet’s life, paganism was no longer a serious threat; Muslims could appropriate and resignify the old pagan hairstyle with new Islamic meanings. At the same time, they could also distinguish Islamic monotheism from Jewish and Christian monotheisms. The Prophet’s shifting policies on hairstyle illustrate how Muslim religious distinction was both fluid and dynamic.

There are other traditions that suggest the Prophet sought to imitate the People of the Book: he ordered Muslims to fast the day of Ṭāḥaerah in celebration of Moses’ victory over Pharaoh like the Jews because he states, “We are closer to Moses than you”; another lesser known tradition informs us that the Prophet used to imitate Jews and
Christians by standing up in honor of their funeral processions.⁴ However, these anecdotes are usually either contradicted by additional information in the same hadith or explained away by another tradition. The number of traditions that emphasize Muslim distinction far exceed the number of those that encourage Muslim assimilation and imitation. Despite the common ground shared between Muslims and their fellow Jewish and Christian scripturies, it becomes clear that Muslim hadith scholars preferred to emphasize how Muslims were different, not similar to their religious siblings. This asymmetry does not mean, however, that there was a uniform consensus over Muslim distinction. In fact, as I discuss in the conclusion to this chapter, Muslims actively debated their policy of imitating Christians and Jews even after the Prophet’s demise, despite orthodox Muslim claims to the contrary. The anxieties of hadith scholars over Muslim imitation of Jews and Christians can be partially explained by the willingness of early Muslims to emulate them.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the regulation and maintenance of hierarchical social distinctions was a natural product of empire. The emergence of a Muslim empire seems to have intensified the momentum towards Muslim distinction that, according to the traditions above, began during the Prophet’s life. What this suggests, then, is that the social objectives of empire and religion overlapped during the formative period of Islam. In this chapter, I hope to strengthen this correspondence by highlighting attempts of Muslim religious elites to regulate hierarchical social distinctions in everyday life. It will become clear that an imperial imaginary contributed to fashioning the early

⁴ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-ṣawm, bāb ṣiyām yawm Ḥāshārāʾ; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-ṣawm, bāb ṣawm yawm Ḥāshārāʾ. For reference to, and discussion of the funeral tradition see the last section of this chapter.
Muslim religious imaginary. As Muhammad Q. Zaman has argued, Sunnī religious scholars fashioned a policy of accommodation, not opposition to Abbasid political elites.5

In this chapter, I show how Muslim practices of distinction entered into early Islamic texts as the prisms through which they imagined themselves and others; the process of constructing Islam was dialogical, dependent upon representations of other religious communities, especially Judaism and Christianity. I also demonstrate that Muslim religion-making was not an abstract affair; aesthetically mediated practices, especially those dealing with the body, played a crucial role in shaping Islam into a distinct religion.

I focus on the key term in Muslim vocabularies of distinction, tashabbuh. Following Wittgenstein’s advice to examine how a word is used, I map its semantic field in early Islamic texts – its dynamic range of meanings and usages as it travels across time and space. We begin to see the semantic “family resemblance” among the different meanings of tashabbuh, which, itself, can mean resemblance. In contrast to previous studies, which have been limited to exploring the concept of tashabbuh in the context of Jewish-Muslim relations or specific subjects such as dyeing beards or fasting ʿĀshūrā, this chapter attempts to grasp the full semantic range of tashabbuh in order to shed light on the key attributes of Muslim distinction during the formative period of Islam.6

5 Abbasid caliphs studied, invoked and patronized the collections of hadith in order to Islamically legitimize their political rule. They even intervened in the burning theological controversies of the day, such as the dispute over the createdness of the Quran. See Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Religion and Politics under the Early ʿAbbāsids: The Emergence of the Proto-Sunnī Elite (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997).

This mode of analysis foregrounds the organic relationship between the production of language and the unfolding of history, suggesting that discourse is also a social practice. Mapping tashabbuh’s semantic field is a way to document how the dramatic social, religious, and political transformations in the formative history of the Muslim community shaped the textual production of Islam. As the early conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries swept Muslims across a vast range of territories stretching from Spain in the Islamic West to Sind in the Islamic East, the flurry of new social and cultural encounters with different religious, ethnic, and linguistic communities shaped Islamic discourses. Islamic texts reflected – albeit in divergent forms - these emerging local conversations, debates, and controversies. The relational concept of tashabbuh functions as a prism through which these social interactions can be perceived. It reflects the dynamic character of early Islam, mediating politics, culture, and religion simultaneously.

I challenge the presumption of previous studies, which assume that tashabbuh always carried a negative value. I argue that tashabbuh transformed from a neutral polyvalent concept into a negatively charged concept in the usage of Muslim religious scholars; instead of signifying imitation in its neutral sense, it began to take on the meaning of reprehensible imitation. Tashabbuh came to signal its opposite: an imperative to be different and distinct. I contest that early Muslim religious scholars, especially hadith scholars, semantically twisted this term into a widespread mandate for

Muslim distinction in order to regulate the disruptive social practice of assimilation. They leveraged other vocabularies of Muslim distinction as well, which amplified the negative polarity of *tashabbuh*. Together these polyvalent languages of distinction portray the attempt of religious scholars to erect sharp differences beyond and within the Muslim community amidst a cultural landscape of sharedness. From the chaos of imitation arose the order of distinction.

The semantic field of *tashabbuh* highlights the cosmic scope of the early Muslim social imaginary. It shows that Muslim religious elites, like political elites, were not just interested in mediating religious identity; they sought to mediate relations across gender, ethnicity, class, and even species.

In order to map the early semantic field of *tashabbuh* I draw upon a wide range of early Muslim literary and religious texts – pre-Islamic poetry, lexicons, the Quran, legal treatises, and hadith. First, I examine the earliest Arabic lexicons where we gain glimpses of a period when imitating others was good. I then examine two early Iraqi legal texts, which illustrate how *tashabbuh* inflects Muslim imperial politics, mediating jihad-conquest and non-Muslim social practice in public life.

The collections of hadith, however, are the main source of my semantic analysis. Histories of early Islam that omit the information contained in this source tend to privilege doctrine over practice. A survey of the *tashabbuh*-related hadith traditions, on

---

7 I discuss these alternative vocabularies of distinction towards the end of this chapter. If we cast our conceptual net too wide, the analysis becomes too diffuse. We miss the subtle transformations in Muslim usages of *tashabbuh* that help shape a historical narrative of Muslim distinction. In part three of this study, however, I integrate these different vocabularies of distinction in order to shed light on other themes.

8 See for example Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010). Although Donner acknowledges “for even more than theological
the other hand, foregrounds the significance of embodied practice to the formation of Islam as a distinct religion. The genre of hadith, above all, shaped *tashabbuh’s* early semantic field. The vocabulary of *tashabbuh* therefore functioned to actualize a key dimension of the hadith’s broader social function: the normalization of Muslim distinction.

It is noteworthy that *tashabbuh* is part of a distinctive Sunnī vocabulary, although its occasional appearance in Twelver Shi‘ī collections of hadith echo Sunnī usage. I not only scour the canonical collections of Sunnī hadith, but also the lesser-known “non-canonical” collections. This comprehensive approach to the Sunnī collections of differences, it is differences in cultic practice that set one religious community apart from others (Donner, 45).” Donner privileges a modern Protestant-informed notion that privileges the conception of religion as a spiritualized essence distinct from socially-embodied forms of everyday life. Donner’s conception of Islam as predominantly creedal frames his entire historical narrative. As a result, Donner presents a prescriptive claim about religion under the guise of an historical description. He writes: “As this movement was not yet a “religion” in the sense of a distinct confession, members of established monotheistic faiths could join it without necessarily giving up their identities as Jews and Christians (Donner, 87).” Here, Donner defines religion as a “distinct confession.” He therefore concludes that during Muhammad’s time, “There is no reason to think that the Believers viewed themselves as a new or separate religious confession (Donner, 69).” According to Donner, then, Muslims, Christians, and Jews formed separate social but theologically indistinguishable communities within one single “religious confession.” Muslims did not become a distinct “religious confession” until the late seventh century of the Umayyad dynasty. However, if religious distinction materialized through the body first and foremost, this has important repercussions for Donner’s narrative.

9 For a brief overview of Twelver Shi‘ī traditions on *tashabbuh* see discussion below.

10 The Sunnī canonical hadith collections are crucial to understanding how Muslims centralized authority in the persona of the Prophet and authorized certain texts over others. Many *tashabbuh* hadith appear in the canonical collections of Bukhārī, Muslim, and other members of the six Sunnī canonical collections known as the “sound six” (*ṣiḥaḥ sitta*), as well as the *Musnad* of Ahmad b. Hanbal. Its presence in these collections ensured that the concept and practice of *tashabbuh* became enshrined in the historical memory of early Muslims. By “non-canonical” I mean those Sunnī collections of hadith that are not of the sound six or the *Musnad* of Ahmad b. Hanbal. They are technically still significant to Sunnī Muslims as a source of normative practice, which makes them technically canonical. However, I wish to differentiate between the more authoritative Sunnī hadith collections from the lesser authoritative ones. Whereas canonical collections focus on the persona of the Prophet, non-canonical collections also usually include significant numbers of Companion and Successor traditions. My research of non-canonical hadith included the topical (*Musannaf*) collection of `Abd al-Razzāq and Ibn Abī Shayba; the *Musnad* collections of Shihiḥ, Abū Ya’la, Bazzār, and Abū Dāwūd al-Tayālīsī; the *Ṣaḥīḥ* collections of Dārāquṭnī and Ibn Ḥibbān; the *Mustadrak* collection of al-Ḥākim; the *Sunan* collection of Bayhaqī; the *Mu‘jam* collections of Tabarānī; the secondary (*zawā’id*) collection of Ibn Hajar al-Ḥaythami; and even the biographical dictionary (*tabaqāt*) of Ibn Sa’d and Ibn Hanbal’s collection of renunciant sayings.
hadith provides a broader textual canvas on which to map the semantic field of *tashabbuh*. By undertaking what I call a *semantic geography*, I show that early Muslims deployed *tashabbuh* as part of their vocabulary of distinction in all the major centers of learning across the Muslim world by the eighth century.

What becomes apparent is that there are significant parallels between *tashabbuh* and the more well-known concept of *bidʿa*, or reprehensible innovation. *Bidʿa* is the antithesis of *sunna*, the normative example of the Prophet. As the Hungarian Orientalist, Ignaz Goldziher, and more recently Rachel Ukeles has shown, *bidʿa* accrued new meanings with the rise of Islam.\(^\text{11}\) It became a crucial tool for regulating religious normativity. I show how *tashabbuh*, like *bidʿa*, transformed into a religious boundary-regulating concept that gained an almost exclusively negative valence. Just as the concept of *bidʿa* highlighted bad innovation, the concept of *tashabbuh* highlighted bad imitation. They formed twin concepts that enabled Sunnī Muslim religious scholars to regulate the normative boundaries of Islam.\(^\text{12}\) In chapter three, I argue for an alternative model of Sunnī Muslim orthodoxy that triangulates between the concepts of *sunna*, *bidʿa*, and *tashabbuh*, instead of adhering to the binary polarity of *sunna* and *bidʿa*.

---

\(^\text{11}\) Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, ed. S. M. Stern, 2 vols. (London: Allen & Urwin, 1967-71), 1:46, 2:33-37; Chapter one in Rachel Ukeles, "Innovation or Deviation: Exploring the Boundaries of Islamic Devotional Law" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2006). Goldziher observes that in pre-Islamic poetry, *bidʿa* also carries a negative valence. *Sunna*, on the other hand, which is also found in pre-Islamic poetry (*Muʿallaqāt*), has the more general meaning of the trodden path. These two terms took on new meanings and significance in Islam.

\(^\text{12}\) Also see chapter three for Ibn Taymiyya’s theorization of both concepts.
When Imitating Others was Good: Early Lexical Meanings

Neither pre-Islamic poetry nor the Quran contain the term *tashabbuh*. The Quran employs some of its linguistic derivatives, however. They amplify *tashabbuh*’s association with its three letter root’s core meanings of doubt and confusion, and its semantic oscillation between positive and negative connotations. The clearest

---

13 The main sources for pre-Islamic Arabic literature I consulted were the: *al-Asmāʾiyyāt*, *al-Muḍaddaliyyāt*, *al-Mu’allaqāt*, and the *Diwān al-Hamāsa*. I also consulted Abbasid collections of proverbs and sayings such as Jāḥiẓ’s *al-Bayān*. A few references to derivative forms for the shared three letter root (sh-b-h) can be found, but not *tashabbuh*.

14 Ironically, the interpretations of these Quranic verses are, themselves, subject to confusion and doubt. The first key verse pertains to Jesus’ crucifixion: “. . . and as for their statement, ‘We killed the Christ, Jesus the son of Mary, the messenger of God’, they did not kill him or crucify him, but it was made to appear like that (shubbiha) to them (Quran 4:157, translation by Abdel Haleem).” What Abdel-Haleem has translated as “it was made to appear to them like that” refers to shubbiha, a passive construct of the second form of the three letter root sh-b-h, and the only such occurrence in the Quran (hapax legomenon). Its meaning in this context has therefore not entirely been clear. The very earliest Muslim exegetes have understood it to mean that a simulacrum of Jesus, either his disciple or betrayer, was cast in Jesus’ form by divine intervention, and took Jesus’ place at the cross. Jesus on the other hand, as the Quran subsequently states, was raised to God, implicitly without dying. According to this interpretation, the simulacrum of Jesus was not real. Like fool’s gold, it was merely form without substance, a mere imitation of the original. What is important here is to note the negative association of the word, shubbiha, with doubt, ambiguity, and deception arising from the existential divergence of appearance and reality. Ambiguity and doubt resurface in the Quranic discussion of its own textual ambiguity: “It is He who sent down upon you the Book, wherein are verses clear (muḥkamāt) that are the essence of the Book (umm al-kitāb), and others ambiguous (mutashābihāt). As for those whose hearts are prone to deviance, they follow the ambiguous part (mā tashābaha minhu)…” (3:7, translation by Arberry with minor changes). Here the Quran opposes the sixth form derivative of sh-b-h, mutashābihāt (sing. mutashābih), ambiguous verses, to muḥkamāt (sing. muḥkam), clear verses. Again, the context of these verses ascribes a negative connotation to ambiguity: those who seek to exploit the ambiguities in the Quran to advance their own interests possess hearts given to “doubt” or “going astray.” The verse suggests that Quranic interpretation is not merely a cognitive act, but is a spiritual practice that depends on an interpreter’s religious subjectivity; it challenges the reader to restrain himself during these occasional moments of textual vulnerability. The verse also self-consciously anticipates the hermeneutical disputes that inevitably emerge from any canonical religious text. In order to explicate the verse’s meaning, the ninth century exegete, Ṭabarī, records multiple occasions when this verse was said to have been revealed. In one narrative, a tribe of Christians debate with the Prophet about the Quranic description of Jesus as the “spirit” and the “word”, suggesting that the Quran confirms their Trinitarian theology. In another, a group of Jews seeks to predict the length of the Prophet’s life based upon the mysterious letters of the Quran (al-hurāf al-muqaṭṭaʿa). Despite the verse’s apparent origins in inter-faith debates between Muslims and others, in Muslim history, the verse gained more significance as weapon of sectarian warfare. When the traditionist, Qatāda, read this verse, he responded, “If they are not the Hāruriyya (Khārifis) and the Šaʿbāʾiyya, I don’t know who they could be!” Associations of mutashābihāt with interfaith and sectarian disputes in later Muslim tradition parallels that of its linguistic relative, *tashabbuh*. In this context, *mutashābihār* becomes a negatively charged concept through its association with interpretive doubt and spiritual deficiency. In another self-reflexive verse, however, the Quran overturns the negative charge of this word: “God revealed the best of speeches, a coherent and consistent scripture (kitāban mutashābihan)” (Quran 39:23). In this verse, the Quran invokes *mutashābih*
evidence of tashabbuh’s original pre-Islamic meanings that I could find come from the first dictionary of Arabic, The Sourcebook (Kitāb al-ʿAyn), attributed to the eighth century South Arabian lexicographer, Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (d. 791). While Farāhīdī does not deem tashabbuh significant enough to give it a separate entry, he explains the meanings of other words by using tashabbuh in their definitions: tasalla, imitating one who drinks; taraʾbala, imitating a tiger; and tafatta, imitating a youth. This “reverse” approach to early lexical meanings of tashabbuh enable us to define it inductively. In all of these situations – none of which are “religious” - tashabbuh possesses a neutral or positive, not a negative connotation. Farāhīdī’s usage also illustrates the word’s inherently dialogical meaning across social relations.

However, Farāhīdī preserves one usage of tashabbuh that carries a negative connotation, which happens to be applied within an Islamic context. Farāhīdī transmits a saying attributed to the second caliph, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, who, as we shall see, plays an important role in propagating the tashabbuh discourse:

in its singular form, to suggest a scripture whose “verses are those which repeat, resemble and confirm each other.” The verse alludes to a different sense of mutāshabih, one that evokes its morphological structure and denotes mutual interaction and agreement of a wide range of subjects, verses and meanings into a coherent discursive whole. The word’s polysemy in Quranic usage reflects its semantic plasticity, which can span both positive and negative connotations. As we shall see, this capacity to carry morally charged judgments of good and bad parallels the early semantic background of its linguistic cousin, tashabbuh. The ʿayn is the deepest letter in Arabic. As a word, it can mean spring, a source of live-sustaining water. The dictionary was intended by its author to be the source for the original usage of Arabic words. There is some dispute over the authorship of the book. However, its organization of Arabic words phonetically, and not alphabetically, suggests its early historical provenance. Some of the greatest figures in the history of the Arabic language such as Sibawayh (d. 796) and al-Asmaʿī (d. 831), were among Khalīl b. Ahmad’s students. See Rafael Talmon, Arabic Grammar in Its Formative Age: Kitāb al-ʿAyn and Its Attribution to Ḥalīl b. Ahmad (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997).

15 All of these entries follow the same part of speech and morphology as tashabbuh, the fifth form. Al-Khalīl b. Ahmad al-Farāhīdī, Kitāb al-ʿAyn, ed. Mahdī al-Makhzūmī and İbrahim al-Sāmirāʾi, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār wa maktabat al-hilāl, n.d.), 7:297, 8:137, 8:265.
Emigrate and don’t just appear to emigrate! Or, Make your emigration sincere for God and do not (just) imitate the emigrants. (Hājarū wa lā tahajjarū! Ay: Akhlīṣū al-hijra lillah wa lā tashabbahū bi al-muhājirīn)\(^{17}\)

Farāhīdī then adds, “like you say, he appears to be forbearing, but he is not really forbearing” (kamā taqūl yataḥallam wa laysa bi-ḥalīm).\(^{18}\) This particular use of tashabbuh recalls Farāhīdī’s definition of sh-b-h as fool’s gold, which implicitly distinguishes between substance and form. ʿUmar commands his audience to emigrate (hājarū) and not merely appear to do so (tahajjarū).\(^{19}\) Since emigration is a practice that either one does or does not do, this command to emigrate begs the following question: How does one merely appear to emigrate? ʿUmar anticipates this confusion by immediately clarifying his statement: “Make your emigration sincere for God and do not (just) imitate (tashabbahū) the emigrants.” The meaning of tashabbuh in this context is the superficial appearance of emigrating. ʿUmar does not mean “Do not imitate (lā tashabbahū)” the emigrants by not emigrating – the literal application of its meaning. Rather, ʿUmar is criticizing the practice of emigrating without spiritual sincerity. Instead of emigrating for worldly gain, and merely “imitating” the outward form of emigration, one should emigrate sincerely by emigrating for God’s sake alone. The sincere intention makes it a true emigration and not just an imitation of its outward form. This command evokes the famous hadith attributed to Muhammad: “Actions are judged in accordance with their intentions.”\(^{20}\) ʿUmar is encouraging the emigrant to cohere


\(^{18}\) al-Farāhīdī, Kitāb al-ʿAyn, 3:386-87.

\(^{19}\) Although the Arabic forms derive from the same three letter root h-j-r, their pairing here materializes contrasting meanings that stem from structural distinctions between the third and fifth forms.

\(^{20}\) I explore the significance of intention to the discourse of tashabbuh in the next chapter. The “intention hadith” also occurred in the context of emigration and is transmitted by ʿUmar. It suggests that the above
intention with deed by emulating the original emigrants who did so only for God.

ʿUmar’s usage of *tashabbuh* as a mere surface effect highlights the fragile relationship between substance and form, which can break down at any moment.

In sum, the contrast in Farāhīdī’s lexical usages of *tashabbuh* indicates that in general usage, *tashabbuh* had a neutral or positive connotation. It also indicates that its religious usage among Muslims had begun to negatively charge its semantic field – a trend that intensifies in the other genres of early Islamic literature.

**Imperial Islam: Jihad and non-Muslims in Iraqi Legal Texts**

*Tashabbuh* was part of the religious vocabulary of all four founding Sunnī jurists.21 Here, I focus on two eighth century Ḥanafī legal texts reportedly commissioned by Abbasid caliphs, which illustrate how Muslim jurists deployed *tashabbuh* to legitimize...
imperial policy - taxation, war and foreign relations. Both texts are also ostensibly of Iraqi provenance from two of the most prominent figures in the Hanafi school of law: Abū Yūsuf (d. 798) and Muhammad Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (d. 805).

Abū Yūsuf’s Treatise on Taxation (Kitāb al-Kharāj) deploys the language of tashabbuh in order to assert visible distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims in public life. Abū Yūsuf discusses these distinctions not simply because he endorsed social segregation, but because they upheld a political-economic order crucial to the survival of the imperial Islamic state. The treatise also evokes the sartorial regulations of the Pact of ʿUmar. In a section titled “How to treat Apostates, Pagans, and Dhimmīs,” Abū Yūsuf writes:

No one should be permitted to imitate and resemble (yatashabbahu) Muslims in their dress, riding beast, and general appearance. They should be subdued by placing around their waists, their special belts – such as a thick cord tied around the waist of each one of them. Their conical hats should be quilted; they should hang two wooden balls resembling pomegranates from the rear of their saddles; they should wear double-

22 On Abū Yūsuf and for an extensive list of primary biographical sources see Brannon Wheeler’s entry “Abū Yūsuf” in Encyclopaedia of Islam, third edition. Kitāb al-Kharāj is said to have been penned by Abū Yūsuf who served as chief judge of Baghdad during the legendary reign of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. Abū Yūsuf was also the pre-eminent student of Abū Hanifa, and played a key role in the perpetuation and survival of what would become the Hanafi law school. The Treatise on Taxation addresses tax regulations, including those that apply to their non-Muslim subjects. It also encompasses subsidiary issues of domestic policy that seek to govern non-monetary interaction with non-Muslims such as whether Muslims can marry Zoroastrian women and the stipulations concerning the distinctive dress of non-Muslim subjects (dhimmīs) living under Muslim rule (dār al-Islām). There have been debates over its authenticity. Norman Calder asserts that it must be a late 3rd/9th century production of Abū Yūsuf’s disciples. Qasim Zaman refutes this argument, in favor of its authenticity, arguing that Calder’s evidence is itself quite speculative. Christopher Melchert does not seem too convinced of Zaman’s assumption of authenticity without definitive and sufficient proof to the contrary. See, N. Calder, Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 105-60; Zaman, Religion and Politics under the Early ābāsids: The Emergence of the Proto-Sunnī Elite, 91-106; Christopher Melchert, “Review: Religion and Politics under the Early ābāsids. The Emergence of the Proto-Sunnī Elite by Muhammad Qasim Zaman,” Islamic Law and Society 6, no. 2 (1999).
thonged sandals, and not wear shoes like Muslim shoes; their women are prohibited from riding on saddles.\textsuperscript{23}

Abū Yūsuf’s allusion to the ordinance mandating sartorial distinctions in the Pact of ʿUmar is striking:

We shall not imitate (\textit{natashabbahu}) the Muslims in any way with regard to their dress, as, for example, with the conical cap, the turban, footwear, or parting the hair.\textsuperscript{24}

Abū Yūsuf subsequently includes other stipulations reminiscent of the Pact of ʿUmar, including limitations on renovating houses of worship, publicly displaying crosses, and selling wine and pork to Muslims.\textsuperscript{25} Quoting the caliph ʿUmar, he then urges administrators to enforce these sartorial regulations “until their dress is distinguished from Muslim dress.”\textsuperscript{26}

He then quotes a tradition from the second ʿUmar, the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (r. 718-20), who attempts to revive many of the

\textsuperscript{23} Yaʿqūb b. Ibrahīm Abū Yūsuf, \textit{Kitāb al-Kharāj} (Beirut: Dār al-maʿrifa, 1979), 127.

\textsuperscript{24} In the tenth century manuscript attributed to Ibn Zabr published by Mark Cohen, we find different versions of the Pact of ʿUmar, which contain subtle variations on the above ordinance, with some additions and subtractions from the list above: 1) “We shall not imitate the Muslims in their dress, as for example in their appearance, their saddles, and the engraving of their signet rings”; 2) “We shall not imitate them in any way with regard to their dress, as for example, with the conical cap, the turban, banded trousers, widened footwear, nor shall we walk except in a leather belt”; 3) “We shall not imitate the Muslims in dress, as for example, in the conical cap, the turban, footwear, parting of the hair, and their riding beasts.”


\textsuperscript{25} Mark Cohen has argued that \textit{The Motherbook (Kitāb al-Umm)} of Shāfiʿi is the first Islamic text to include a large number of stipulations associated with the Pact of ʿUmar. One can also argue that Abū Yūsuf’s \textit{Treatise on Taxation} is an even earlier text that reproduces key elements of the Pact of ʿUmar, albeit in a more allusive and summary form. Because Shāfiʿi transforms the original epistolary format of the Pact into what Cohen calls “a juridical elaboration,” he omits the term \textit{tashabbuh} (Cohen, 119). The earliest written source to quote the Pact of ʿUmar verbatim in its familiar format is an early 10\textsuperscript{th} century collection of responsa from Ahmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855), collected by Ibn Khallāl. It includes the term, \textit{tashabbuh}, in its transmission of the Pact, and its usage is almost identical to Abū Yūsuf’s. All of the versions transmitted by Ibn Zabr use the term, \textit{tashabbuh}.

\textsuperscript{26} Abū Yūsuf, \textit{Kitāb al-Kharāj}, 127.
ordinances above. Abū Yusuf wishes to leverage the power of the state to limit the assimilating tendencies of religious “cross-dressing.”

This usage molds tashabbuh into a negative concept that mediates an Islamic political aesthetics in public life. The term’s inclusion in a compendium of religious law saturates practices of tashabbuh, such as wearing hats, shoes, and belts with enduring symbolic value that transcends their initial locus. Abū Yusuf’s usage of tashabbuh suggests that the term’s association with the Pact of ʿUmar and religious distinction had become a durable part of Iraqi Muslim collective memory by the eighth century.

The Great Treatise on International Law (al-Siyar al-kabīr) attributed to Muhammad Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (d. 804) is also a product of Islamic imperial politics. While treatises on taxation emphasized domestic policy, the siyar genre regulated

---

27 The transmitter of this tradition is the Syrian ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Thawbān (d. 782), who, (not) coincidentally, is also the key transmitter in the imitation hadith (see section below on imitation hadith) and appendix two. He seems to have cared about regulating Muslim distinction in public life. Ibid., 127-28.
28 As mentioned in the previous chapter, different versions of the Pact place it in either Damascus or Arabia.
29 The conclusions drawn from this text are slightly more tentative than those drawn from Abū Yusuf since it is preserved as we know it only from a commentary by the medieval Ḥanafī jurist of Islamic Central Asia, Muhammad al-Sarakhsī. In his translation of Shaybānī’s shorter treatise on international law, Majid Khadduri asserts, “…Sarakhsī’s commentary amounts to virtually a new book; he failed to reproduce an exposition of al-Shaybānī’s original text…al-Shaybānī’s text, despite efforts of modern editors to distinguish it from the commentary, may well be regarded as lost. Sarakhsī’s commentary represents Ḥanafī doctrines as they were understood in the fifth century of the Islamic era (eleventh century A. D.), and not in the second century (eighth century A. D.) when Shaybānī was live” (Khadduri pg. 44, fn. 102). Norman Calder supports this line of reasoning when he argues that the multivolume treatise attributed to Shaybānī, Mabsūṭ, is really a compilation of later jurists who synthesized a number of works attributed to Shaybānī. However, more recently, Benjamin Jokisch argues against this more skeptical appraisal. He claims that Shaybānī’s works, “form a unity” that corresponds to Byzantine law and therefore must have existed as a “systematic reception” that could not have exceeded the eighth century. Regardless of which side one chooses, what is important is that it is certainly possible, though not certain, that Shaybānī had authored what Sarakhsī attributed to him. One can therefore cautiously address Shaybānī’s contributions to the early discourse of tashabbuh. See Muhammad b. al-Ḥasan Shaybānī, The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybānī’s Siyar, trans. Majid Khadduri (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 44, fn. 102; Calder, Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence, 39; Benjamin Jokisch, Islamic Imperial Law: Hārūn al-Rashīd’s Codification Project (Berlin; New York: Walter De Gruyter, 2007), 98.
international relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in times of peace and war.\footnote{According the commentator of Shaybānī’s treatise, Sarakhsī, “[i]t describes the conduct (ṣīra) of the believers in their dealings (al-mu’āmalāt) with the non-Muslims of enemy peoples as well as with the people with whom the believers have made treaties, whether temporary (musta’minin) or permanent (ahl al-dhimma); [and also] with the apostates who were the worst of the unbelievers, since they abjured after they accepted Islam; and with the rebels, who were not counted as unbelievers, though they were ignorant and corrupted in their understanding of Islam. Muḥammad Shams al-Aʾimma al-Sarakhsī, al-Mabsūṭ, 30 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1414/1993), 10:2; cited and translated in Shaybānī, The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybānī’s Siyar, 40.}

Governing both political entities and individuals, it addresses issues such as territorial integrity, taxation, regulations governing non-Muslim foreigners, rules of war, as well as diplomatic and commercial relations.\footnote{Hanafi scholars in particular were instrumental in developing this genre of law, although other scholars and schools contributed as well. Shaybānī apparently authored this greater treatise in order to respond to a derogatory comment by the Syrian jurist, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Awzāʿī (d. 774): Shaybānī, The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybānī's Siyar, 30, fn. 77. Khadduri perhaps overgeneralizes the distinction between Iraqi and Arabian jurists: “The Hijāzī jurists, somewhat remote from the areas in which Muslim and non-Muslims came into direct contact, paid little or no attention to the question arising from encounters between Islam and other communities.” ———, The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybānī's Siyar, 23.}

Its singular form, sīra means biography. The siyar genre, therefore, signified the transformation of political conduct from narrative to normative.\footnote{His father is said to have lived in Syria, eventually moving to Iraq. He joined Abū Ḥanīfa’s circle of disciples at 14 and stayed with him until Abū Ḥanīfa’s death four years later. At the age of 18, he then studied under Abū Yūsuf, while he served as chief judge. He himself eventually served a Judge of Raqqa until he was dismissed from his post seven years later. Near the end of his life it is said that Hārūn al-Rashīd appointed him Chief Judge of Baghdad, the most prestigious religious post in the Abbasid Empire, shortly before he died. See Ibid., 28-31.}

Like Abū Yūsuf, Shaybānī was a prominent Iraqi disciple of Abū Ḥanīfa and also served as a judge for Hārūn al-Rashīd.\footnote{In addition to Abū Ḥanīfa and Abū Yūsuf, he is said have studied with Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 777) in Iraq, Mālik b. Anas (d. 795) in Medina, Ibn Jurayj (d. 767) in Mecca and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Awzāʿī in Damascus. He reportedly encountered Shāfiʿī in Baghdad around the year 803.}

Shaybānī’s contribution to shaping the early semantic field of tashabbuh is significant. While Shaybānī’s usage of tashabbuh is qualitatively different from that of Abū Yūsuf, both usages are expressions of an imperial Islamic order. Shaybānī, like his mentor Abū Yūsuf, deploys oral traditions in order to support his normative religious
positions. He transmits the imitation hadith, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them,” as part of a much longer narration:

Ṭāwūs said, “The Messenger of God said: ‘God sent me with the sword on the eve of the hour and he placed my sustenance underneath the shade of my spear. He condemned those who oppose me to humiliation and abasement. Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.’”

This tradition amounts to a dramatic apocalyptic call for jihad. God authorized the Prophet to carry a sword, the symbol par excellence for war, which evokes the famous prophetic hadith: “Paradise lies beneath the shade of swords.” The subsequent reference to Judgment Day adds an apocalyptic dimension. Employing the Quranic metonym of “the Hour” for the climactic encounter between God and human where “each soul shall be repaid in full” creates an imminent sense urgency: the end of human existence draws near as the pace of sacred time quickens. In lieu of paradise, the narration then places material gain underneath the shade of another weapon of war, the spear. It suggests that the reward for battle does not just materialize in the next world, but arrives in the form of life-sustaining provisions here and now. Having established the case for war, the tradition forecasts the consequences of those who reject the Prophet’s call or oppose him in battle: humiliation and disgrace. The Arabic word, ṣaghār, recalls

---

35 Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Shaybānī and Muhammad Shams al-A’imma al-Sarakhsī, Sharḥ Kitāb al-Siyar al-Kabīr, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1997), 1:12-14. Al-Sarakhsī, Al-Mabsūṭ, 10:3. Here I will examine the hadith text according to its classification by Shaybānī. While we cannot be certain that Shaybānī, and not Sarakhsī, transmitted this tradition, it was certainly possible that he did, given his own familiarity with prophetic traditions and his itinerancy across the major centers of Islamic learning across the Abbasid Empire - including Medina and Syria. It is not farfetched to imagine how he could have encountered the imitation hadith in its different forms, which, as I will demonstrate below, was circulating in Syria by the middle of the eighth century. As mentioned above, tashabbuh was part of his religious vocabulary.

36 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-jihād wa al-siyar, bāb al-janna taḥta ẓill al-suyūf; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-imāra, bāb thubūt al-janna li’l-shahīd. Ironically, in another context, the Prophet makes this statement after advising his audience not to hope to meet the enemy. See Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-jihād wa al-siyar, bāb lā tamannaw liqā’ al-ʿadā
the Quranic verse that charges Muslims to overcome the People of the Book until they are humbled and subdued (ṣāghirūn). And finally, if this threat fails to persuade, then “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.” In this context, this hadith seems to assert an “us versus them polarity” that distinguishes between friends and enemies. This tradition is imperialism in a nutshell. At face value, it is nothing less than a call to jihad, to holy war.

Shaybānī categorizes this tradition under a chapter on the virtues of the ribāṭ, which, as earlier discussed, played a unique role in Muslim imperial logic. It is a unique space where empire and religion converge. Guarding the frontiers through an ascetic life was a social experience that brought its participants into a coherent unity. In this context, those who relocate to the ribāṭ will have answered the call of the tradition; they will achieve the sustenance promised to those who wield their swords and spears for God’s cause. To imitate the one who lives in this condition, the murābiṭ, or frontier guardian, becomes “one of them.”

Hadith: Acts of Distinction

The genre of hadith intensifies the negative usage of tashabbuh present in the other genres of early Islamic literature. The hadith provide the key to mapping the early semantic field of tashabbuh. As other studies have observed, the hadith link tashabbuh

---

37 Quran 9:29: “Fight those who have been given scripture yet do not believe in God nor the Last Day, and who do not prohibit what God and His messenger have prohibited nor follow the religion of truth until they pay the tribute with their hands, humbled and subdued (ṣāghirūn).”

38 A pioneer in so many areas of scholarship, Ignaz Goldziher first introduced the concept of tashabbuh to the Western academic study of Islam. He made several very crucial observations about tashabbuh in his pioneering article. He was the first to locate tashabbuh as a hadith-based discourse. Although he suggested that Abbasid fanaticism played a role in circulating tashabbuh traditions, he remained open to
to Muslim regulation of religious distinction – especially between Muslims and Jews. However, other studies have missed *tashabbuh*’s connection to other social distinctions – a lacuna that I fill below.

My examination of Sunnī canonical and non-canonical collections of hadith shows that *tashabbuh* applies to a wider range of practices and a wider range of social relations than was previously recognized. Muslims deployed the vocabulary of *tashabbuh* not only as a way to mediate religious relations but also as a way to classify the social order along a broad hierarchical spectrum. Even more, the term *tashabbuh* appears in almost every collection of hadith. This suggests that its use in Islamic religious discourses had reached every major center of the early Muslim world by the ninth century: Medina and Mecca in the Hijaz; Sanʻā’, Yemen; Kūfa and Baṣra in Iraq; Fustāṭ, Egypt; and Damascus, Syria. *Tashabbuh* had become a widespread vernacular of Muslim distinction.

One particular command became a topos worthy of mention. The negative imperative “Do not imitate” (*lā tashabbahū*) circulated across the major centers of hadith learning. This command loads *tashabbuh* with a negative value. It was always the possibility that some of them may have originated during the time of the Prophet. Congruent with this skepticism towards the provenance of hadith, Goldziher reasoned that the content of hadith reflected political, theological, and legal developments that occurred contemporary to their compilation and collection. Yet, Goldziher dismissed the issue of provenance as being of “little importance,” suggesting that other important insights about early Muslim history could be gained from an analysis of these traditions. Goldziher, “Usages Juifs D’après La Littérature Religieuse Musulmans,” 77-78. References to Goldziher’s article will be based on the French translation.

39 See footnote above for references to the studies of Goldziher, Kister and Vajda. Nearly a century after Goldziher, M. J. Kister authored the first English language article on *tashabbuh*, which he titled, “Do Not Assimilate Yourselves.” Like Goldziher’s article, Kister focuses on hadith. Although he expands on Goldziher’s list of traditions, his collection is rather haphazard and disorganized. Kister, ”Do Not Assimilate Yourselves...” *Lā Tashabbahū...”*. 40 The lone exception is Sanʻā’, Yemen, a relatively less important center. This conclusion was based on my examination of chains of transmission and searching for “common links” who circulated the tradition.
coupled, however, with a criticism of a specific ritual or social practice. As a result, the command, “Do not imitate” provides a logic of practice - a rationale for behaving in a certain way. In the Muslim religious imaginary these concrete practices eventually became symbolic markers of distinction. The widespread presence of this topos illustrates the remarkable consistency of Muslim vocabularies of distinction.41

Yet other usages of *tashabbuh* were local to a specific area. By mapping *tashabbuh*’s semantic geography - its differentiated meanings across the major geographical centers of hadith learning in the early Muslim world – we can learn how certain local practices of Muslim distinction became textualized into the religious corpus of Islam. We obtain a geographically differentiated representation of Muslim distinction. Some practices of distinction gained significance in certain regions before becoming canonized in the collections of hadith. I obtained a tradition’s semantic geography by studying its chain of transmission, which tells us who transmitted the tradition. From the information provided in biographical dictionaries, I then mapped the locations of the transmitters.42 This transmission genealogy tells us where and when a specific tradition was unable to find common links that circulated *lā tashabbahū* traditions in Yemen. See below for an explanation of the concept and my approach to deriving a semantic geography of *tashabbuh*.

41 Hadith teachers and students were themselves mobile, often traveling between different cities of learning. Naturally, they formed an intellectual community that aimed to shape the world around them according to their vision of religion and society.

42 There are some clusters of traditions that have a “common link.” According to historian of Islam, Joseph Schacht, a common link is someone who transmitted a tradition to multiple sources according to the chains of transmission contained in hadith collections. Some scholars, including Schacht himself, have used this concept to suggest the “common link” is the one who originated the given tradition, and falsely ascribed the tradition to a past authority, usually the Prophet. This conclusion was rooted in a skeptical appraisal of hadith traditions as products of later Muslim history, not the Prophet (or Companion) himself. I am not interested in entering this debate about the elusive origins of hadith. However, this does not mean that Schacht’s common link theory is not useful for narrating the early history of Islam. On the contrary, we can determine a given tradition’s common link in order to discern the circulation of a tradition at a given place and time. In other words, a common link can give us a general idea of where a given tradition circulated. We can therefore use common links to “map” the semantic geography of *tashabbuh* across the early Muslim world. Most *tashabbuh* hadith, however are lone narrations. They lack a common link who
may have circulated. As a result, we learn that certain traditions circulated in specific regions such as Syria, Iraq, and Egypt by the eighth century.\textsuperscript{43} It offers us a glimpse at how local practice shaped the textualization of Muslim distinction.

I have organized the following survey of traditions thematically. The arrangement highlights how Muslim hadith scholars deployed the language of \textit{tashabbuh} as a way to mediate religious and other distinctions. I also highlight traditions that became especially significant in later Islamic discourses, although I do not discuss their meaning and historical context in detail.\textsuperscript{44} My main objective is to map \textit{tashabbuh}'s semantic field, including the variety of ritual and cultural practices associated with it.

\textsuperscript{43} In addition to mapping the circulation of several traditions, this approach to mapping \textit{tashabbuh}'s semantic geography affords us a global insight. A majority of \textit{tashabbuh} traditions travel from Mecca or Medina in Arabia to almost every major center of the Muslim world, especially Iraq. Such a chain of transmission may look like the following: The Prophet Muhammad (Medina) -> Companion, Ibn ʿAbbās (Mecca) -> ʿIkrima (Medina) -> Qatāda (Wāsiṭ, Iraq) -> Shuʿba (Baṣra, Iraq) -> numerous transmitters who eventually settled in Medina, Iraq and elsewhere. This observation confirms what we know from about the early history of hadith transmission: the center of hadith transmission was originally Medina before Iraq took over that honor in the eighth century.

\textsuperscript{44} I discuss the semiotic meaning and significance of many of the following traditions in part three of this study.

taught the tradition to multiple students who then circulated the tradition to their students. Therefore, one cannot confidently determine how frequently transmitters circulated these lone-narrations in a given locale; we cannot know how important that particular practice of distinction was to the local community in which it circulated. In mapping the semantic geography of \textit{tashabbuh}, I am only interested in documenting the geography of a tradition that we can determine with confidence to have been circulated among multiple people in a given region. Although a common link does not provide absolute certainty about the circulation of a given tradition, we can still be reasonably confident about the information it provides us. When mapping the semantic geography of \textit{tashabbuh}, then, I focus only on those traditions circulated by a common link. See Joseph Schacht, \textit{The Origins of Muhammad Jurisprudence} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 163-75; For a critical review of Schacht's theories and Western historical approaches to hadith in general see Chapter eight in Jonathan Brown, \textit{Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World}, Foundations of Islam (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).
The Imitation Hadith

Let us begin with the defining hadith tradition: “Whoever imitates (tashabbaha) a nation is one of them.” The imitation hadith has been listed by Muslim scholars among the most well-known prophetic hadith in circulation. Hadith critics’ gradings of this hadith ranged from good (ḥasan) to authentic (ṣaḥīḥ), although some individual chains of transmission (isnāds) are considered forgeries or weak. Unlike other tashabbuh texts, it does not have an immediate context, other than the context that the hadith scholars provided, which I discuss in the next section. In its long version, discussed above, it closes an apocalyptic call to jihad. As a stand alone text, however, it is more benign; nor is it bound to a specific practice or to a particular collectivity, religious or ethnic whom Muslims are urged to either imitate or warned not to imitate. As a result of this textual ambiguity, this hadith has been the subject of many different interpretations over the course of Muslim history. I address some of the most important of these interpretations in the next two chapters, which also mark the theoretical development of the tashabbuh discourse as a whole. Here, I discuss only those aspects that are most relevant to the

---

45 See Appendix One in this study for references to all the collections for this hadith.
early Muslim social imaginary, its transmission, earliest interpretations, and, in the next section, its classification in topical collections of hadith.

Damascus is the key setting for the circulation of this hadith. The two transmitters most responsible for circulating the hadith are both Damascenes: ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Thawbān (d. 781–82) and the famed Syrian jurist, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Awzāʿī (d. 773), who had a legal school of his own. These two were contemporaries, and apparently knew one another. They both also survived the fall of the Umayyad dynasty. Awzāʿī, however, relocated to modern day Jordan where he died. Although this hadith apparently entered Syria during the first Islamic century, it was not circulated with frequency in Damascus until the middle of the eighth century, roughly around the fall of the Umayyad dynasty. Since Damascus was the capital of the Umayyad dynasty before


49 In one instance Awzāʿī rebukes Ibn Thawbān for flip flopping on the permissibility of leaving the Friday prayer. Ibn Thawbān stated originally that leaving the Friday prayer is unlawful, and later changed his mind, stating that it is permissible. al-Dhahabī, Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ, 7:314.

50 Everyone who transmitted this hadith to Ibn Thawbān is also Damascene except the first transmitter, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar, who resided in Medina. Still, this chain of transmission is thoroughly Damascene, which contradicts the implications made by Juynboll that tashabbuh is a Medinan phenomenon. G.H.A. Juynboll associates lā tashabbahū hadith with Medina and khālifūhum hadith with Syria. He bases this conclusion only upon the traditions transmitted by Ibn Saʿād on dyeing hair in his Tabaqāt: Juynboll, "Dyeing the Hair and Beard in Early Islam: A Hadith-Analytical Study."; Ibn Saʿād, Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr, 1:378. While this is an interesting distinction, my study of other lā tashabbahū traditions shows that this language was much more widespread.
its fall in 750, the hadith may have carried imperial meanings of conquest, or may echo conflicts among different Muslim factions in the midst of the Abbasid revolution. These are highly speculative suggestions however.\textsuperscript{51} The association of the key \textit{tashabbuh} text with Damascus eerily anticipates the interest in \textit{tashabbuh} of medieval Damascene jurists, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 1348), and Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 1651), who wrote the only three pre-modern treatises on \textit{tashabbuh}. Imitation seems to have been a major problem in cosmopolitan Damascus.

The imitation hadith’s connection to Damascus also evokes memories of the Pact of ʿUmar, whose most frequently transmitted version also takes place in Damascus; this strengthens the imperial overtones of the hadith.\textsuperscript{52} However, the parallels between the imitation hadith and the Pact of ʿUmar are not limited to geography. The most significant Companion transmitter of the imitation hadith is none other than the son of ʿUmar, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar, who resided in Medina.\textsuperscript{53} He is said to have transmitted the hadith from the Prophet to a resident of Damascus in the seventh century.\textsuperscript{54} To add to the father and son \textit{tashabbuh} correspondence, in another lesser known transmission of the

\textsuperscript{51} Historical chronicles do not record this hadith being used as a battle cry or a slogan among different Muslim factions for example.

\textsuperscript{52} In my examination of different published versions of the Pact of ʿUmar, I was unable to find any significant correspondences in the transmitters of the imitation hadith and the Pact of ʿUmar. The one common transmitter of both texts, Ismāʿīl b. Ayyāsh (d. 798) who is from Homs, Syria ironically transmits the version of the Pact of ʿUmar that was said to have occurred in al-Jazīra, not Syria! See Shams al-Dīn Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, \textit{Aḥkām Ahl al-Dhimma}, ed. Ṣubḥī al-Ṣāliḥ, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-ʿilm al-malāyīn, 1994), 2:658.

\textsuperscript{53} On Ibn ʿUmar see section below, along with references in the footnotes.

\textsuperscript{54} The Damascene, Abū al-Munīb al-Jurashī, is listed among the transmitters in \textit{Sunan Abī Dāwūd}, kitāb al-

libās, bāb libs al-shuhrā. Also see appendix one of this study.
imitation hadith, the caliph ʿUmar, himself, is the origin of this tradition, not the Prophet!  

I now turn to one early interpretation of the imitation hadith that potentially represents an early Muslim understanding of *tashabbuh* before it had become negatively charged. The early commentator from Kūfa in Iraq, ʿAlqama (d. 681 – 682), is reported to have glossed the imitation hadith as follows: “Whoever imitates the pious is honored like those who are honored and whoever imitates the sinners is not honored.” This common-sense interpretation echoes the imitation hadith’s neutral plain sense meaning, and appears to predate its later ideologically - charged negative connotations among Muslim religious scholars. It explains that imitation leads to a moral polarity of either honor or disgrace, depending on the model one chooses to follow. This descriptive account of imitation as becoming subtly suggests to the listener/reader that she must choose her models wisely, and pay attention to the company she keeps. ʿAlqama’s gloss also suggests that early Muslims did not necessarily have clear cut attitudes regarding the negative implications of this hadith. It clearly contrasts the negative value carried by *tashabbuh* in most other hadith.


56 ʿAlqama was a student of the famous Companion of the Prophet who also resided in Iraq, Ibn Masʿūd (d.32/ 652-3), and was a key figure in the Hanafi law school since Abū Ḥanīfa traces his intellectual genealogy back to him. See the entire commentary of the hadith in al-ʿĀzīm Ābādī, *ʿAwn al-Maʿbūd Sharḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 11:74-76.

57 While it is certainly possible that the Kūfan ʿAlqama glossed the imitation hadith in this way, the interpretation attributed to ʿAlqama also tells us that later Muslims imagined *tashabbuh* outside the standard negative gloss. None of the chains of transmission (*isnāds*) corroborate the circulation of the imitation hadith in Iraq, where ʿAlqama resided, prior to his death. They all suggest that during the seventh century the hadith was circulating elsewhere. See Appendix One.
Religious Distinction

“A Muslim should not support an infidel, nor should he imitate (yatashabbahu) an infidel.” 58 This statement attributed to the Prophet is contained in the hadith collection of ʿAbd Allāh b. Wahb (d. 812), which is among the oldest Arabic-Islamic papyrus codices in existence. 59 As a prominent Egyptian student of the jurist, Imam Mālik b. Anas (d. 795), Ibn Wahb was a religious authority in his own right; he helped compile the Muwaṭṭaʾ and spread the school of Mālik. This hadith text is striking because unlike any other tashabbuh hadith contained in Sunni canonical or non-canonical collections, it declares without restriction that Muslims should not support or imitate infidels. Infidel, or kāfir in this context, would include all non-Muslims - Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and pagans. It also seems to include all practices. In every other tradition to be covered below, when the Prophet or some other religious figure make a similar statement to not imitate a religious community, whether Jews, Christians or pagans, the command always justifies doing or not doing a specific concrete ritual or cultural practice. It is never a blanket statement. This hadith, however, is the lone exception. It foregrounds religion as a general category of distinction.

Anxieties of Jewish Influence

Muslims harbored anxieties of Jewish influence. Of all the religious communities, the tashabbuh discourse suggests that they were acutely concerned with differentiating themselves from the Jews most of all. This trope seemed to have persisted in religious


59 On Ibn Wahb’s life and status among early religious scholars see introduction in Ibid., 1:12-32.
literature even after the Prophet’s expulsion and elimination of Jewish tribes from Medina in the third decade of the seventh century. Many have theorized about the Jewish “influence” upon the development of Islam, and it is not my point here to speculate on the Jewish origins of Islam. Rather, I make the simple observation, as Goldziher had observed over a century before and M. J. Kister more recently, that a disproportionate number of tashabib traditions address Jews in particular. As Goldziher observed, Muslims were not just concerned with distinguishing themselves from Jews through abstract doctrine and ritual practice but through a wide range of everyday practices as well. Tashabib traditions told Muslims to do the opposite of Jewish practice by: cleaning their armpits, dyeing their hair, sitting down during a funeral, covering the faces of their dead, and not hoarding goods or wrapping oneself up in a single garment during prayer.

60 This thesis was most provocatively defended in Patricia Crone and M. A. Cook, Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

61 Goldziher was insightful enough to notice that these traditions appear to reflect mounting tensions between Muslims and Jews in Medina. A skeptical view of hadith actually presupposes that Muslim traditions should emphasize Christian influence more than Jewish influence since the greatest rival to the early Muslim empire was the Christian Byzantine empire. According to A. S. Tritton, “It is surprising how little Muslim authors have to say about the Jews; the law books rarely mention them, speaking only of dhimmis or Christians (Tritton, 92). However, in the hadith, Muslims are actually more concerned with Jewish influence. This emphasis corresponds with the Quranic emphasis on Moses’ prophecy more than any other. This observation, of course, is certainly not sufficient to convince skeptics of the authenticity of hadith traditions. However, as Goldziher suggests, it should not surprise us that they may reflect growing tensions between Muslims and Jews in Medina, and increasing early Muslim anxieties over Jewish influence.


63 I explain the traditions on dyeing hair and covering the faces of the dead in further detail below and in chapter six. The traditions can be found in the following collections: on cleaning armpits see, Ṣunan al-Tirmidhī, kitāb al-tahāra, bāb mā jāʾa fī al-naẓāfa; on dyeing hair, see Ṣunan al-Tirmidhī, kitāb al-libās, bāb mā jāʾa fī al-khiḍāb; on covering the faces of the dead, see Abū Bakr Ibn Abī Shayba, Al-Muṣannaf li-Ibn Abī Shayba, 1st ed., 16 vols. (Riyadh: Makatabat al-Rushd, 1425/2004), 5:435. Hadith # 14634 in kitāb al-hajj, bāb fī al-muhrim yamūt yughaṭṭa raʾsuhu; on not hoarding goods see Abū Yaʿlā al-Mawsī, Musnad Abī Yaʿlā (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿriʿa, 2005), 183, hadith # 790; on not wrapping oneself up in a single garment see Abd al-Razzāq al-Sanʿānī, Al-Muṣannaf, ed. Habīb al-Rahmān al-ʿAẓamī, 12 vols. (Beirut: Maktab al-Islāmī, 1983-), 1:352, hadith # 1372.
while shod in opposition to the Jews who did not.\textsuperscript{64} While these instances may reflect linguistic strategies to stigmatize specific practices rather than an accurate depiction of actual social reality, they nonetheless indicate acute Muslim anxieties over Jewish influence – a fact that corroborates historical narratives of the Prophet’s rivalry with the Jews of Medina and the Quran’s emphasis on the turbulent history of the Children of Israel.

Other traditions illustrate Muslim self-consciousness of their own resemblance to Jews. In one tradition, the Prophet exclaims: “How one night resembles the other! These Children of Israel – how we resemble them”\textsuperscript{65} In another, the Prophet sarcastically chides: “Both in your way and in your manner…you resemble the Children of Israel more than any other people. You follow their act every bit. But I am not sure. Are you worshipping the calf?”\textsuperscript{66} In this last reprise, the Prophet sharply criticizes a group of Muslims who desired to hallow a tree in imitation of pagan practices of idolatry. By rhetorically asking those Muslims if they were worshipping the calf, the Prophet obliquely draws a mimetic relationship between them and the Jews. The Quran chastises the Jews for wanting to imitate the pagans by a worshipping a calf.\textsuperscript{67}

According to another tradition, even the Jews of Medina noticed the Prophet’s policy of religious distinction. The Prophet is said to have ordered Muslims not to sequester menstruating women. This was meant to oppose the practice of Medinan Jews

\textsuperscript{64}Hadith traditions exhort Muslims to wear shoes during ritual prayer in order to be different from the Jews who removed their shoes before performing ritual prayer in their synagogues. See below and chapter six.


\textsuperscript{66}Ibn T, 109?

\textsuperscript{67}Ibn T, 109?
who sequestered menstruating women into separate spaces. In response to this
oppositional prophetic decree, one Medinan Jew exclaimed, “This man (The Prophet)
will leave nothing out from our affair except that he will do the opposite.” The Jew
perceived that the Prophet was deliberately trying to distinguish Muslims from Jews.
What is significant about this narration is that it suggests a Muslim policy of religious
distinction was widely known even among Medina’s Jews.

Ritual

A large number of traditions pertaining to religious distinction pertain to ritual, especially
ritual prayer. Ritual, of course, is a key way for a religious community to signal its
distinction from others. Unsurprisingly, most traditions stigmatize the People of the
Book, and the Jews in particular. The Prophet is said to have disliked praying in niches
because it resembled what was practiced in churches; and Muslims should not imitate the
People of the Book. ʿUmar urges Muslims not to imitate Jews who wrapped themselves
up in a single garment during ritual prayer. The Prophet’s wife, ʿĀʾisha, disliked that a
Muslim pray with his hands over the bellybutton because this gesture resembled Jewish
practice. One Companion advises a Muslim who travels during Ramadan, but reaches
his destination during the day to fast the remainder of the day in order to avoid

69 ʿUmar b. al-Khattāb saw a man pray wrapped up in a cloak (multahifan bihi) so he said, ‘Do not imitate
the Jews. If anyone of you cannot find anything but a single garment (thobe), let him make an waist-wrap
(Lebūr: Maktab al-Islāmī, 1983-), 3:352, hadith # 1372.
70 “She disliked placing one’s hands over the belly-button (al-ikhtisār) while standing during ritual prayer
and she said, ‘Do not imitate the Jews.’” This tradition is attributed to ʿĀʾisha, but with a Kūfan Iraqi
resembling non-believers who are not fasting. Muslim ritual distinction included cleanliness as well. One hadith urges Muslims to pluck the hairs of their armpits and to not imitate the Jews.

**Everyday Cultural Practice**

The language of tashabbuh also draws attention to the significance of everyday practice in shaping religious distinction. Corroborating its usage in the Pact of ʿUmar, tashabbuh gained traction in a range of seemingly insignificant cultural practices. It charged these cultural practices with socio-symbolic meaning in public life. The language of tashabbuh highlighted ordinary practices such as standing, sitting, veiling, dressing, styling hair, and cleaning. Tashabbuh shows that distinction is not only an abstract concept; it is an everyday practice. The usage of tashabbuh in hadith collections materializes in four main areas of everyday life surveyed here: social life, funerals, festivals, and dress.

**Social Belonging**

Muslims sought to regulate social belonging. In the eighth century, Egyptian Muslims became especially concerned without how to greet one another. How to greet someone became a key gesture of Muslim social belonging and distinction. Egypt was a former territory of the Byzantine Empire where Muslims would initially have been a religious minority living among Jews and Christians. The shrewd general who helped conquer Egypt, ʿAmr b. al-Āṣ (d. 663) transmitted to his son who transmitted to his son the following tradition:

---


72 The hadith states: “God is good and He loves goodness. A clean person loves cleanliness. A generous person loves generosity. A benefactor loves beneficence. So clean - I think he said - your armpits and do not imitate the Jews.” *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, kitāb al-tahāra, bāb mā jāʾa fī al-nazāfa
One who imitates (yatashabbahu) others (lit. other than us) is not one of us. (laysa minnā man yatashabbahu bi-ghayrinā) So do not imitate (lā tashabbahū) Christians and Jews. The Jews greet each other using their fingers and the Christians greet each other using their palms.73

This is an important tradition because it explicitly directs Muslims not to imitate Christians and Jews. The phrase, “One who imitates others is not one of us,” appears to be the obverse of the imitation hadith: “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.”74 The phrase actually expresses what the imitation hadith came to signify: a general warning not to imitate others. Despite its local setting, some Muslim commentators extended the imperative, “Do not imitate Christians and Jews,” from a context-specific command to a general principle.75 The tradition reveals that Egyptian Muslims during the eighth century had anxieties over how to visibly distinguish their greeting from those of Jews and Christians.

Festivals

Festivals, whether holidays, celebrations, ceremonies, or rituals, were potential moments of mimetic frenzy that caused Muslims anxieties from the beginning of Islam. Early Muslims perceived these social events as more than just a good time; they signaled national, ethnic, and religious identity as well. In many cases, they also signaled debauchery and political insubordination. For a Muslim to participate in foreign festivals therefore had potentially serious repercussions, as indicated by a very severe tradition attributed to ʿUmar:

73 Sunan al-Tirmidhī, kitāb al-istiʾdhān, bā mā jāʾa fī karāhiyyat ishārat al-yad bi-al-salām. There is a common link for chains in the transmission of this hadith: the Meccan, ʿAmr b. Shuʿayb (d. 736). Both chains lead to two important Egyptian figures: the jurist, Layth b. Saʿd (d. 791), and traditionist, Abd-Allāh b. Lahīʾa (d. 790). Tirmidhī grades his transmission as fair due to additional evidence, indicating that the chain of transmission itself is weak. Also see chapter six for a semiotic analysis of this tradition.

74 “Laysa minnā man yatashabbahu bi-ghayrinā” versus “Man tashabbaha bi qawmin fa-huwa minhum.”

75 See my analysis of this tradition in chapter six.
Whoever settles in foreign lands, celebrates their holidays - Nawrūz and Mihrajān - and imitates them (yatashabbahu) until he dies, will be resurrected with them on the Day of Judgment.\textsuperscript{76}

The provocative us versus them language of this tradition evokes the imitation hadith. However, it does so within the specific context of festivals. It very clearly illustrates early Muslim anxieties over the prospect of cultural assimilation resulting from the rapid expansion of the early Muslim polity into non-Arab lands. The seamless elision of ethnic and political difference with religious difference is also striking. To celebrate the Persian festivals of Nawrūz and Mihrajān was the equivalent to cultural apostasy; the person who participates in these Persian festivals would be raised with them, not the (Arab) Muslims, on the Day of Judgment. Festivals are therefore portrayed as crucial markers of social belonging. During the Mamluk period, Ibn Taymiyya and other pietists carried this crusade against festivals to new heights, frequently deploying the vocabulary of \textit{tashabbuh} in the process.\textsuperscript{77}

\textbf{Funerals}

Like festivals, funerals in early Islam were also potential sites of mimetic frenzy. As Leor Halevi has shown, funeral processions among different religious communities were performances of social distinction.\textsuperscript{78} Muslims were therefore very concerned with distinguishing their funeral processions from those of Jews and Christians. The following tradition most likely spread to Iraq from Mecca sometime in the middle of the


\textsuperscript{77} See chapter three for a description of Muslim responses to festivals in the context of Mamluk Damascus; see chapter seven for an analysis of festivals in light of their semiotic impact on the senses.

\textsuperscript{78} See chapter five in Leor Halevi, \textit{Muhammad’s Grave} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 143-64.
eighth century: “Cover the faces of your dead and do not imitate the Jews.”

The tradition claims that Jews do not cover the faces of their dead, and Muslims should not imitate them. In another tradition transmitted by residents of Iraq, a Companion saw a funeral followed by an incense burner; he took the initiative to throw it and break it, before rationalizing his act by exclaiming: “Do not imitate the People of the book!”

This tradition suggests that using incense at a funeral was both literally and figuratively inflammatory.

Dress

Corroborating the Pact of ʿUmar’s emphasis on sartorial distinctions, a large number of tashabbuh traditions regulate modes of fashion such as hairstyle, veiling, and footwear. Dress mediates the body’s relationship to the social world, and is a dynamic carrier of social, cultural, political and religious meanings. By regulating Muslim dress, religious scholars sought to usher in a new Islamic style.

M. J. Kister devoted roughly half of his article on tashabbuh to the topic of Jewish shoes. Footwear was a visible marker of distinction much like it is today. The Prophet is said to have urged his Companions: “Pray in your shoes, and do not imitate (lā tashabbahū) the Jews!”

Taking off shoes in emulation of Mosaic practice became a marker of Jewish ritual practice. As a result, the Prophet encourages Muslims to

---

79 The Meccan, Ibn Jurayj (d. 767), is said to have transmitted this tradition to several Iraqi personalities, Sufyān al-Thawrī, Hafs b. Ghiyāth, and ‘Alī b. ‘Āsim. See for example, Ibn Abī Shayba, Al-Muṣannaf, 5:435, hadith # 14634. See chapter five for my analysis of this tradition in the context of veiling.

80 “He saw burning incense (mujammaran) at a funeral so he broke it! He said: I heard Ibn ʿAbbās say, ‘Do not imitate the People of the Book.’” This has a Kūfan Iraqi isnād. Ibid., 4:445, hadith # 11277.

distinguish their ritual prayer from that of the Jews by wearing shoes. Muslims, however, extended this practice of distinction from religious ritual to everyday life. The Pact of ʿUmar requires that non-Muslims not wear shoes that resemble Muslim shoes in public spaces. In Baghdad, the founding jurist, Ahmad b. Hanbal, complains about Sindhi sandals, a popular fashion that had taken root among Muslims in his day. He deemed them impermissible if the person intended to wear them for decoration, but permissible only if he had a real need. When he espied Sindhi sandals on a doorstep, he inquired about its owner and then responded, “He is imitating (yatashabbahu) royalty (awlād al-mulāk).” In this context, the language of tashabbuh mediates the distinction between everyday and courtly practice. Its negative connotation suggests that Muslim religious elites frowned upon emulating the fashions of those in power.

Hairstyle, especially dyeing beards, was another widely debated issue among early Muslims. A tradition that circulated widely in religiously cosmopolitan Iraq urges Muslims to dye their hair: “Dye your grey hair and do not imitate (lā tahabbahū) Christians and Jews.” The prescriptive command not to imitate Jews and Christians provides a logic of distinction for the practice of dying hair.

**Ethnicity: Differentiating Arabs**

---

82 I also discuss the topic of shoes in chapter five.
84 The Medinese Hishām b. Urwa (d. 145/762) is said to have transmitted this tradition to various students who resided in Iraq. Another version of this tradition omits the Christians, and urges Muslims not to imitate Jews only. I address the topic of dyeing hair in more detail in chapter five. *Sunan al-Nasā‘ī*, kitāb *al-zīna*, bāb al-idhn bi al-khiḍāb; For mention of Jews only see *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, kitāb al-libās, bāb mā jā‘a fi al-khiḍāb; Ibn Sa‘d, *Kitāb al-Tabaqāt al-Kabīr*, 1:378; Juynboll, "Dyeing the Hair and Beard in Early Islam: A Hadith-Analytical Study."
Hairstyle also mediated ethnic relations. Beards, literally, loomed large among Muslim men. They entangled ethnic and religious distinction into a single visible marker. The Prophet is reported to have said: “Grow your beards and do not imitate (lā tashabbahū) the non-Arabs (Aʿājim).” Among the founding jurists of what eventually became the Hanafi school, the following tradition circulated: “There is no problem in shortening the beard as long as it does not resemble the polytheists.” While dying the beard functioned to differentiate Muslims from Jews and Christians, growing it differentiated them from non-Arabs and polytheists. Facial hair was truly an expression of Muslim (male) distinction. Most traditions employ the literary topos, “Be different!” in order to exhort Muslims to growing out their beards.

In a very different context, ʿAbd-Allāh b. ʿUmar reported to have heard his father, ʿUmar, say:

Whoever braids his hair should shave after coming out of the sanctified state of pilgrimage (iḥrām). Do not imitate (lā tashabbahū) the [pagan Arab] practice of braiding your hair with gum (talbīd).

In this scenario, the topos, “Do not imitate,” expresses a negative attitude toward pre-Islamic Arabs. Because Arab pagans had also valorized the sacred precinct (kaʿba), ʿUmar urges Muslims to differentiate themselves from their rituals and even their hairstyles. Muslims harbored anxieties of pre-Islamic Arab influences as well. This is

86 Abū Yūsuf, Kitāb al-Āthār, 235.
the lone tashabbuh tradition transmitted by the founding jurist, Mālik b. Anas, in his famous compilation of traditions, The Well-Trodden Path (Muwaṭṭa’).  

Gender

Eighth century Iraq was not only a hotbed of religious rivalry; it was also a site of rivalry between the sexes. Among the most widely transmitted tashabbuh-related traditions pertained to gendered imitation:

“The messenger of God cursed men who imitate women (mutashabbiḥīn) and women who imitate men (mutashabbiḥāt)”

The widespread circulation of this tradition in Iraq suggests that in the mid to late eighth century, men and women interacting and resembling one another became a serious problem for Iraqi men of religion. Like the imitation hadith, the tradition is a general commentary on moral behavior without additional context to specify its meaning.

Classifications of hadith scholars and the circulation of other traditions condemning gendered imitation in dress give a sartorial gloss to the above tradition.

88 This work transmits legal opinions mainly in the form of traditions on a wide range of subjects from ritual prayer to business transactions. Mālik was a resident of Medina, the city of the Prophet, and the capital of the first three caliphs and an important early center of Islamic learning and teaching. Medina’s close proximity to Mecca and its association with the pilgrimage rites, provided an appropriate local context for the circulation of this tradition. Although the chain of transmitters recorded by Mālik are Medinan (ʿUmar → Ibn ʿUmar → Nāfiʿ → Mālik), this tradition was exported to Iraq and Syria, through the mobility of the famous traditionist, Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742), who lived in both Medina and Damascus. This narration is therefore contained in hadith collections mostly through a series of Syrian transmitters who learned the narration from Zuhrī during the first half of the eighth century. Pilgrims from these regions became educated about how to properly perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. What was a local practice was becoming a general norm. See Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-lībās, Bāb al-talbīd.  


90 In the section below and in chapters five and six, I shed more light on the meanings and application of this tradition in light of its classification in collections of hadith, and its interpretation in commentaries and treatises of jurisprudence.
Early Muslims also discriminated by age: “The best of your youth emulate (yatashabbahu) your elders and the worst of your elders emulate your youth.” This tradition is important because, like the imitation hadith, it suggests that tashabbuh has both positive and negative possibilities, depending on the model imitated. It is also a general exhortation, not a criticism of a specific exterior practice. In this context, tashabbuh stresses the importance of molding one’s interior moral becoming. Youth should emulate their elders in order to become like them. However, elders should not emulate youth because it would morally corrupt them; young people lack the refinement of character that comes with life experience. The hierarchical social distinctions between old and young should therefore be maintained in order to maintain this ideal social and moral order.

A different sort of social hierarchy is enforced by a tradition where the caliph ʿUmar, who again plays the role of enforcer, distinguishes between free person and slave: “ʿUmar saw a slave girl who veiled her hair. He struck her and told her: "Do not imitate free women!" (lā tashabbahu bi-l-harāʾir). Counter-intuitively, ʿUmar commands the slave girl to take off her headscarf so that she does not resemble free women. In other words, not only should men and women not imitate one another, but women should not imitate other women of different social status. The usage of tashabbuh in this tradition

once again showcases the importance of dress, and the headscarf in particular, as a mediator of social distinction.

**Human vs. Animal: Braying like a Donkey**

Nature and culture were connected in the early Muslim social imaginary; even the distinctions between humans and animals were not always clear. The hadīth collector, Abū Dāwūd, transmits an anecdote in which the Prophet jokes about a man braying like a donkey:

“He (the Prophet) passed by a group gathered around a man who was making them laugh. So he asked, ‘What is this?’ They replied, ‘A man imitating (yatashabbahu) a donkey and making his friends laugh.’ So he responded, ‘Glory be to God, no one will believe this! God had perfected his image; now he transforms him into the image of a donkey!’”

Although this is a light-hearted tradition, the implication is that the donkey-imitator is demeaning himself by taking on such an appearance: tashabbuh still has a negative valence, and the emphasis, once again, is on exterior form. In many other traditions, the Prophet encourages Muslims to be different from various animals.\(^94\)

**Muhammad and the Devil**

Hadith scholars were also sensitive to the potential for human and spirit worlds to blur. One widely transmitted tradition illustrates the unique and unparalleled distinction of the Prophet Muhammad among creation: “He who has seen me in his sleep has seen me, for

---


\(^94\) Again, see chapter six.
Satan cannot simulate my form (lā yatashabbahu bī)."\textsuperscript{95} This tradition validates the veracity of dreams that visually depict the Prophet Muhammad because Satan cannot take his form.\textsuperscript{96} This tradition emphasizes tashabbuh primarily as the practice of taking on a new exterior form, much like the Quranic narrative of Jesus’ crucifixion. Unlike Jesus, however, Muhammad cannot be simulated or duplicated, at least by the devil. In this supernatural context, tashabbuh still carries a negative value through its association with the arch-deceiver, Satan. Muslims believe that Satan and his minions can assume anthropomorphic forms. One apocalyptic hadith narrative even depicts a scene during the end times where devils transfigure (yatashabbahūna) into zombies and hauntingly query the living, “Do you know me? I am your brother and your father…”\textsuperscript{97}

This ends the brief survey of tashabbuh hadith traditions. Almost universally, tashabbuh carries a negative connotation, whether in its capacious sense of interior moral self-transformation or in its surface-level sense of exterior transfiguration. Moreover, we learn that tashabbuh not mediated religious distinction, it also mediated social distinctions across gender, ethnicity, class, age, and species. In sum, among hadith scholars, tashabbuh had become a linguistic means to declare the reprehensibility of a potentially subversive mimetic practice and impose a normative order of distinction upon Muslim society.

\textsuperscript{95} Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-ruʾyā, bāb qawl alladhī (ṣalla Allāhu ʿalayhi wa sallam) man raʾāni fī al-manām fa-qad raʾāni

\textsuperscript{96} Dreams were part of early Muslim religious culture, the most famous manual attributed to the eighth century Iraqi religious authority Muhammad b. Sirīn (d. 728). Dreams of the Prophet held sacred value, suggesting divine favor or guidance. Throughout history, Muslims frequently invoked such dreams to legitimize normative religious claims on disputed subjects – even to validate the authenticity of a controversial hadith! Brown, Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World, 110-11.

I now briefly highlight three key historical figures who play key literary roles in *tashabbuh* hadith traditions; they all emerge as enforcers of Muslim distinction.

**Three ʿUmars of Distinction**

Three ʿUmars all related by blood, the second caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644), ʿUmar I, his son, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar (d. 692), and ʿUmar I’s great grandson, the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (d. 720), ʿUmar II, were pivotal historical figures in the first century or so of Islamic history. They each became critical religious figures in Sunnī Muslim memory for their role in shaping Muslim normative practice. They consistently reappear in *tashabbuh* traditions, either as transmitters or figures in the traditions themselves as regulators of Muslim distinction.  

ʿUmar I was the namesake of the Pact of ʿUmar, whose significance is mentioned throughout this study. He is also one of the transmitters of the imitation hadith, and figures in many other *tashabbuh*-related hadith as well. His association with enforcing Muslim distinction conformed to the images memorialized by Muslims. He is said to have been nicknamed by his peers, al-Fārūq, the “distinguisher” between truth and falsehood.  

As second caliph, he took credit for the early military conquests of the

---

*98 Among most Shiʿī Muslims, the three ʿUmars were more infamous than famous. ʿUmar was perceived as a key figure in the usurpation of the caliphate from ʿAli.

99 By “literary” I do not mean that they did not exist or that Muslim historical representations are necessarily concocted. I am simply highlighting their literary role in Muslim discourses of *tashabbuh.*

100 Biographers and hadith collectors preserve numerous anecdotes where ʿUmar would volunteer to put someone who appeared to insult the Prophet to the sword. If he took one path, the devil, in fear of him, would take another. In terms of shaping religion, he was also memorialized among Sunnīs for determining the vocal format of the call to prayer (*adhān*), banning women from mosques, beginning the Muslim
Sasanian Empire and the Byzantine Empire in Syria and Egypt. As this study illustrates, he is also attributed with legislating (or inspiring) important religious precedents that shaped Islam, which Sunnis accepted and Shi'is rejected.

ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, ʿUmar II, did his part to amplify his great grandfather’s image. As mentioned above, the pious and austere ʿUmar II also devised his own decrees that enforced sartorial distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims reminiscent of the Pact of ʿUmar.101 In this sense, he was instrumental in sustaining the early memory of tashabbuh as a vernacular of religious distinction. In contrast to the Umayyad caliphs who had succumbed to the luxuries that accompanied the Muslim conquests, Sunni Muslims remembered him as a staunch pillar of religion; he is credited with commissioning the first collections of hadith – the key medium for defining the early semantic field of tashabbuh.102

calendar with the year of the migration to Medina, and instituting the special evening congregational prayer during Ramadan (tarāwīḥ). In other words, ʿUmar was instrumental in shaping Islam and giving strength to the Muslim community. As Ingrid Mattson has shown, ʿUmar even cultivated an ascetic persona during his caliphate that endeared him to later Muslims as a pillar of justice and solidarity with his subjects. See chapter one in Ingrid Mattson, "A Believing Slave Is Better Than an Unbeliever: Status and Community in Early Islamic Society and Law" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1999). For more on ʿUmar see Ibn Sa'd, Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kabīr; al-Dhahabī, Siyar A'īlam al-Nubalāʾ. For a monograph length biographical study translated into English see Muhammad Shibli Numani, Jamil A. Qureshi, and Khan Zafar ʿAli, ʿUmar (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004); S. Bashear, "The Title Fārūq and Its Association with ʿumar I," Studia Islamia 72(1990). For more primary and secondary source references see "ʿUmar (1) b. al-Khaṭṭāb" in Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition. 101 On his edict see Chapter three of Levy-Rubin, Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence. " For more on his life and rule, see ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz" in Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition; ʿAbd-Allāh Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam, Strät ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1983).

Ibn ʿUmar was also credited with transmitting a large number of traditions advocating Muslim distinction.\textsuperscript{103} He was remembered as the arch-imitator of the Prophet, known for his extraordinary fidelity to the Prophet’s normative conduct (sunna).\textsuperscript{104} Ibn ʿUmar, in particular, transmitted many hadiths pertaining to aesthetically mediated practices of dress, hairstyle, cosmetics and ritual, whose subject-matter conforms to the discourse of tashabbuh more generally.\textsuperscript{105} He gave importance to the aesthetic and corporeal dimension of normative Islam. Ibn Taymiyya even blamed him for going too far in his reverential re-enactment of the Prophet’s everyday practice!\textsuperscript{106}

Although his father, ʿUmar, is credited with transmitting the imitation hadith, most transmissions are attributed to him. Nevertheless, the father and son transmission of the key source-text of tashabbuh is perfectly consistent with their literary roles in Muslim memory as key enforcers of normative (Sunnī) Islam.

**Shiʿī Hadith: Between Simulation and Dissimulation**

While tashabbuh is a distinctively Sunnī discourse, some isolated cases of its usage are transmitted in Twelver Shiʿī collections of hadith. Shiʿī collections share three key


\textsuperscript{104} In fact, it is said that when travelling Ibn ʿUmar was so precise about imitating the Prophet’s every word and deed that Ibn ʿUmar would imitate him even in purely circumstantial matters. So if the Prophet happened to pass by a particular tree during one of his journeys, Ibn ʿUmar would go out of his way to pass by the same tree, although there was no religious significance to this singular event. It would not be an exaggeration to assign Ibn ʿUmar the honorific of being the arch-imitator of the Prophet.

\textsuperscript{105} The standard reference for the length of the beard as fistful (qabḍ) refers to Ibn ʿUmar’s practice, not the Prophet, who never specified its length.

features with Sunni collections in their usage of the term. First, *tashabbuh* carries a negative value. It also often refers to aesthetically mediated cultural practices such as dress and bodily comportment. Finally, it attempts to mediate relations and ensure hierarchical distinctions between different collectivities. I now summarize the small number of traditions I was able to find in the four canonical collections of Twelver Shiʿī hadith. One tradition attributed to the sixth Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 765) discourages men from imitating women in their sartorial styles. When he was told about a man who let his garment drag on the ground while walking, Imam Jaʿfar responded: “I really detest that he imitate (*yatashabbahu*) women.” Other Shiʿī *tashabbuh* traditions discourage imitating the pilgrim who visits Mecca (*muḥrim*) in dress. Another tradition discourages eating while reclining because “he (the Prophet) used to detest the imitation of kings.” Sunnis also discouraged reclining and eating, but used a different rationale. They also discouraged imitating the kings of Byzantium and Persia in a different context. Another tradition contained in the collections of Twelver Shiʿī hadith urges moderation in quenching one’s thirst. Instead of consuming one’s drink in a single gulp like a very thirsty camel, one should consume it gradually in three separate gulps. Sunnī hadith also encourage human distinction from camels and other animals, but in different contexts.

While there are clear parallels in Shiʿī and Sunnī regulation of social distinction through the language of *tashabbuh*, there is one key difference that deserves attention.

108 Ibid. 1:410, 2:1907, 2:1968
109 Ibid., 1:907.
110 See chapter five of this study.
Twelver Shiʿīs do not deploy *tashabbuh* to stigmatize Jews and Christians, the most frequently stigmatized group in Sunnī *tashabbuh* hadith. This is very important. It suggests that the function of *tashabbuh* was very different for Sunnīs: *tashabbuh* was part of their language of shaping Islam dialogically, of making religion. Shiʿīs, on the other hand, deployed the term as moral exhortations dealing with internal Muslim affairs. This, of course, did not mean that Shiʿīs did not have anxieties over their interactions with Christians and Jews. Some of their positions towards Christians and Jews were stricter than those of Sunnīs.112

One more observation is worth noting. Despite using the term to prescribe affairs among Muslims, Shiʿīs did not deploy *tashabbuh* to prescribe how to interact with Sunnīs. I did not find a single hadith condemning *tashabbuh* of Sunnīs for example. It seems that dissimulation, *taqiyya*, became a more effective concept and approach to dealing with Sunnīs than simulation, *tashabbuh*.113 This key distinction in its usage suggests that *tashabbuh* became a distinctive Sunnī religious discourse analogous to the way *taqiyya* became a distinctive Shiʿī discourse. Each concept represents a distinct vision of how to practice Islam in relation to others. The semantic distinction between *tashabbuh*, simulation, and *taqiyya*, dissimulation, mirrors the Sunni-Shiʿī polarity.

---


113 *Taqiyya* in certain forms is accepted by Sunnīs in limited circumstances. It was even used by the Khārijīs. However, the concept never achieved the same status in Sunnism as it did in most versions of Shiʿī Islam. On the significance of *taqiyya* as a pivotal doctrine of Shiʿism in both primary and secondary sources see Etan Kohlberg, "Taqiyya in Shiʿī Theology and Religion," in *Secrecy and Concealment. Studies in the History of the Mediterranean and the near Eastern Religions*, ed. H. G. Kippenberg and G. G. Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 1995); ———, "Some Imāmī-Shiʿī Views on Taqiyya," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95, no. 3 (1975); For a different approach that depicts taqiyya as an historical performance see Devin Stewart, "Taqiyya as Performance: The Travel of Bāḥaʾ al-Dīn al-ʿĀmilī in the Ottoman Empire (991-93/1583-85)," in *Law and Society in Islam*, ed. Devin Stewart, Baber Johansen, and Amy Singer (Princeton: Marcus Weiner Publishers, 1996).
Without over-generalizing and over-simplifying a complex issue too much, this polarity might be partially explained by power. While early Sunnīs tried to accommodate political elites, Shiʿīs tended to be outside the circles of power during the first three centuries of Islam until the middle of the tenth century, the beginning of the “Shiʿī century.” Sunnīs were legislating norms from a position of strength, as a majority, while Shiʿīs were legislating norms from a position of weakness, as a minority. While Sunnīs discouraged simulation, Shiʿīs encouraged dissimulation in order to achieve the same objective: the protection of their religious identity.

**Muslim Distinction beyond Tashabbuh**

The early Muslim vocabulary of distinction spans a wider semantic field than *tashabbuh*. Many traditions deploy other literary or rhetorical methods to assert religious or other distinctions. The literary form and content of these traditions often display a striking similarity to the *tashabbuh* traditions, however: they span a wide range of ritual and everyday practice: they usually pertain to religious difference – especially Jewish difference; they also emphasize aesthetically-mediated practices such as dress and proper bodily comportment. These traditions functioned to reinforce and strengthen the negative polarity of *tashabbuh*’s semantic field.

The following two traditions emerged as key texts that illustrate Muslim anxieties of over defending the Muslim community from both internal and external forces. As the *tashabbuh* traditions above have demonstrated, Muslims were deeply concerned with regulating their relationships to outsiders, whether Jews, Christians, Persians or Byzantines. They were equally concerned with the fragmentation of the Muslim
community into different ideological and political factions, which began almost immediately after the Prophet’s death.

The first tradition, the “lizard hole hadith,” illustrates the pitfalls of imitating both non-Muslims and non-Arabs:

You will follow the ways of those nations who were before you, span by span and cubit by cubit so much so that even if they entered a hole of a lizard you would follow them. We said, “O Messenger of God, the Jews and Christians?” He replied, “Who else?”

In another version, the Companions ask: "O Messenger of God! Do you mean by those (nations) the Persians and the Byzantines?” The Prophet replied, "Who else can it be?"

The variations of this hadith equate the magnitude of imitating Jews and Christians with that of imitating Byzantines and Persians. Regardless of whether Muslims imitate a foreign religious or ethnic group the result is the same: they enter the depths of a lizard’s hole. Historically, this hadith had an important symbolic role in enforcing Muslim orthodoxy, not only due to its presence in the two most authoritative collections of Sunnī hadith collections, but also because it became a key textual marker of the normative boundary-regulating discourse of reprehensible innovation (bidʿa). As I argue in the next chapter, this hadith functions as a textual marker that signifies a shared function of both the tashabbuh and bidʿa discourses: to enforce orthodoxy.

---

114 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-manāqib, bāb mā dhukira ‘an bānī isrāʾīl, and kitāb al-iʿtiṣām bi'l-sunna, bāb qawl, al-nabī la-tattabiʿanna sunan man kāna qablakum; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-ʿilm, bāb ittibāʿ al-yahūd wa al-naṣāra.

115 Apparently not recognizing the significance of both versions to Ibn Taymiyya’s argument, Memon excludes the second version from his annotated translation. While these traditions may seem repetitive in their different versions, they mark significant textual moments for the Muslim imaginations of social difference. This hadith is especially common in contemporary Salafi discourses that inflect Muslim anxieties over Christian-Western cultural diffusion into Muslim lands.
The lizard hole is a vivid image that evokes an inevitable and foreboding descent into the unknown darkness. The undertone of such an image is clearly negative, implicitly opposed to the symbol of light, which is synonymous with divine guidance. The famous ninth century hadith collector, Muḥammad al-Bukhārī (d. 870), pairs these two hadith together under the chapter on “Holding onto the Book and the Sunna.”

Through this classification scheme, Bukhārī suggests that fidelity to the normative conduct of the Prophet is constituted by difference – that Muslim identity was constituted by difference. Commentators of the lizard hole hadith suggest that Muslims would descend this hole and follow Jews and Christians in religious innovations and sinful transgressions. One commentator attempts to fuse the different versions by appealing to historical demographics; a large number of Jews inhabited Persia and a large number of Christians inhabited Byzantium. According to this interpretation, the different versions of the hadith are not so different after all; they refer to the same basic collectivities. This attempt at textual reconciliation is another reminder that Muslim distinction was configured in relation to both ethnic and religious differences, which often overlapped.

The second tradition forebodes that Muslims will imitate Jews and Christians in a more concrete way: fragmentation and sectarianism. It forecasts that Muslims will break into seventy-three heterodox Muslim sects, and only one will be saved. In fact, Muslims end up in an even worse predicament than Jews and Christians who (only) split into seventy-one and seventy-two sects respectively:

---

116 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,-kitāb al-iʿtiṣām biʾl-kitāb wa al-sunna, bāb latattabiʿunna sunan man kāna qablakum.
118 Ibid, 13: 368.
“The Jews split into seventy-one sects. One is in heaven and seventy are in the fire. The Christians split into seventy-two sects. One is in heaven and seventy-one are in the fire. By Him in whose hands is Muhammad’s soul my community will split into seventy-three sects. One will be in heaven and the rest will be in the fire. It was said to Muhammad, who are they? He replied: The majority (jamāʿa).”

The canonical collections contain multiple variants. Some compare Muslims to the Jews only, once again highlighting acute Muslim anxieties over Jewish influence. Other versions oscillate between the exact number of sects: seventy-one or seventy-two. Some forget to mention that all but sect will be damned. One “pluralist” tradition even claims the opposite: that all but one group will be saved. Like the lizard hole hadith, it textually marked the discourse of reprehensible imitation (bidʿa).

“Be Different!”

As a counterpoint to the negative imperative, “Do not imitate!” (lā tashabbahū!) other traditions deployed the positive imperative: “Be different!” (khālifū!). Despite their contrasting phrasings, these topoi represent two sides of the same rhetorical coin. Numerous traditions exhort Muslims to “Be different” (khālifū) from Christians, Jews, and pagans. Some early biographers and hadith scholars classified traditions deploying the topoi of “Do not imitate!” and “Be different!” together, signaling their shared semantic fields. Among hadith partisans and jurists, tashabbuh would become almost

119 Al-Ṭabarānī, Al-Mu’jam al-Kabīr, 8:327-28, hadith # 8051. A monograph work on this subject has been authored by the great Yemeni reformer Muhammad b. Ismāʾīl al-Ṣanʿānī, which contains a detailed discussion of this hadith, its authenticity, its variants and interpretations. Muhammad b. Ismāʾīl al-Amīr al-Ṣanʿānī, Ḥadīth Iftirāq al-Umma ilā Nayyif wa Sabʿin Firqa (Riyadh: Dār al-ʿĀṣima, 1994). For this particular variant see pg. 52 fn. 1.

120 See al-Ṣanʿānī, Ḥadīth Iftirāq al-Umma ilā Nayyif wa Sabʿin Firqa, 47-53.


synonymous with the command to be different, becoming charged with a stronger 
oppositional impulse. This semantic convergence eventually culminated in the first 
monograph-length treatise on the subject of Muslim distinction, *The Necessity of the 
Straight Path in order to be Different (mukhālafat) from the Inhabitants of Hell* by Ibn 
Taymiyya.\(^{123}\) It asserts that Islamic orthodoxy and Muslim identity is achieved through 
difference.

This semantic convergence of the commands to be different/not imitate also 
materializes through the subject matter. “Be different” traditions also emphasize the 
importance of sartorial style as a marker of distinction, as in the following examples:\(^{124}\):

“Be different from *(khālīfū)* the pagans *(mushrikīn)*, grow the beard and trim the 
moustache”\(^{125}\); “Verily the Jews and Christians do not dye their hair, so be different from 
*(khālīfū)* them”\(^ {126} \); and “Oh gathering of Helpers *(Anṣār)*, dye your hair red and yellow, 
and be different from *(khālīfū)* the People of the Book (Jews and Christians)”\(^ {127} \); “Be

---

\(^{123}\) Although early Muslim traditionists like the ninth century Iraqi biographer, Ibn Sa’d (see footnote 148 
above) grouped together traditions that employ both linguistic forms, Ibn Taymiyya was the first to 
articulate the semantic relationship between these two types of commands forcefully. The provocative title 
of his treatise against imitation signals that the master spatial metaphor of religious orthodoxy, the straight 
path, means being different from the inhabitants of hell. It asserts Muslim identity through difference. In 
the treatise, Ibn Taymiyya, elides the command, *lā tashabbahū,* do not imitate, with *khālīfū,* be different. 
Through this semantic association, Ibn Taymiyya charges *tashabbuh* with an even stronger oppositional 
impulse. The term *mukhālafa* can also mean to oppose.

\(^{124}\) Ibn Taymiyya cites five “Be different” traditions – all of which address appearance except for one.

\(^{125}\) This version can be found in virtually every Sunnī canonical hadith collection: *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* *kitāb 
al-libās,* bāb al-khiḍāb and *kitāb al-anbiyā‘,* bāb mā dhukira ‘an banī isrā‘īl; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim,* *kitāb al-libās 
wa al-zīna,* bāb fī mukhālafat al-yahūd bi al-sabgh; *Ṣanān Abī Dāwūd,* *kitāb al-libās,* *Ṣanān Ibn Māja,* 
kitāb al-libās, bāb fī al-khiḍāb; bāb al-khiḍāb bi al-hinnā‘. A slightly different version is contained in 

\(^{126}\) *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* *kitāb al-anbiyā‘,* bāb mā dhakara ‘an banī isrā‘īl; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim,* *kitāb al-libās 
wa al-zīna,* bāb mukhālafat al-yahūd fī al-sabgh.

\(^{127}\) Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Ahmad b. Hanbal,* 36: 613, hadith # 22283. The above phrase is actually 
part of a larger tradition which suggests that Muslims sought to different from Jews and Christians in all 
sartorial matters: “O Helpers, dye your beards red and yellow and be different from the People of the Book. 
He said: So we said: ‘O Messenger of God, the People of the Book do not wear trousers or sarongs (izārs).’ 
So the Messenger of God said: ‘Wear trousers and sarongs and be different from the People of the Book.’ 
He said: we said: ‘O Messenger of God the People of the Book do not trim their moustaches and do not

160
different from (khālifū) the Jews; they do not pray in their sandals nor in their leather socks.”

Other traditions encouraged Muslim distinction by using alternative rhetorical methods. In some cases, the negative stigma associated with resembling a specific group is implicit: “Do not eat with your left hand, for the devil eats and drinks with his left hand.” Although the Prophet does not explicitly command Muslims to be different from the devil, the diabolical association of eating with the left hand makes this command implicit. Based on Ibn Taymiyya’s influential assemblage of oral traditions pertaining to Muslim distinction, Table 2.1 below classifies the subject matter of some traditions on Muslim distinction not addressed above.

wear shoes [during prayer].’ He said: the Prophet said: ‘Trim your moustaches and wear shoes [during prayer] and be different from the People of the Book.’ He said: we said: ‘O Messenger of God the People of the Book trim their beards (‘athānīnahum) and grow out their moustaches sibālahum.’ The Prophet said: ‘Trim your moustaches (sibālakum) and grow out your beards (‘athānīnakum) and be different from the People of the Book.’”


Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-āshriba, bāb ādāb al-ṭaʿām, wa al-sharāb wa aḥkāmihima. Within this section, Muslim provides many other traditions that advocate eating and drinking with the right hand. Bukhārī also has a chapter on “Reciting God’s name over food and eating with the right hand.” Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, kitāb al-ataʿima, bāb al-tasmiyya alā al-ṭaʿām wa-al-akl bi-al-yamin. See chapter six of this study for a more in depth analysis of this tradition.
# Table 2.1 Traditions of Distinction

| Religion: Jews and Christians | - burying the dead in a niche because Jews and Christians do not;  
|                             | - summoning believers to prayer (adḥān) vocally because Christians and Jews use musical instruments. |
| Religious: Christians only   | - eating a pre-dawn meal prior to fasting because Christians do not;  
|                             | - fasting intermittently instead of continuously like Christians |
| Religious: Jews only         | - hastening to break one’s fast and pray the sunset prayer because Jews delay both practices until the stars appear;  
|                             | - not sequestering menstruating women because the Jews sequester their menstruating women;  
|                             | - fasting two days on ʿĀshūrāʾ unlike the Jews who only fast one day only |
| Religious: Pagans or Zoroastrians | - growing the beard and trimming the moustache because Zoroastrians do the opposite;  
|                                | - not prostrating during sunrise and sunset because pagans do;  
|                                | - not mourning the dead by wailing or tearing one’s clothes like pagans;  
|                                | - styling one’s turban differently from Zoroastrians;  
|                                | - not eating from gold or silver vessels like Persian/Zoroastrians elites;  
|                                | - not shaving the nape like Zoroastrians |
| Ethnic – Persians, Byzantines, and Bedouin Arabs | - not standing while the imam is sitting during prayer because Persians and Byzantines stand while their kings sit on their thrones;  
|                                              | - not confusing the names of ritual prayers like Bedouin Arabs |
| Gender                               | - Men and Women not imitating each other |
| Animals                              | - not kneeling like camels or sitting like a dogs during ritual prayer |
| Devil                                | - not eating with the left hand like the devil |
A Disagreement between Companions

I began this chapter with an anecdote of how the Prophet first initiated a policy of conformity to Jewish and Christian religious practice, but later changed his mind. Traditional Muslim narratives give the impression that this new policy was settled during the Prophet’s lifetime, and was understood by his Companions. Even the skeptical Goldziher seems to have accepted this assessment and claimed that it was “unanimous that Muslims should not follow customs of their coreligionists.”\(^{130}\) Goldziher observes that foreign elements crept in despite this principle. Perhaps, however, Muslim incorporation of some foreign practices occurred because Muslims did not have a unanimous consensus over whether or not to conform to the practices of their coreligionists. The Ibn ʿAbbās tradition above suggests that Muslims used to look favorably on imitating Jews and Christians. I close this chapter with another revealing tradition that suggests that the Companions continued to debate whether or not to imitate their religious siblings, even after the Prophet’s demise; how to distinguish Islam’s monotheism from competing versions remained a controversial topic.

The tradition is set in Iraq, which as we discussed above, was a hotbed of inter and intra-religious competition. It is also another funerary-related tradition that pertains to the proper procedure of sitting and standing during a funeral procession:

imitated (yatasabbuhahu) the People of the Book, but when he was prohibited from this he stopped.\textsuperscript{131}

According to ʿAlī, the Prophet used to stand during a funeral procession in order to imitate the Jews and Christians, but ceased to stand after God ostensibly prohibited him from imitating them. The narrative suggests that standing for a funeral procession was not an insignificant custom, but an important practice of distinction. Standing or sitting during a funeral procession became a normative practice. This narrative is corroborated by many other traditions. In one anecdote, the Prophet was standing during a funeral procession. A Jew then informed the Prophet that this was a Jewish custom. The Prophet responded “Be different from them (khālifūhum),” meaning the Jews, and sat down.\textsuperscript{132} This unilinear narrative of imitation to distinction echoes Ibn ʿAbbās’ narrative of the Prophet’s decision to part his hair instead of letting it hang down. It strengthens the case that at one time imitating Christians and Jews was once perceived as a good thing.

This tradition is also unique in how it explicitly historicizes the term, \textit{tashabbuh} within a narrative of Islam’s formative history. It brings into relief the primary thesis of this chapter. It was once good for the Prophet to practice \textit{tashabbuh} - to imitate, resemble and assimilate himself to Christian and Jewish everyday practice. However, this eventually changed. This narrative indicates that the term’s moral register – at least with respect to social relations among Muslims, Christians and Jews – had shifted from good to bad, from imitation to “reprehensible imitation.” The reader or listener is encouraged to believe that this question was decisively settled by the Prophet himself.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibn Ḥanbal, \textit{Musnad al-Imām Ahmad b. Hanbal}, 2:381-83. Shuʿayb Arnāʾūṭ grades this hadith authentic (ṣaḥīḥ).
\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Sunan Ibn Māja}, kitāb al-janāʾiz, bāb jā’a fi al-qiyām li al-janāza

164
However, the disagreement among key Companions suggests that even if this process began during the Prophet’s life, its significance and application was not uniformly understood by Muslims after the Prophet. We know that this event allegedly occurred after the Prophet had passed away because the transmitter, Abū Maʿmar, was a Successor, not a Companion, who lived in Iraq (Kūfa). This anecdote is striking because of the way it depicts a lack of consensus among the Prophet’s Companions about Muslim religious distinction, even after the Prophet had passed away. This is really the only hadith tradition that I have been able to find that highlights these conflicting attitudes among the first Muslims towards the imitation of Jewish and Christian social practices. The disagreement is said to have taken place between two of the Prophet’s most venerable and knowledgeable Companions: the fourth caliph ʿAlī, and the governor of Iraq, Abū Mūsā. Perhaps ʿAlī and Abū Mūsā agreed on principle but only disagreed on implementation. However, ʿAlī’s explanation suggests that the basic principle of Muslim distinction was not clearly established among even the most knowledgeable and pious of Companions. The anecdote attributes to ʿAlī special prestige. He effectively abrogates Abū Mūsā’s opinion with an historical argument: the Prophet used to imitate and resemble the People of the Book, but when he was ordered to do otherwise, he ceased the practice of standing during funeral processions, and sat down instead.

The disagreement between the two famous Companions of the Prophet suggests that a unilinear narrative of imitation to distinction is a bit too simple. This tradition appears to reflect a transitional period where Muslims actively debated how to interact with Jews and Christians within and beyond the religiously diverse cultural milieu of
seventh and eighth century Iraq. This tradition would have functioned as evidence to advocate a policy of Muslim distinction.

Nevertheless, the tide eventually shifted. Muslims religious elites transformed the meaning of *tashabbuh* into a reprehensible form of imitation. Leveraging the stigma this term now carried, elites shaped the ritual, cultural and aesthetic practice of Islam. In sum, the vocabulary of *tashabbuh* mediated the dialogical construction of Islam through concrete practices of distinction.
CHAPTER THREE
THE INNOVATION OF IMITATION:
IBN TAYMIYYA’S ANXIETIES OF INFLUENCE

The worst things are inventions. Every invention is an innovation. Every innovation leads astray. And every stray deed leads to the hellfire.

— Prophet Muhammad, contained in the Sunan collection of Nasāʾī (d. 915)

Oh Turner of the hearts! Inspire us to follow the sunna of your Prophet and save us from innovation and imitation…

— Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 1348)

Purity and Danger

When historian, Donald Little, asked if Damascene jurist, Ibn Taymiyya, had a “screw loose” he was not joking. Based on his impressive résumé of conflicts with scholars, politicians and laypeople of his time, some of Ibn Taymiyya’s peers genuinely wondered if he had a cognitive disorder. After all, he is known to have once espied two people playing backgammon, and kicked over the board in disapproval of such frivolities. However, while the passage of time no longer permits us to make a scientific assessment of his mental state, his prolific body of writings reveals that he was besieged by several

2 Donald Little, “Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose,” Studia Islamia 41(1975). Ibn Battūta is said to have held this opinion. See pgs. 95-96 of Little’s article for a translation of the passage. “Screw loose” is a translation of “fī ʿaqlihi shayʾan,” literally “something in his mind.”
3 Ibid.: 107.
anxieties of influence that inspired his writings on imitation, innovation, and distinction.\textsuperscript{4} He wrote a monograph work condemning Muslim imitation of religious and non-Arab social practices, as well as legal responsa (\textit{fatwas}) condemning men imitating women, women imitating men, and humans imitating animals.\textsuperscript{5} He also penned polemical treatises against speculative theologians, Shi‘īs, and Christians. One senses that Ibn Taymiyya felt threatened by multiple nefarious forces underpinned by the precarious political position of the Mamluks who were struggling to fend off the Mongol invaders – those responsible for deposing the caliph for the first time in Muslim history. As Mary Douglas has argued, during moments of political crisis, social regulation of the physical body intensifies: “The threatened boundaries of their body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity and purity of the physical body.”\textsuperscript{6} Most cases of \textit{tashabbuh} directly involve the body in some way. Ibn Taymiyya’s writings therefore reflect the unique historical context of Mamluk Damascus. In this chapter, I shed light on this historical context, including the political, cultural, and religious dimensions that shaped Ibn Taymiyya’s perspectives on religious and other distinctions.

When Muslims mobilize \textit{tashabbuh} to stigmatize a practice, they are identifying the practices they perceive as dangerous. As Douglas also observed, “Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others.”\textsuperscript{7} Ibn Taymiyya was perhaps attuned to these dangerous

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.: 110.
\textsuperscript{5} See chapter five and six of this study.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 97.
transitional states – especially during festivals - more than anyone else during his time. His anxieties over dangerous influences partially explain why he sought to reassert ordered distinctions by deploying the language and logic of *tashabbuh*.

This chapter focuses on Ibn Taymiyya’s landmark contribution to shaping the discourse of *tashabbuh*. By Ibn Taymiyya’s time, *tashabbuh* was already a negatively charged concept. However, Ibn Taymiyya transformed it from a marginal concept to a central principle. He boldly declared that Muslim distinction was a necessity - a universal Islamic principle. For the first time in Muslim history, he synthesized the anecdotes and witticisms contained in the collections of hadith, and gave them a theoretical scaffolding that transformed *tashabbuh* from a diffuse and fragmented concept into a coherent discourse. He was also the first to very clearly connect the Islamicized concepts of imitation and innovation, *tashabbuh* and *bidʿa*, by highlighting their shared discursive function in regulating orthodoxy. Although I have argued that Muslims collectively distinguished themselves from others from the beginnings of Islam, Muslim religious scholars prior to Ibn Taymiyya casuistically discussed distinction in relation to discrete practices, not as a self-contained discourse in itself. It took centuries for the abstraction of *tashabbuh* to transmute into a unitary principle of Muslim distinction.

In this chapter, I also want to frame Ibn Taymiyya’s discourse of *tashabbuh* as a Shariʿa-based discourse. At its foundation, Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is the discursive practice of determining the Shariʿa, of deriving divinely-mandated norms from the corpus of Islamic texts. As I illustrate in the next chapter, his usage of *tashabbuh* contrasts that of Sufis who deployed *tashabbuh* in a very different way. In the centuries preceding Ibn Taymiyya, Muslim jurists had constructed modes of reasoning that enabled normative
Islam to adapt to new historical contexts. They sometimes deployed the concept of *tashabbuh* as a legal rationale in order to legitimize the enforcement of certain norms. I illustrate how Ibn Taymiyya deploys Shari‘a-based terminology and modes of reasoning in order to mobilize the concept of *tashabbuh* to set the legal norms governing Muslim participation in festivals.

Let me reiterate how I conceptualize discourse since it is essential to how I position Ibn Taymiyya’s contribution to the formation of *tashabbuh* as a Shari‘a-based Islamic discourse. Earlier, I drew upon the insights of Michel Foucault and other theorists to define discourse as a rationalized and coherent (though possibly contradictory) set of concepts, forms of reasoning, and genres mediated through social relations, which assert a normative way of knowing and being in the world. So when I say that Ibn Taymiyya made *tashabbuh* into a discourse, this is what I mean.

The legacy of Ibn Taymiyya is very much alive today. Despite his rants against innovation, he ironically was a great innovator. The breadth of Ibn Taymiyya’s intellectual interests showcases his deep erudition. His published works nimbly range across disciplines of theology, law, hadith, Quranic exegesis, philosophy, and logic. Modern Muslims, especially of the *Salafi* and *Wahhabi* strain currently in vogue in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, continue to turn to Ibn Taymiyya as a pre-eminent religious authority.8 Those found guilty of assassinating Egyptian Prime Minister, Anwar Sadat, in 1981 found inspiration in his writings, as did Osama bin Laden.9 Because a number of

---

modern actors have invoked his authority for their radical deeds and utterances, Ibn Taymiyya has gained a reputation for being a pre-modern forerunner to modern Islamic fundamentalism. “Yet,” as one recent study acutely observes, “Ibn Taymiyya is more often cited than understood, constantly invoked and not sufficiently studied.”

In this chapter, I attempt to correct additional misconceptions about Ibn Taymiyya through a close reading of The Necessity of the Straight Path, to be Different from the Inhabitants of Hell (Iqtiḍāʾ al-Ṣiraṭ al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jaḥīm). This treatise is both the first major synthesis and most widely-disseminated treatise of the tashabbuh discourse in Islamic history. In it, Ibn Taymiyya’s intellectual versatility and analytical powers are on full display, spanning ritual, psychoanalysis, sociology, popular culture, politics, theology, ethics and law. Not only does the intellectual breadth of this work indicate the plasticity, malleability, and adaptability of a wide range of Islamic discourses, but it demonstrates how the tashabbuh discourse in particular is entangled in a complex web of concepts, discourses, and debates. This discursive breadth also indicates how the social practice of imitation saturates everyday life.

Academic scholarship has marginalized the significance of tashabbuh to Ibn Taymiyya’s main argument in The Necessity of the Straight Path. Instead, they focus on his arguments against participating in public festivals and his theorization of innovation, bidʿa. Maribel Fierro, for example, has counted Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise among the

---

12 Until now, previous studies of this treatise have focused on the second part in which Ibn Taymiyya criticizes Muslim participation in public festivals, celebrations, and holidays – all of which are included in the Arabic term, ʿīd. See introduction of Muhammad Umar Memon, Ibn Taimiya's Struggle against
“treatises against innovations (kutub al-bidʿa).” This chapter goes against the grain of this emerging scholarly orthodoxy by asserting that his theory of imitation and distinction is central to The Necessity of the Straight Path. While the concept of bidʿa plays an important theoretical role for establishing the problematic legal status of popular celebrations, it plays a secondary role to the concept of tashabbuh. Ibn Taymiyya’s work is perhaps better classified among the “treatises against imitation” than among the treatises against innovation. It would not be farfetched to claim that Ibn Taymiyya perceived imitation as a more dangerous problem than innovation.

Theorists have argued that discourses do not develop in isolation but in relation to other discourses. The discourse of tashabbuh is no exception. It is partially through the interaction with other discursive practices that the concept of tashabbuh becomes a discourse. I therefore highlight tashabbuh’s discursive interaction with bidʿa. Bidʿa functioned primarily as a discourse that regulated the boundaries of Islamic orthodoxy. By highlighting the conceptual (and discursive) relationship between the two terms, I also highlight the boundary-regulating function of tashabbuh. As Muslims moved through history, and engaged new cultures, intellectual currents and political circumstances, they needed to develop discursive mechanisms that preserved a sense of continuity with the past - a sense of religious orthodoxy. While the Prophet’s sunna functioned as a positive concept that promoted Muslim fidelity to specific time-tested norms imbued with the

---

13 Fierro, "The Treatises against Innovations (Kutub Al-Bida")."
sacredness of history, the concepts of bidʿa and tashabbuh functioned as negative concepts that prevented new norms from rivaling or replacing these norms. Together, sunna, bidʿa, and tashabbuh, formed a “triangle of orthodoxy.”

The late Pakistani scholar, Fazlur Rahman, identified synthesis as a key factor in building orthodoxies, and recognized Ibn Taymiyya’s significant historical role in this regard. Ibn Taymiyya’s synthetic approach highlights how imitation and innovation, as both concepts and practices, are not mutually exclusive polarities, but are surprisingly integrated. They overlap, amplify, and constitute one another. Sometimes, imitation is actually quite innovative, and sometimes innovation is actually quite imitative. This realization should not be so surprising. After all, the great psychologist of religion, William James, reminds us that, "Invention, using the term most broadly, and imitation, are the two legs, so to call them, on which the human race historically has walked." They are both modes of assimilation, adaptation, and incorporation of new and old cultural practices. They are the motors of history.

**Ibn Taymiyya of Damascus**

The most significant conceptual and discursive features of tashabbuh originate in Damascus. Medieval Damascus, like other Islamicate cities past and present, was

---

16 William James and Gerald E. Myers, *Writings, 1878-1899* (New York: Library of America; Viking Press, 1992), 742. William James discussed the power of imitation in relation to education. He made several important observations about imitation including its relationship to emulation and rivalry.
17 In chapter two, I mentioned that the imitation hadith first circulated extensively in Damascus, and all three pre-modern treatises on tashabbuh, including the two treatises examined in this chapter, also originated in Damascus. One naturally asks, “Why Damascus?” There is no single definitive answer. I attempt, however, to describe some key features about the historical context of Damascus during Mamluk times in this chapter and Ottoman times in the next that facilitated the emergence of tashabbuh as a language of Muslim distinction.
characterized by a plethora of social differences. It was a relatively wealthy cosmopolitan city which was linked by trade routes to the Mediterranean, Central Asia, Indian Ocean, and the rest of Arabia. It therefore played host to “clerks and secretaries, holy men, scholars, and soldiers, from many parts of the Islamic world.” It was also a very religiously and culturally colorful place with an illustrious and long history. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim interaction was the norm, not the exception. When Muslims first conquered Damascus in the seventh century they were a minority ruling over a Christian majority. Over centuries, Muslims finally became the majority. Significant numbers of Christians, Jews, and other minorities remained, however. During this period, Muslims also fractured into numerous subgroups themselves. Competition from inside, coupled with the threat of Mongol invasion from outside spawned an early Mamluk urban culture of competition among both elites and non-elites who vied with one another for influence and position. Despite the presence of a Muslim majority, Ibn Taymiyya still felt threatened by the non-Muslim minority presence.

Ibn Taymiyya’s xenophobic imagination also corresponds to an exoticized historical imaginary of Syria’s pagan past. Ibn Taymiyya cites a pre-Islamic tale first narrated by Ibn Iṣḥāq (d. 776) in his eighth century biography of the Prophet. According to the anecdote, an Arab named ʿAmr b. Luḥayy visited Syria. He then returned to Mecca with some idols that he had obtained in Syria. Meccans soon began worshipping these idols until paganism overtook monotheism as the dominant religion of

---

19 Ibid.
Posterity therefore held ʿAmr b. Luḥayy responsible for introducing paganism to Mecca. Ibn Taymiyya blames Ibn Luḥayy’s desire to imitate others – Syrian foreigners – as the primary cause for allowing the most egregious sin of polytheism to contaminate the originally pure and monotheistic Arabia. This pre-Islamic narrative is consistent with Ibn Taymiyya’s imagination of Syria (and Damascus) as a religiously diverse and cosmopolitan land pregnant with dangerous foreign beliefs and practices - even though it had been inhabited by Muslims for seven centuries.

For most of Ibn Taymiyya’s life, Syria was stuck in-between a sixty year war between the Mongols and Mamluks, both of Turkic origin. Mamluks, literally slaves, were actually just that; slaves who had taken power in Egypt in 1250, and who eventually extended their dominion to Syria and Arabia as well. Alluding to their “ignoble” origins, the historian, Edward Gibbon, derogatively called Mamluk rule “the arbitrary dominion of strangers and slaves.” The main rival to Mamluk power, the Mongols, had sacked Baghdad in 1258 by deposing the Abbasid Muslim caliphate, before they, themselves, eventually converted to Sunnī Islam. To make matters more complicated, a Franko-Mongol alliance that linked the Mongols to the Crusaders and predisposed them to Christian sympathies persisted until their official conversion in 1295. Although the Mamluk victory at the Battle of Acre in 1291 marked the end of the Crusader presence in the Levant, tensions between the now Muslim Mongols and the Mamluks did not cease until a peace treaty was signed in 1323, just five years before Ibn Taymiyya’s death.

21 When I refer to Mongols in this chapter, I am generally referring to the Ilkhanids, who were one of four Mongol khanates. They had splintered from a unified and contiguous Mongol Empire, considered to have been the greatest single contiguous empire in world history.
22 The Mamluk reign lasted from 1250 - 1517. Historians divide the Mamluk period into two: 1) the Turkish or Baḥrī period which lasted from 1250 – 1382; and 2) the Circassian or Burjī period continued until 1517. Mamluks originated mainly from the Caucasus and Eurasian Steppe.
Mamluks also demonstrated an interest in participating in Muslim religious life through patronage and learning. While they attempted to balance the political power of the four Sunni schools of law by assigning official posts to members of each school, some sultans and military personnel gave certain scholars special advisory positions, inevitably favoring some over others. Because Mamluks did not pass down power hereditarily, the political culture was prone to instability, although religious patronage continued throughout Mamluk rule. However, this also meant that religious moods and ideological inclinations of those in power changed, which, because of their involvement in religious life, impacted Muslim religious elites as well. In this politically charged religious context, it is not hard to imagine how Ibn Taymiyya’s life was punctuated by political conflict and tension.

According to Michael Chamberlain, the absence of naturally endowed “rank and birth” helped construct a social environment of constant “fitna,” or discord, among elites jockeying for influence, status, and wealth. Damascus valued hierarchical social distinctions. Having assimilated Greek and Iranian methods of social classifications, Muslim philosophers imagined a hierarchical society according to profession. In the Mamluk period, a quadripartite model that divided men into scholars, warriors, merchants, and agrarian folk became fashionable. A just society required that men stick to one profession determined at birth. The preoccupation with hierarchical classifications extended beyond human social categories and included books, things, and cities as well.

24 Damascus had only one official judge who was affiliated with the Shafi‘i school - the majority.
26 Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350*, 162.
The revival of the laws of distinction governing non-Muslims materialized these philosophical abstractions publicly and visibly. In 1301, soon after the temporary Mongol occupation of Damascus in 1300, the Mamluks revived the intermittent application of the Pact of ʿUmar that had occurred during the Abbasid, Ayyubid and Seljuk periods.27 With the Crusades still fresh in the memories of Muslims, many religious scholars were deeply suspicious of non-Muslims and their political loyalties. They wanted to socially quarantine them in order to ensure the social integrity of the Muslim community. The social distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims had blurred to an alarming degree.28

Mamluks had a vibrant and colorful vision of social life, color-coding Muslims and non-Muslims (dhimmīs) through dress. They mandated that dhimmīs wear different colored turbans: Christians, blue, Jews, yellow, and Samaritans, red. Muslim men, in contrast, would continue to wear white turbans.29 Christian, Jewish, and Samaritan women were to wear blue, yellow, and red wraps (izār) respectively. Christians were required to wear a distinctive belt (zunnār).30 The decree also forbade dhimmīs from

27 See Chapter one for discussion of the Pact of ʿUmar along with its recurrence in Muslim history.
28 “There are abundant references in the Geniza to clothing and other passing evidence in the documents, indicating no differences between the attires of Jews and Muslims during the Fatimid and early Ayyubid times (mid 10th – late 12th century)...it seems that it was often difficult to tell them apart.” Mark R. Cohen, Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 63-64.
29 According to Chamberlain, “The turban was the mark of the learned Muslim male.” Muslims even named themselves “wearers of the turban” (mutaʿammāmīn) and “People of the turban” (ahl al-ʿimāma). Chamberlain then describes how some religious scholars such as Ibn al-Ḥājj disapproved of the increasing flamboyance of religious scholars, signaled by their large turbans and large sleeves. In 1354, subsequent decrees limited the size of dhimmī turbans. See Chamberlain, Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350, 100-06. Also see chapter five of this study for more on dress as a means of social distinction among Muslims.
30 As was discussed in the previous chapter, the zunnār belt was listed among the initial regulations that Damascene Christians agreed to in the Pact of ʿUmar. Prior to the Muslim conquests, Christians had worn belts to signal status affiliations of different sorts. The initial pact seems to have merely mandated what was already in practice among late antique Christians. Over time, the zunnār belt became a symbol of
building houses higher than those of Muslims, riding on horses, and working in administrative positions. Nearly a decade later, in 1310, the Mamluks considered a proposal to exempt Jewish and Christian elites from the color-coding polices, but at the behest of Ibn Taymiyya no less, rejected it. These laws attempted to establish clear and visible hierarchical differences between Muslim and non-Muslim.

Late Medieval Muslim anxieties over regulating non-Muslim visibility in public life intensified in other areas as well, such as architecture and political administration. Treatises that condemned the widespread participation of Jews and Christians in government proliferated after the twelfth century. Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 1355), a rival of Ibn Taymiyya who served as head judge in Damascus for sixteen years during Mamluk rule, penned treatises that detailed the regulations of building, repairing and renovating non-Muslim houses of worship.

As in the past, the degree of the enforcements of such restrictive regulations likely waxed and waned. As I suggested earlier, the widespread diffusion of the speech-act, “Do not imitate” suggests that Muslim imitation of non-Muslims in everyday life was

---


32 An account of which is recorded by Damascene historian, Ibn Kathîr (d. 1373), and translated in Lewis, *Islam: From the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople*, 232-33.


34 Seth Ward, “Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī on Construction, Continuance and Repair of Churches and Synagogues in Islamic Law,” in *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions*, ed. William S. Brinner and Steven Ricks (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989). It is said that shortly after the initial decree, some churches were razed and some Muslim mobs even tore down the upper stories of Christian dwellings that stood higher than those of neighboring Muslims. The subsequent attempts to relax the laws for dhimmī elites suggest that in urban areas and during the period shortly after the decree was publicized, these laws were enforced relatively strictly. However, this state of affairs appears to be the exception and not the rule.
actually the norm. The very presence of treatises that complain about non-Muslim presence in public life suggest the “pervasive phenomenon of non-Muslim involvement in the political life of medieval Islam.”\(^{35}\) According to historian, Mark Cohen, “The dhimmīs ubiquitous presence in Arab ruling circles involved them in the business of state in ways unimaginable for Jews in Christian North Europe. It gave them influence and honor and imparted to the minority communities to which they belonged a feeling of embeddedness in the larger society.”\(^{36}\)

**Festivals and the Cult of Saints**

Perhaps nowhere in Damascus’s public sphere did mimetic contagion result in the blurring of distinctions between different social groups more than at festivals, or ʿīds. These holidays and celebrations comprised rituals and social practices that folded the religious into the cultural, and the cultural into the religious. Festivals, in their numerous forms, were central to the life of medieval Damascenes, whether Muslim, Christian, Jew or pagan. People attended funerals, visited the tombs of various saints, celebrated holidays such as Easter, ʿĪd al-Fiṭr, the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, the martyrdom of the Prophet’s grandson, Ḥusayn, and the originally Persian holiday Nawrūz. The “Cult of Saints” was widespread in the two major Mamluk cities of Damascus and Cairo. These festivals also marked specific groups associated with them. Christians celebrated Easter, Christmas and Maundy Thursday. Muslims celebrated ʿĪd al-Fiṭr. Sufis celebrated the Prophet’s birthday. Shiʿīs celebrated Husayn’s martyrdom. Egyptians celebrated


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 66. Cohen also observes, “the relative stability over time of the basic law regarding their legal status assured them a considerable degree of continuity.” ———, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*, 74.
Nawrūz. Jews, however, tended to conduct their public rituals and celebrations out of public view.\textsuperscript{37}

Yet, despite the particular group-affiliations of these ʿīds, they often incorporated outsiders as well. ʿĪds therefore marked moments and places where boundaries between different social groups blurred just as they simultaneously signified the public expression and presence of the specific group that a particular festival represented. At these festivals, social hierarchies were often subverted and overturned, resulting in what Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has called, the carnivalesque.\textsuperscript{38} Boaz Shoshan has colorfully described the practices associated with the Egyptian holiday of Nawrūz, which included a range of transgressions against social norms such as spraying water on people, cross-dressing, singing and dancing.\textsuperscript{39} Perhaps the most symbolic event of this momentary inversion of the social order, however, was the customary performance of a Nawrūz procession during which a “thinly bearded” replica of the Amīr was mocked by the crowds. Perhaps such blatant disrespect of political authority went too far. After repeated attempts of different rulers to suppress its celebration, the Mamluks sought to ban it altogether from Cairo towards the end of the fourteenth century. This attempted ban did not mean that medieval politicians never supported public celebrations, however. The Mamluks imprisoned Ibn Taymiyya for his strident views against tomb visitation due, in part, to its popular appeal.

\textsuperscript{37} Cohen, \textit{Under Crescent and Cross : The Jews in the Middle Ages}, 60.
\textsuperscript{38} M. M. Bakhtin, \textit{Rabelais and His World} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
\textsuperscript{39} Boaz Shoshan, \textit{Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 40-52.
ʿĪds also became a controversial topic among Muslim religious scholars. They were far from unanimous on how to approach the seasonal waves of such public spectacles. Some had a more lenient attitude. The Egyptian religious scholar, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) authored a treatise supporting the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday. The Mamluks imprisoned Ibn Taymiyya with the blessing of prominent religious scholars who did not object to tomb visitations. Others, however, embedded their social critique in religious discourse. “Reformist scholars” such as Ibn Taymiyya and his student, Shams al-Din al-Dhahabī (d. 1348), were especially vocal. They enthusiastically mobilized the discourse of tashabbuh in treatises that condemned tomb visitation and Muslim participation in unsanctioned festivals such as the Christian Lent holidays. They singled out the Lent festivities on Thursday in particular, which they derogatively referred to as “Despicable Thursday (al-khamīs al-ḥaqīr).” During this holiday, Muslims ate lentils, inhaled incense, hung paper crosses, wore new clothes, exchanged gifts, and painted eggs just like the Christians. For Ibn Taymiyya and others, this level of Muslim involvement in Christian religious celebrations was unacceptable. During the Mamluk period, Muslim polemics against religious innovations (bidʿa) also intensified. The Egyptian contemporary of Ibn Taymiyya, Muhammad ʿAbdarī, known

---

40 Maundy Thursday was just one day in a series of special days during the last week of Lent that held special significance for Christians. It seems that Muslim scholars like Ibn Taymiyya and Dhahabī derogatively referred to this time with the temporal metonym of Thursday, despite its relative insignificance when compared to Good Friday or Easter Sunday. Perhaps the uniqueness of Thursday as a special holiday to Christians inspired this label. Ibn Taymiyya mentions this day in the Necessity of the Straight Path, but provides more detail on the specific practices and customs associated with the last days of Lent among Damascene Christians in a fatwa. See Memon, Ibn Taimiya’s Struggle against Popular Religion, 210-14; Ibn Taymiyya, Iqtiḍāʾ al-Ṣiraṭ al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jaḥīm, 1:476-81; Ahmad b. Halim Ibn Taymiyya, Majmuʿat al-Fatāwa, 3rd ed., 37 vols. (al-Manṣūra, Egypt: Dār al-wafāʾ, 2005); Muhammad Ibn al-Hājj al-ʿAbdarī, Al-Madkhal, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ṭurāth, n.d.), 2:54-55.

as Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 1336), criticizes the participation of Cairene Muslims – women especially - in unsanctioned festivals like tomb visitations. He advised Mamluk governors to ban the sale of products to Christians that aid them in associating partners with God. Writing from Mecca, Ḥanafi jurist, Idrīs al-Turkumānī, condemned Mamluk employment of non-Muslims in administration, Muslim participation in Christmas, Easter and Nawrūz celebrations, and even the use of firearms by hunting associations. Like Ibn al-Ḥājj, Ibn Taymiyya and al-Dhahabī, he criticizes the transgressions of women, dedicating a special section in The Illuminating Treatise on Reprehensible Inventions and Innovations to dancing, singing, unveiling, seductive movements of the body, and gender separation at social gatherings and funerals.

Ibn Taymiyya vs. the world?

There have been many excellent studies of Ibn Taymiyya’s life, works, trials, and personality. Here, I will merely attempt to summarize and contextualize Ibn

---


43 Shoshan, Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo, 68.


46 There has been much written on Ibn Taymiyya among European and North American scholars. In addition to Memon’s introduction and translation of The Necessity of the Straight Path, I mention some of the more important studies here. For a general synthesis of his thought and life, see the magisterial and still unsurpassed Henri Laoust, Essai Sur Les Doctrines Sociales Et Politiques De Taki-a-Din Ahmad b. Taymiya (Le Caire: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1939); also see the introduction of Thomas F. Michel, A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya's Al-Jawab Al-Sahih (Delmar, N.Y.: Caravan Books, 1983); on his theodicy, see Jon Hoover, Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism (Leiden: Brill, 2007); on his relationship to the Hanbali school see Abdul Hakim I. al-
Taymiyya’s anxieties over a host of foreign threats, internal and external, to Muslim society. Ibn Taymiyya became famous not only for his staunch defense of the perduring normative authority of the salaf, the founding fathers of Islam, but also for his intellectual genius, social activism, and polemical sparring with Muslim and non-Muslim alike. This penchant for conflict and controversy cannot be simply attributed to madhhab politics. Ibn Taymiyya was a bold activist in multiple fields of social life, including politics, religion, and everyday affairs. In 1300, he resisted the Mongol invasion of Damascus, despite the obvious risks to his life, negotiating the return of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian prisoners to Damascus. That same year he participated in a military campaign against the Shiʿa in the Syrian Lebanese mountains, who were accused of collaborating with the Mongols. He functioned as a religious consultant to Mamluk sultan al-Mālik al-

Matroudi, *The Hanbali School of Law and Ibn Taymiyyah: Conflict or Conciliation* (London: Routledge, 2006); on trial in Damascus, see Sherman A. Jackson, "Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial in Damascus," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 39, no. 1 (1994); on his Sufism, see G. Makdisi, "Ibn Taimiya: A Sufi of the Qadiriya Order," *America Journal of Arabic Studies* 1(1973); on his personality, see Little, "Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose."; for a compilation of more recent studies see Rapoport and Ahmed, *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, as well as the studies and translations of Yahya Michot.

During the Mamluk period, madhhab-affiliation could significantly impact a scholar’s ideological, legal, theological, and political positioning. Ibn Taymiyya was born into a family of religious scholars who followed the Ḥanbalī madhhab, which was a minority school in a mostly Shāfiʿī city. His public trials were never administered by a Hanbali judge, illustrating the political function that madhhab affiliation could play. Hanbalis were immigrants who had fled to Damascus from Mongols and Crusaders. As a child, Ibn Taymiyya, himself, fled his birthplace of Harrān, located in Syria, to escape the Mongols. During their initial periods of migration to Damascus, Hanbalis encountered some resistance and prejudice. For instance, one could find a sign that read, “No Jew, Christian, Magian, or Ḥanbalī enter.” Some even disputed their claim to be true Muslims. However, amidst the emergence of a Mamluk catholic policy towards the four Sunni schools of law, Hanbalis crafted out a space for themselves in Damascus, and in the Mamluk sultanate more generally. Catherina Bori observes that “while the polemics surrounding Ibn Taymiyya’s legal and theological doctrines can be partially explained through madhhab competition…they often tended to go beyond the boundaries of the madhhab.” Michael A. Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 146–47; Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350*, 169; Caterina Bori, "Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamāʿatu-Hu: Authority, Conflict and Consensus in Ibn Taymiyya’s Circle," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 24.

Nāṣir al-Qalāwūn (d. 1341), before falling out of favor with him. He went on anti-brothel campaigns, and as already mentioned, kicked over backgammon boards.

His anxiety over a variety of dangers materialized into numerous polemical works directed against Christianity, Shīʿism, Greek logic, scholastic theology, and Sufism in both its popular and theosophical forms. He even authored polemical works that named and targeted particular scholars. Ibn Taymiyya authored the most extensive polemical works authored by a medieval Sunni Muslim against Christians and Shiʿīs. Ibn Taymiyya wrote seven major polemics against Christianity, including the most elaborate Muslim polemic against Christianity in medieval Islam, *The Correct Reply to Those Who Altered Christ’s Religion (al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-masīḥ)*. During the latter part of his life in 1321, amidst violent conflict between Christians and Muslims in Cairo, Ibn Taymiyya authored a fierce polemic against the Twelver Shiʿa, *The Methodology of the Prophetic Way (Minhāj al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya)* in response to a treatise penned by contemporary Shiʿī scholar al-Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī (d. 1326). In this work, Ibn Taymiyya repeatedly lumps the Shiʿa with Christians and Jews, demonstrating how *inter*-religious and *intra*-religious difference can overlap and amplify each other. Ibn Taymiyya also authored numerous treatises attacking various aspects of Sufism.

While, he is stereotyped as being anti-Sufi, he also maintained Sufi sympathies, and

---

49 During his last stint in prison he penned *The Book Refuting al-Ikhnāʿī (Kitāb radd ʿalā al-Ikhnāʿī)*. Ikhnāʿī had declared Ibn Taymiyya an unbeliever, recommending that he should be killed. Instead, Ibn Taymiyya was imprisoned.  
might even have been a Sufi himself. Nevertheless, he perceived many dangers to orthodox Islam in both discursive and popular manifestations of Sufism.

While his treatises usually targeted a specific group, his actual barbs often drew them together into a single opposition. This rhetorical approach works like the strategy of guilt by association. For example, Ibn Taymiyya perceived the inability and unwillingness to uphold the sanctity and uniqueness of prophecy to be a common feature among Christians, Sufis, and Shiʿīs: Christians valorized the teachings of their priests above those of the prophets; Twelver Shiʿīs rivaled the Prophet Muhammad’s primacy by elevating the twelve imams to the status of sinlessness and infallibility; Sufis diluted Muhammad’s status by rivaling the spiritual states and ritual practices of pious shaykhs with those of the Prophet himself. Ibn Taymiyya draws them altogether when he mocks the shrine of Ḥusayn in Cairo revered by both Sufis and Shiʿīs, “It is probably the head of some Christian monk.” He reviles this Shiʿī and Sufi pilgrimage site by associating it with Christianity. He repeats this approach when he criticizes the monism of the controversial Sufi, Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), by drawing analogies to Shiʿī and Christian theological adulterations. Summarizing Ibn Taymiyya’s polemical tendencies, Thomas Michel observes that “the second great principle which guides Ibn Taymiyya’s polemical writings” is the failure of the philosophers, speculative theologians, Sufis, and Shiʿīs to assert the difference between God and the universe. As we shall see below, however,

---
53 See the introductory chapters of Michel, A Muslim Theologian’s Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya’s Al-Jawab Al-Sahih.
54 Ibid., 36.
55 Ibid.
the distinction between human and divine was not the only difference that Ibn Taymiyya asserted as defender of the Straight Path.

III. The Necessity of the Straight Path in order to be Different from the People of Hell

Ibn Taymiyya’s emphasis on Muslim distinction shapes the content of *The Necessity of the Straight Path* as well. Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise marked a watershed moment in the history of this concept because it loaded *tashabbuh* with such a long-lasting negative emphasis on distinction. Ibn Taymiyya was also the first to assemble a wide range of hadith traditions that he classified under the rubric of *tashabbuh* in order to prove that Muslim distinction was a universal principle of Islam. Ibn Taymiyya builds upon the Shari‘a discursive tradition, which emphasizes *tashabbuh*’s negative meaning in order to enforce Muslim religious and other distinctions. For Ibn Taymiyya, good *tashabbuh* requires very special circumstances.

In *The Necessity of the Straight Path*, Ibn Taymiyya argues that being different as a default religious policy is good even when there is no specific divine command to avoid a particular practice. Deploying several hadith traditions, he argues that a logic of difference permeates the Islamic source-texts. He argues that when the Prophet commanded Muslims to “Be different!” he intended for this imperative to be general and absolute; the command goes far beyond the original context of dyeing the beard.56 Ibn Taymiyya explains that Muslims who believe that being different (*mukhālafa*) is inherently good will be protected from imitating non-Muslims and their deviant habits.

---

Within this oppositional framework, simply looking different is thus beneficial. Difference is a pre-emptive mechanism that ensures the social and cultural boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim do not blur.

Muslim religious distinction is Ibn Taymiyya’s most pressing concern. “The act of imitating infidels (al-tashabbuh bi’l-kāfirīn) lies at the root of the effacement of God’s religion and His laws,” he audaciously declares. He even expands the concept of jāhiliyya, which normally refers to pre-Islamic Arabia to include Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and paganism. Further, he claims their behavior and moral character is necessarily deficient: “It cannot be imagined that any of their deeds can ever be perfect…everything in them is harmful or deficient… infidelity is like a malady of the heart or even worse.” Ibn Taymiyya appears to be combating a more liberal sentiment among Muslim contemporaries, which led many to emulate infidel ways. The problem for Ibn Taymiyya is that these spiritual diseases can spread to Muslims as well and become a part of who they are: “A man, despite virtue, learning and piety, may still have something of the traits called pagan, Jewish and Christian.” This potential multivalence of religious identity is a clear and present danger that Ibn Taymiyya must confront.

Unsurprisingly, Ibn Taymiyya’s anxieties are directed towards those who most resembled Muslims - Jews and Christians. He stereotypes them in order to foreground

58 This includes the reprehensible innovations and abrogated doctrines that preceded Islam regardless of the source. Ibn Taymiyya, Iqtiḍāʾ al-Ṣiraṭ al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jahīm, 231; Memon, Ibn Taimiya’s Struggle against Popular Religion, 146.
60 “…but this does not mean that he is to be considered an unbeliever or impious.” Ibn Taymiyya, Iqtiḍāʾ al-Ṣiraṭ al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jahīm, 224; Memon, Ibn Taimiya’s Struggle against Popular Religion, 143.
the distinction between Muslims and their scriptural rivals. Ibn Taymiyya glosses the very first chapter of the Quran, *The Opening*, with a familiar trope that places the Muslim community in between Christian excesses and Jewish shortcomings. In the closing verses of this chapter, the believer petitions God to “Guide us on the straight path, not of those who have incurred your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray.”\(^{61}\) Ibn Taymiyya invokes a polemical interpretation held by other exegetes, which identifies Christians as “those who have gone astray” and Jews as “those who have incurred God’s wrath.”\(^{62}\) Ibn Taymiyya blames Christians for deifying Christ and for succumbing to extreme ascetic and monastic practices; they have thus gone too far. Ibn Taymiyya blames Jews for deliberately altering their scriptures for being too stingy with their knowledge; they have thus fallen short. In contrast, Ibn Taymiyya lauds Muslims as the “middle community” (*umma wasaṭa*) who exhibit the virtue of the golden mean.

Yet, Ibn Taymiyya deflects many of his essentialist criticisms of Christians and Jews onto Muslims themselves. He criticizes Damascene Muslims for fracturing into sectarian groups, deviating from correct religious interpretation, concealing knowledge for personal gain, uncritically imitating religious leaders, participating in the cult of saints, and slavishly succumbing to their womenfolk. Ibn Taymiyya mobilizes his social critique of non-Muslims to critique contemporary Muslim practices.

The continuing fragmentation of the Muslim community into various sects alarmed Ibn Taymiyya. He takes great pains to demonstrate that diversity of opinion in

---

\(^{61}\) Quran 1: 6-7.

normative religious practice (ikhtilāf), is not always bad, and is in fact a mercy. However, there are limits to this normative pluralism. Following Quranic vocabulary, Ibn Taymiyya labels a host of groups – Christians, Jews, pagans, and deviant Muslims - the *ahl al-ahwāʾ*, literally people who follow their base desires, or those who have deviated from the Straight Path. However, Ibn Taymiyya employs this phrase to single out deviant Muslim groups, especially, such as Sufis, philosophers, speculative theologians, wannabe-jurists, and various subgroups of the Shiʿa. When Muslims reach this threshold of desire, difference is no longer a mercy, but a curse. It deforms into moral and spiritual inferiority. Articulating the full disruptive capacity of desire, Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Zizek, observes, “Desire's *raison d'être* is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire.” It is this infinite and unbounded attribute of desire that threatens to undermine and overwhelm the finite and bounded order of orthodoxy. René Girard recognized that desire is mimetically produced; the regulation of desire therefore requires the regulation of social interaction.

For Ibn Taymiyya, desire threatens to transgress all bounds, and unravel the social, political, and religious scaffolding built around the exemplary conduct of the first Muslims (*salaf*).

Ibn Taymiyya reserves his most scathing remarks about the *ahl al-ahwāʾ* for the Shiʿis who “are the most lying and polytheistic of those groups who follow their base

---


64 The medieval Persian Muslim heresiographer, Shahristānī (d. 1153), divides up his compendium on Muslim sects (*al-Mīlal wa al-Nihal*) into two main parts: 1) those with scripture; 2) and those without scripture. The latter category he labels the value-laden, *ahl al-ahwāʾ*. In the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Ignaz Goldziher defines it as “a term applied by the orthodox theologians to those followers of Islam [sic], whose religious tenets in certain details deviate from the general ordinances of the Sunnite confession (cf. *ZDMG*, 1898, 159).”

He may be referring to the Nuṣaybī and Druze Shiʿīs of the Lebanese Mountains. Ibn Taymiyya fought jihad against them shortly after the Mongol occupation of Damascus; they may have been collaborators with these foreign invaders. He also blamed Fatimid Shiʿīs for allowing Christian Crusaders to occupy Jerusalem and build a door in the vicinity of Abraham’s rock, which opened the door to Muslim visitation and veneration of this place. Ibn Taymiyya exhorted Sunnī Muslims to wear signet rings on their left hand in opposition to the Shiʿī “innovators” who wore signet rings on their right hand. Not just Muslim, but Sunnī Muslim distinction must materialize itself in everyday ritual and cultural practice.

Ibn Taymiyya had anxieties over more than just religious distinction, however. He boldly proclaims that his main purpose for writing *The Necessity of the Straight Path* is to illustrate the “vices of the People of the Book and non-Arabs.” Ibn Taymiyya’s juxtaposition of both ethnic and religious difference illustrates how imaginations of foreignness rarely operate along mutually exclusive categories of difference. Multiple markers of foreignness converge into a singular vice. This coupling also suggests that the enemy is comprised of both non-Muslims and Muslims – foreign Muslims. He clarifies, “When the Shariʿa prohibited Muslims from imitating non-Arabs, it meant to include all

---

67 Ibid., 359; Memon, *Ibn Taimiya’s Struggle against Popular Religion*, 178. A tradition contained in an important Twelver Shiʿī collection expresses the positive value and unique association of wearing a ring on one’s right hand: “Inform me of the ring worn by the Commander of the Faithful. Was it on his right hand or what?” He replied: ‘He used to wear it on his right hand because the imam is the companion of the right hand after the Messenger of God. God also praised the companions of the right hand, but condemned the companions of the left hand. The Messenger of God used to wear a ring on his right hand and it is a well-known sign of the Shiʿīa...” There are other traditions, however, that do not indicate a preference for one hand or another. See Muhammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Hurr al-Āmilī, *Wasāʾil al-Shiʿa*, 30 vols. (Qumm: Mu’assasat Āl al-bayt, n.d.), 5:82.
old or new practices of the non-Arab unbelievers and also those of the non-Arab Muslims which were not in vogue among the early converts.\textsuperscript{69} This is ironic because Ibn Taymiyya himself was of non-Arab Kurdish origin – a fact he appears to have blocked out.

Ibn Taymiyya lauds the numerous virtues of the Arabs. Evoking the earlier \textit{Shu‘ūbiyya} debates, he writes, “Arabs are more inclined to good works than any other people. They are closer to generosity, sagacity, courage, loyalty and other such praiseworthy moral qualities.”\textsuperscript{70} Because of the significant socio-symbolic significance of language, this also meant that Muslims should speak Arabic and “not learn the gibberish (\textit{raṭāna}) of the non-Arabs,” as advised by ʿUmar.\textsuperscript{71} Preserving Arab pride was even more significant after the collapse of the caliphate in 1252, which was sacked by the initially pagan non-Arab foreigners, the Mongols. Not only Islam, but Arab civilization was under constant threat. Yet, even Syria’s current rulers were not Arabs. The Mamluks were originally military slaves plucked from Turkic-speaking regions. Ibn Taymiyya attributes this change of fortune to widespread Muslim disavowal of proper Islamic practices:

> When the imitation on the one hand of the Jews and Christians and on the other of non-Arabs such as the Byzantines and Persians became rampant among the Eastern kings, who thereby violated the tenets of Islam and thus plunged into doing things that displeased God and His Prophet, God brought these infīdīl Turks…\textsuperscript{72}


Ibn Taymiyya fumes at the Turkish displacement of the Arabs from political power. Not only was their commitment to Islam suspect, but their ignorance of Arabic and uncouth habits marred Arab – Islamic culture. A Mongol invasion of Syria meant that one foreign ruler would be replaced by an even more tyrannical foreign ruler.

This helps us to understand why a Muslim majority presence in Damascus does not offer Ibn Taymiyya much solace. His anxieties were incited by the possibility of collaboration between indigenous Christian and Muslim minorities and foreign Mongols and Crusaders. Not only were Arabs under non-Arab Turkic rule, but the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad had just collapsed – a memory that continued to haunt him. Festivals functioned as a microcosm of the political theatre that was taking place around Ibn Taymiyya. The mimetic frenzy of Muslims celebrating Easter and Christmas with Christians, and participating in saint and tomb visitations signified the very political disorder that Ibn Taymiyya sought to rectify. For Ibn Taymiyya, then, restoring order to the sphere of public celebrations was an overtly political practice.

Despite these xenophobic attitudes, Ibn Taymiyya’s egalitarian impulse prevails. He admit that many non-Arabs excelled Arabs, drawing a hyperbolic comparison between the two poles in the pre-Modern Arab-Muslim imaginary: an Abysinnian black slave and a Qurayshi, a member of the Prophet Muhammad’s tribe “An Abyssinian can

73 On Ibn Taymiyya’s viewpoint on the necessity of the caliphate see Mona Hassan, “Modern Interpretations and Misinterpretations of a Medieval Scholar: Apprehending the Political Thought of Ibn Taymiyya,” in Ibn Taymiyya and His Times, ed. Yossel Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
be more distinguished in the eyes of God than a Qurayshī,” Ibn Taymiyya says, because “collective excellence is not necessarily reflected individually.”

Ibn Taymiyya is less compromising with respect to gender, however. He stresses the necessity of gender distinctions. Ibn Taymiyya’s observations about women are brief but poignant. He condemns men imitating women since, in his worldview, women were especially vulnerable to imitating non-Muslims at festivals, a point also emphasized by others. “Indeed it is women who are responsible for much of the imitation of the holiday customs,” Ibn Taymiyya observes. He therefore warns men not to give into women by participating in festivals. To establish this point, he cites a prophetic hadith that states women were the greatest trial for the Jews, at once casting a negative light on women and Jews.

Ibn Taymiyya advocates the enforcement of other social distinctions as well. Although he lauds Arabs in general, he roundly criticizes Bedouin Arabs, who are condemned by the Quran and the Prophet on different occasions. Yet, Ibn Taymiyya admits that Arab Bedouins may supersede settled Arabs in terms of piety so that imitating their example is not inherently bad. He takes an extreme case to make his point. He contrasts Bedouins to the devil, whose imitation he condemns absolutely.

---

75 See footnotes 42 and 45 above.
Taymiyya also recognizes the human tendency to resemble animals and urges Muslims to be careful when selecting their animal companions. Ibn Taymiyya’s social imaginary spanned the cosmos.

**Degrees of Distinction: Ibn Taymiyya’s theory of minor differences**

Ibn Taymiyya creates sharp distinctions between Muslims and others by constructing a binary oppositional framework of similarity (*mushābaha*) and difference (*mukhālafa*). According to Ibn Taymiyya’s logic, similarity to nonbelievers means difference from the Prophet Muhammad, while similarity to the Prophet means difference from the non-believers. Therefore, whoever desires to be like Muhammad should be different from non-believers. This binary logic of difference underwrites Ibn Taymiyya’s discourse of *tashabbuh*.

However, Ibn Taymiyya recognizes that a binary logic of difference has its limits. Distinction has multiple manifestations and degrees, and need not always be so crudely oppositional. Manifestations of distinction can therefore appear in the guise of what Freud called “minor differences.” Like Freud, Ibn Taymiyya recognized that distinctions are often mapped on a broad framework of similarity - that there are some practices and rituals that Muslims share with other religious communities. In these situations, Muslims only differ in the details. Ibn Taymiyya offers an example: Islamic regulations on menstruating women. He transmits a tradition where the Prophet distinguishes Islamic regulations from those of Judaism. According to this tradition, Arab Jews sequestered

---


menstruating women into separate quarters, banning any sort of physical intimacy with them. The Prophet, however, did not go to such extremes. Instead, he ordered that menstruating women should not pray nor engage in physical intimacy below the waist; it was not necessary for them to be sequestered in separate quarters. After hearing Jewish disapproval of this ruling, a Companion wondered if they should follow Jewish custom instead, and asked the Prophet, “Should we not have sex with them?” The Prophet appeared to become angry at having been second guessed, but then calmed down when he was later gifted with milk. Reflecting on this incident, Ibn Taymiyya observes that the Prophet does not order Muslims to do the exact opposite of what the Jews do and abandon restrictions on menstruating women altogether. That would be tantamount to imitating Christians. Instead, Muslims emulated the Jews by distinguishing menstruating women from other women. However, the Prophet enacts some small differences in order to differentiate the Muslim approach from both the Jewish and Christian ones. Ibn Taymiyya extrapolates from this incident that distinction need not be completely oppositional; Islam’s distinct spin on monotheism may simply materialize through minor differences. The upshot is that Muslims could still share certain core principles and values with other religious communities like Judaism and Christianity, but should implement them differently.

**Tashabbuh as Shariʿa Discourse**

Before delving into Ibn Taymiyya’s theory of imitation, I want to first contextualize *tashabbuh* as a Shariʿa-based discourse. By the eleventh century, all Sunnī law schools,  

---

and even the Literalist (Ẓāhirī) school, deployed *tashabbuh* to determine Islamic norms according to a morally-charged typology of human acts. This classification system represented the Muslim attempt to discern divine law, Shari'ā. Most Sunnī schools of law, except the Ḥanafīs, classified human actions into one of five possible legal categories: illicit (*ḥalāl*), detested (*makrūh*), licit (*mubāḥ*), recommended (*mustaḥabb*), and binding (*farḍ* or *wājib*). An act of *tashabbuh* could fall into any one of these five categories. Ibn Taymiyya summarizes the legal possibilities:

..The Shari'ā makes it obligatory to appear different from them (non-Muslims) and sometimes makes it obligatory for them to appear different from us, such as in the case of dress and related matters. In other situations, the practice is simply recommended (*mustaḥabb*), as in dying the beard and praying with shoes… and yet in other situations, imitating them is detested (*makrūh*), as in praying during sunset and breaking one’s fast belatedly.

Even an act judged to be reprehensible imitation, Ibn Taymiyya argues, need not be automatically judged illicit. The jurist may classify the practice as simply detested, or even licit, if the particular form of imitation was not considered very serious. Because

---


84 Ḥanafīs added two more categories for a total of seven possible classes in their spectrum of human actions. They divided the classification of “detested” (*makrūh*) into two more types, mildly detested (*makrūh tanzihi*) and strongly detested (*makrūh taḥrīmī*). They also divided the classification of obligation into two more types, necessary (*wājib*) and obligatory (*farḍ*). See chapter seventeen in Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2003). For an in depth discussion on the Ḥanafī and Shāfiʿī disputes over the difference between *wājib* and *farḍ* see A. Kevin Reinhart, ”"Like the Difference between Heaven an Earth.” Ḥanafī and Shāfiʿī Discussions of Farḍ and Wājib in Theology and Uṣūl,” in *Studies in Islamic Jurisprudence*, ed. Bernard Weiss (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

determining whether an act was truly reprehensible was a subjective matter, jurists from
different legal schools, and even within the same school, might disagree on a given ruling.\footnote{I review disputes among Muslim jurists about the topic of covering the face of a corpse with a garment in chapter five.}

Invocations of \textit{tashabbuh} as a legal rationale become prevalent in treatises of jurisprudence by at least the 11\textsuperscript{th} century.\footnote{The canonization of hadith across major works of substantive law (\textit{al-furūʿ}) composed during the eleventh and twelfth centuries across Sunnī and non-Sunnī legal schools contributed to this development.} \textit{Tashabbuh}, while broadly accepted as a valid explanatory cause for determining legal rulings, sometimes served as a forum for intra-Muslim debate and disagreement. The choice to condemn or outlaw certain practices of imitation depended on the social circumstances, historical context and the subjective viewpoint of the jurist. Not all jurists saw a particular mimetic practice as bad. The medieval Ḥanafī jurist, Sarakhsī, portrays Imam al-Shāfiʿī as soft on \textit{tashabbuh} by attributing the following quotation to him: “We do prohibit the imitation (\textit{tashabbuh}) with them [Jews and Christians] in everything; we eat like they eat.”\footnote{Al-Sarakhsī, \textit{Al-Mabsūṭ}, 1:201. I have been unable to locate this quotation in Shāfiʿī’s published writings. It was not uncommon for legal schools to misrepresent other legal schools. Sarakhsī makes this attribution in the context of debates between Ḥanafīs and Shāfiʿīs over the permissibility of praying with a printed copy of the Quran. Ḥanafīs viewed this practice as impermissible due to its resemblance to Jewish and Christian ritual practice; Shāfiʿīs had no such qualms, however.} Muslim jurists tended to converge on a default ruling that imitation (\textit{tashabbuh}) in non-ritual matters was not illicit (\textit{harām}) but clearly detested (\textit{makrūh}).\footnote{A century later, the Hanafi jurist, Abū Bakr al-Kāsānī (d. 1191), followed Sarakhsī’s great work with comprehensive work of substantive law of his own, \textit{Badāʾiʿ wa Ṣanāʾiʿ fī tartīb al-Sharāʾiʿ}. In it, he expresses a similar opinion regarding the imitation of the devil (Iblīs) and infidels: “Imitating the Devil and Infidels is detested (makrūh) in matters outside ritual prayer.” See Abū Bakr al-Kāsānī, \textit{Badāʾiʿ wa Ṣanāʾiʿ fī Tartīb Al-Sharāʾiʿ}, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmīyya, 1986), 1:215.} The Baghdadi jurist, Ibn Ḥanbal, for instance, declared it was not unlawful, but detested to wear Sindhi sandals, a kind of
footwear that originated in India but had become stylish in Muslim Iraq. Sarakhsī declared that “It is detested that men imitate and resemble women.”

However, when a practice of tashabbuh overlapped with sin, it ran the risk of being deemed unlawful. Jurists, for example, declared that to prostrate in ritual prayer during the precise moments of when the sun is rising or setting was not simply detested, but unlawful. Why? Because it was associated with a pre-Islamic pagan practice of worshipping the sun. The practice signaled that one was worshipping other than God (shirk), the most grievous sin in Islam. Prostrating during those moments had far greater theological consequences than wearing Sindhi sandals.

Determining the status of acts was not a haphazard process. It relied on a set of systematic discursive tools developed by jurists. All they needed was a way to interpret the religious source-texts – the Quran and hadith - by deploying different discursive mechanisms, or forms of reasoning. Here, I want to highlight one discursive mechanism that helps explain how tashabbuh operated in Muslim legal thinking: the rule of “blocking the means to the illicit (sadd al-dhārīʿa),” which has become known in Anglo-American law as the “camel’s nose dilemma.”

The Camel’s Nose Dilemma

The “slippery slope” describes the potential for dire consequences or imminent disaster. In logic, it describes the fallacy that one decision will necessarily lead to a particular result in a deterministic fashion; it assumes that precedence dictates the future. Modern

90 For source, see chapter two fn. 86.
91 Al-Sarakhsi, Al-Mabsūṭ, 1:43.
legal scholars ironically refer to the dilemma as the “camel’s nose” problem. It is so called based on the following anecdote. One day a camel poked its nose into a tent inhabited by an Arab. At first, the Arab paid little attention to the camel. That is, until the rest of the camel’s body followed and entered the tent, creating an uncomfortably crowded encounter between the Arab and the camel.

The moral of the story is that the seemingly harmless entry of the camel’s nose marked the first cause in an inevitable, but unexpected and undesirable, chain of causes and effects. One should therefore not belittle such apparently insignificant events, but pre-emptively prevent them from leading to greater problems. This pre-emptive logic of stopping potential causes of major undesirable events – like the entry of the camel’s nose - is a consistent feature of legal reasoning across cultures. It is a form of reasoning that usually implies a pessimistic decent into the illicit. Like “slippery slope” arguments, this pre-emptive rationale provides a formal outlet for the anxieties of jurists to express themselves in the determination of legal rulings. The jurist perceives these practices as potentially dangerous, and therefore prohibits them even if the possible harm never results. As one contemporary legal thinker observes, this form of rationality does not permit for an ethical ledge along the slippery slope – it reflects a conservative legalistic way of thinking that does not admit of a middle ground.

Muslim jurists developed a formal legal tool to pre-emptively outlaw licit practices that could potentially lead to illicit practices. They called this mechanism

---

“blocking the means to the illicit (sadd al-dharīʿa).” \(^{95}\) In the fourteenth century, Ibn Taymiyya’s dedicated student, also a Damascene Ḥanbalī jurist, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), zealously adduced ninety-nine examples of this form of reasoning. \(^{96}\) He wanted to leave no doubt in the minds of skeptics who dismissed this form of legal reasoning as illegitimate. The Sunnī legal schools did not unanimously accept the Islamic legitimacy of this form of reasoning: only the Ḥanbalī and Mālikī jurists did. \(^{97}\) From a psychoanalytical perspective, the legal tool of “blocking the means” provides a forum for jurists to reveal their anxieties and fears. As Ibn Qayyim explains, it outlaws practices that in themselves are harmless.

Among Ibn Qayyim’s examples, cases of \textit{tashabbuh} emerge frequently – about ten percent of the examples. The cases include: not praying during sunrise and sunset in imitation of polytheists, not wearing shoes during prayer in imitation of Jews, distinguishing oneself from Jews and Christians in outward appearance and dress, and even not speaking publicly about one’s sexual indiscretions so that other Muslims do not mimetically reproduce such illicit desires. Ibn Qayyim lists these examples under the heading, “Proofs on prohibiting one who does what leads to the illicit although it (that


\(^{97}\) Jurists in the Ḥanbalī and Mālikī legal schools adduce examples from the Quran and \textit{sunna} to demonstrate its use. However, Hanbaī and Shāfiʿī jurists do not recognize it as a formal legal tool, preferring instead alternative mechanisms such as \textit{istiḥsān}. Still, according to the medieval Mālikī legal theoretician, al-Shāṭibī, all legal schools employ this legal mechanism to derive law to some degree: see al-Shāṭibī, \textit{Al-Muwāfaqāt}, 2:434-37.
act) is permissible in and of itself.” For Ibn Qayyim, *tashabbuh* is the most salient expression of this precautionary legal mechanism.

This logic is actually embedded in the hadith texts themselves, such as in the command ascribed to the Prophet, “Dye your grey hair, and do not imitate the Jews.” The text itself offers the rationale for the legal ruling. A Muslim male should dye his graying beard, not because it looks stylish or because he should appear younger than he actually is, but because he should not imitate or resemble the Jews. Muslim jurists did not have to extrapolate a legal rationale to justify their exhortation for Muslim males to grow their beards. The hadith did it for them. In other cases, however, a legal rationale was not explicitly provided, and jurists had to offer an explanatory reason or cause (*ʿilla*) to justify their legal opinions. In many cases, they justified their legal opinion by appealing to the logic of imitation – most often in relation to Jews and Christians. For example, Ibn Taymiyya argues that Muslims should not participate in non-Muslim festivals because it constitutes reprehensible imitation of Jews and Christians.

**From Exteriority to Interiority: Ibn Taymiyya’s Theory of Imitation**

Ibn Taymiyya’s interpretation of the imitation hadith, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them” is a rich, multidimensional exploration that highlights the complexity of the

---

99. See Chapter two, fn. 87 for references to this hadith.
101. However, what a jurist claims is the “cause” that led to a particular ruling may actually be a retroactive “rationalization” that justified an already established ruling. The earliest treatises of Islamic jurisprudence often provided little or no explanation for specific rulings.
discourse and practice of *tashabbuh*: it highlights the significance of intention and agency for defining the legal status of a mimetic practice; the power of collective symbols; the politics of friendship; and the role of calculative rationality in defining the moral value of *tashabbuh*. His analysis shows how the apparently distinct realms of affect and cognition, body and spirit interact in order to shape human subjectivity, collective life, and religious orthodoxy.

Ibn Taymiyya delves beneath surface of imitation to examine its affective and spiritual core. He claims that imitation is an index of a person’s love and admiration for another individual or collectivity. Imitation constructs a hierarchical relationship between imitation and original that elevates the original above the imitation, even if the act is unintentional and unconscious. A Muslim who imitates a non-Muslim therefore (consciously or unconsciously) esteems him, as does an Arab who imitates a non-Arab. From Ibn Taymiyya’s perspective, such imitation generates an inferiority complex inappropriate for Arab Muslims. If Muslims are imitating social inferiors – whether Jew, Christian, pagan, or non-Arab - this inverts the ideal social order. A Muslim should be superior, not inferior to others. A consequence of this attitude is that the normative example of the first Muslims, the *salaf*, should be valorized above all other ways. When a Muslim becomes an imitator, he therefore reveals the weakness of his faith.

Ibn Taymiyya’s holistic imaginary of subject-formation illustrates how the “outward” (*ẓāhir*) and the “inward” (*bāṭin*) realms of human experience are inextricably connected. He writes, “Exteriority and interiority are inextricably related; the emotional

---

states of the heart must materialize into exterior practices, and exterior practices must
materialize into emotional states in the heart.”¹⁰³ Imitation is therefore an aesthetically-
mediated performance that corresponds to one’s affective (and spiritual) mode of being in
the world. The inextricability of the interior and exterior dimensions of human experience
explains why Ibn Taymiyya and others attribute great importance to regulating
eaesthetically-mediated practices such as dress and corporeal techniques in ritual and
everyday life. These practices were public and visible expressions of one’s moral and
spiritual being. They help direct one’s journey along the Straight Path.

The Theology and Politics of Friendship

Ibn Taymiyya’s spin on the imitation hadith intensifies religious difference and severely
marginalizes its positive gloss. For Ibn Taymiyya, tashabbuh almost univocally means
the reprehensible imitation of another collectivity. Through some innovative exegesis, he
likens the hadith, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them,” to a famous verse of the
Quran: “Whoever among you befriends them is one of them.”¹⁰⁴ Within the context of
the surrounding Quranic verses, the verse appears to require Muslim disavowal from
Jews and Christians. Framed within this Quranic politics of friendship, the imitation
hadith is far from a neutral description. Both texts deploy the referent, “them,” which
stands in as a proxy for a hierarchically inferior “other” unworthy of both friendship and
imitation. In the Quranic verse, however, the word tashabbuh is absent. The keyword is

¹⁰³ Ibn Taymiyya, Iqtiḍāʾ al-Ṣiraṭ al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jaḥīm, 80; Memon, Ibn Taimiya’s
Struggle against Popular Religion, 97. I have altered Memon’s translation.
¹⁰⁴ Quran 5:51. “Man yatawallahum min-kum fa-innahum min-hum” Ibn Taymiyya, Iqtiḍāʾ al-Ṣiraṭ al-
a term with an analogous Arabic morphology, “yatawallahum.” This term carries the distinct meaning of turning towards someone for friendship and protection - not the more general and possibly benign act of imitation. So, although both texts make strong statements about community belonging, the Quranic verse’s philological implications are more overtly political and polemical. Those who turn towards these Jews and Christians for friendship and protection do not merely associate with them but now belong to their community. This exaggerated statement not only expresses a tense religious rivalry, but also demarcates very clear social boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims by establishing an explicit us versus them binary.

According to this exegetical spin, the imitation hadith indicates that a Muslim must be able to tell his enemies from his friends. The German political philosopher, Carl Schmidt, distilled the birth of politics into the collective distinction between friend and enemy. By framing the imitation hadith as an endorsement of this construction, Ibn Taymiyya highlights a key political dimension of the tashabbuh discourse. This polarized imaginary intensifies and politicizes religious distinction into a friend-enemy polarity.

105 Like the infinitive, tashabbuh, tawalla corresponds to the fifth form Arabic verbal construction.
106 Some commentators tend to specify the suffix pronoun “hum” meaning “them” to a particular group of Christians and Jews, and not the generality, while others interpret the verse to include all Jews and Christians. Those who specify the verse’s application refer to the following verses from the chapter, Mumtaḥana (60:8 – 9) to specify the meaning of the above verse: “God does not forbid you concerning those who neither fight nor drive you out of your homes from dealing kindly and justly with them; God certainly loves those who are just. God only forbids you from turning (for friendship and protection) to those who fight you in religion, drive you out from your homes, and support (others) in driving you out. It is those who turn to them (for friendship and protection) who are the wrongdoers.” (emphasis mine) The same word “yatawallahum” is also used when the verse specifies exactly whom Muslims should avoid befriending: those who fight them in religion, who drive them out of their homes, or who support others in driving them out of their homes. In other words, Muslims should not befriend and seek protection from those who aggressively attack them. On the other hand, the verse’s seeming default position is that Muslims should deal with those who do not seek to harm them with kindness and justice.
This politics of friendship also has theological implications. “Whoever loves an infidel is not a believer,” declares Ibn Taymiyya.\(^{108}\) He argues that just as Quran 5:51 states that a Muslim who turns towards Jews and Christians for friendship and protection has crossed the theological boundary of belief into disbelief (\textit{kufr}) and become one of “them,” one who publicly imitates another community can likewise cross the boundaries of belief and become one of “them.” Therefore, depending upon the kind of practice and to whom it is affiliated, an act of \textit{tashabbuh} may even be tantamount to apostasy – the ultimate theological sin. While Ibn Taymiyya was not the first to declare that certain publicly visible and reprehensible forms of imitation could mean apostasy, he appears to be the first to have done so in considerable detail.\(^{109}\) Not all practices of imitation constitute apostasy, however. How does Ibn Taymiyya differentiate between imitative acts that constitute acts of apostasy from those that do not?

**Degrees of Imitation: The Primacy of Intention and Origins**

Just as there can be degrees of distinction, there can be degrees of imitation. Ibn Taymiyya asserts that the degree of imitation determines the ultimate legal ruling of a specific mimetic act - whether one becomes an apostate or remains within the fold of Islam. How does one determine the degree of imitation? For Ibn Taymiyya, the

---


\(^{109}\) The celebrated thirteenth century theologian, exegete and Shāfiʿi jurist, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), declares that to deliberately wear the \textit{zunnār}, the distinctive belt of the Christians and Jews, among other blatant acts that publicly proclaim that one is not a Muslim, constitutes an act of infidelity (\textit{kufr}). The thirteenth century theologian, al-Ījī, confirms this opinion declaring on the basis of community consensus (\textit{ijmaʾ}) that such acts constitute infidelity. See chapter five for sources and additional detail on how other theologians prior to Ibn Taymiyya had discussed the potential of apostasy in relation to matters of dress.
foremost consideration is the imitator’s intention. Let us once again recall the canonical hadith, “Actions are judged in accordance with their intentions.” Ibn Taymiyya makes a fundamental distinction between intentional and unintentional imitation. When unintentional, imitation is almost completely exterior because the interior dimension of intention is absent. When intentional, imitation becomes a composite of exteriority and interiority.

Ibn Taymiyya considers both intentional and unintentional imitation blameworthy. Intentional imitation is a much more serious matter, however. The imitator’s deliberate choice to imitate the distinctive rituals, symbols, and practices of another community signals conscious opposition to the way of the Prophet and the first Muslims. It also signals that sovereignty and authority no longer reside with God, the Prophet and the first Muslims, but with someone else. These intentional acts of imitation undermine the sovereignty of God. For this reason, in certain circumstances, such acts can result in apostasy. For Ibn Taymiyya, simply to claim that imitating Jews and Christians is a good thing is equivalent to “leaving the religion of the Muslim community.”

111 Also see chapter two: Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, kitāb al-badʾ al-waḥī, bāb kayfa kāna badʾ al-waḥī ilā rasāl Allāh; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-imāra, bāb qawlihī (ṣ) innamā al-aʿmāl bi al-niyyā; Sunan Abī Dāwūd, kitāb al-ṭalāq, bāb fīmā ʿuniya bihi al-ṭalāq wa al-niyyāt; Sunan al-Tirmidhī, kitāb ʿadāʾil al-jihād, bāb mā jāʾa fi man yuqāṭīl riyaʾ an wa lī al-dunya; Sunan al-Nasāʾī, kitāb al-ṭahāra, bāb al-niyya fī al-wuḍūʾ; Sunan Ibn Māja, kitāb al-zuhd, bāb al-niyya.
113 Although the intention of an act cannot be empirically known unless an imitator exposes his intention, Ibn Taymiyya can still theoretically determine the moral and legal status for such acts.
Ibn Taymiyya softens his initially harsh position, however. Despite this grim assessment of intentional imitation, Ibn Taymiyya acknowledges that intentionally imitating others simply in order to imitate them is rare. He claims that imitation is usually either unintentional. Anticipating the insights of René Girard, Ibn Taymiyya also recognizes that imitation is usually a dynamic triangulation between imitator, object (mimetic practice), and model. However he subtly nuances this mimetic triangulation. He observes that one does not simply imitate a practice because of the model. On the contrary, an imitator has an admixture of attraction to both the mimetic practice and the model; the imitator’s desire is diffused across both the model and the practice. Because of his attention to the subjective variables of imitation, Ibn Taymiyya criticizes the adherents of the Ḥanafi school for being excessively strict in their attempts to regulate imitation. He objects to them “declaring those who imitate the infidels in dress or celebrations as themselves infidels.” This reluctance to condemn the unintentional resemblance of non-believers as apostasy suggests that Ibn Taymiyya placed great emphasis on the “subjective” intention of a believer relative to the “objective” form of the practice.

Ibn Taymiyya takes this “liberal” spirit one step further. Despite his staunch opposition to the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday (mawlid) as both a reprehensible religious innovation (bidʿa) and reprehensible imitation (tashabbuh) of Christians who celebrate the birthday of Jesus (Christmas), he still grants a participant the possibility of

---

obtaining a “great reward” in the afterlife.\footnote{Ibn Taymiyya, *Iṣḥāq al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jaḥīm*, 2:621-22; Memon, *Ibn Taymiya's Struggle against Popular Religion*, 245. Rachel Ukeles has also written on this topic in the context of Ibn Taymiyya’s legal thinking. See Ukeles, “The Sensitive Puritan? Revisiting Ibn Taymiyya’s Approach to Law and Spirituality in Light of 20th-Century Debates on the Prophet's Birthday (Mawlid Al-Nabi).”} According to Ibn Taymiyya, celebrating the Prophet’s birthday had no basis in the Quran, hadith, or the practice of the first Muslims. How then, can Ibn Taymiyya allow for the possibility of a “great reward” for such an unsanctioned religious practice? In this instance, Ibn Taymiyya seems to make an almost inexplicable exception, allowing a believer’s affective and spiritual mood - the transcendent love for the Prophet Muhammad (*bāṭin*) - to triumph over the immanent normative Islamic order (*ẓāhir*). Simply put, Ibn Taymiyya’s emphasis on the primacy of intention enables him to imagine a rupture between the inward and outward realms of human experience. In the sacred space and time of the afterlife (*ākhira*) this intention carries a value that cannot be fathomed in the profane space and time of ordinary life (*dunya*). Ibn Taymiyya’s robust vision of a believer’s subjectivity creates a discursive space for inward reality to triumph over outward form.\footnote{Ibn Taymiyya, *Iṣḥāq al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jaḥīm*, 2:622; Memon, *Ibn Taymiya's Struggle against Popular Religion*, 245.}

Let us not think, however, that preserving the exterior semblance of order (*ẓāhir*) was insignificant to Ibn Taymiyya. First, Ibn Taymiyya did not permit this dispensation for any believer.\footnote{Two caveats are in order. First, Ibn Taymiyya was not the first to give primacy to intention and affect over outward form. In the context of *tashabbuh*, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr of Andalusia acknowledges the ultimate importance of piety regardless of transgressions in hairstyle (see chapter five). For a monograph length study of the role of intent in Islamic law see, Paul R. Powers, *Intent in Islamic Law: Motive and Meaning in Medieval Sunni Fiqh* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006).} This divine reward for a pure intention is reserved for those who lack the knowledge to know better, or whose faith was so weak that they might otherwise do something worse. Believers who cannot claim ignorance will not be eligible for divine
reward, despite their good intentions. Through this calculative logic, Ibn Taymiyya minimizes exceptions to the normative Shariʿa order. Second, despite the appearance that unintentional imitation is benign, it remains a serious matter for Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Taymiyya deploys an originary logic, an essentialist mode of reasoning that seeks to determine the moral value of a given practice through its origins. He therefore divides practices into two types: those that originate from non-believers and those that do not. Ibn Taymiyya argues that it is commonplace for Muslims to unintentionally imitate practices that originate from non-believers but whose origins have been forgotten such as Christmas and Maundy Thursday. It is at the very least detestable, if not impermissible for Muslims to imitate these cultural practices. However, those practices that do not originate from non-believers and are only circumstantially similar to those of Muslims are benign. Finally, if the roles are reversed, and non-Muslims are the ones imitating Muslims, there is no harm. Muslims do not need to further distinguish themselves because non-Muslims are the ones imitating Muslims and conforming to Muslim normative practice. Muslims are the originators, not the imitators.

**Tashabbuh, Power, and the Collective Good**

Despite arguing for the universality of the principle of Muslim distinction, Ibn Taymiyya makes room for exceptions. In certain situations, *tashabbuh* can actually be praiseworthy. In fact, Ibn Taymiyya’s legal rulings on *tashabbuh* cover the full range of Islamic legal classifications: impermissible (*harām*), detestable (*makrūh*), permissible (*mubāḥ*), praiseworthy (*mustaḥabb*), and required (*wājib*). The latter two are of course

---

most rare and subject to other higher order principles that conform to Ibn Taymiyya’s
calculative political rationality.

For Ibn Taymiyya, power is an important variable for shaping his imagination of
time and space. As discussed in chapter one, early Muslims divided the world into
Muslim territory, combat territory, and infidel territory. This spatial imaginary rooted in
religious distinction underpinned much of their juridical formations. These distinctions
were also crucial to Ibn Taymiyya’s legal application of *tashabbuh*. After discussing
how the first Muslims enjoined distinction from Jews and Christians only after obtaining
political power, Ibn Taymiyya applies this logic to his current time:

If a Muslim is in combat territory (*dār al-harb*) or peaceful non-Muslim
territory (*dār al-kufr*), he is not obligated to be different from the people in
their outward conduct because of the potential harm that may befall him.
In fact, it may be commendable, or even binding upon a person to
participate occasionally in their public affairs if it fulfills a religious
objective. This includes summoning them to Islam; exposing their internal
affairs in order to inform the Muslims about them; or stopping their
attempts to harm the Muslims, and other similar righteous objectives.
However, in Muslim territory, in which God has exalted his religion,
debased non-believers and imposed upon them the poll-tax, Muslim
distinction is required. If it becomes clear that the correct religious policy
with respect to similarity and difference changes with time and place, then
the truth of these hadith traditions does so too.\textsuperscript{121}

This passage reveals Ibn Taymiyya’s overarching concern for the collective good, a
feature of his writings that the late Fazlur Rahman had lauded.\textsuperscript{122} We see how Ibn
Taymiyya’s political reasoning once again animates his legal reasoning. The variable of

Taimiya’s Struggle against Popular Religion*, 190. Translation is my own.

\textsuperscript{122} Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam: A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism*, ed. Ebrahim Moosa
(Oxford: OneWorld, 2000), 132-44; in comparison to Ghazâlî’s emphasis of ”personal purity and piety” see
power is the crucial variable for distinguishing the circumstances where *tashabbuh* is good from those where *tashabbuh* is bad. When in Muslim territory, where Muslims are in a position of strength, manifesting Muslim distinction is necessary. However, when either in combat or infidel territory, where Muslims are in a position of weakness, *tashabbuh* may be encouraged or required in order to advance the interests (*maqāsid*) of the Muslim community, whether by spying or calling non-Muslims to Islam. In these specific situations, *tashabbuh* becomes like *taqiyya*, a strategic form of dissimulation in order to achieve certain religio-political objectives.\(^\text{123}\) This suspension of the normal order conforms to a calculative utilitarian political logic that had become an accepted form of reasoning in Islamic legal theory.\(^\text{124}\) One could practice the relatively small “evil” of *tashabbuh* in order to achieve a greater good of protecting or strengthening the Muslim community. In fact, in such exceptional scenarios, *tashabbuh* turns from a sinful practice to a pious deed.

**Powerful Symbols of Distinction: Limiting *Tashabbuh***

Ibn Taymiyya was attuned to the symbolic dimensions of cultural practice. Collective symbols were symbols of power. Ibn Taymiyya recognized that regulating these symbols also regulated power relations between Muslims and others. As a result, they formed a crucial element in his theorization of *tashabbuh*. *Tashabbuh* was not ubiquitous, but only occurred when the particular practice being imitated was a distinctive symbol or marker of another collective identity. After all, not all practices were unique to a specific group, or symbolic of their collective identity. Ibn Taymiyya deploys two key terms that

---

\(^{123}\) See Chapter two for a comparison between the two concepts.

\(^{124}\) Michael Cook observes, “utilitarianism” is a well-attested feature of Ibn Taymiyya’s thought.” See Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*, 154.
encompass those practices that should not be imitated: 1) *shiʿār*, which are distinctive symbols or markers; and 2) *khāṣṣ* (*pl.* *khaṣāʿiṣ*), which are the features that are unique or specific to an entity. Ibn Taymiyya uses these terms almost interchangeably; symbols and markers gain meaning, power, and significance from their uniqueness. For Ibn Taymiyya, “The real reason why a Muslim is forbidden to participate with the non-believers in their festivities is that such practices are markers, distinctive symbols (*shiʿār*) of the non-believers...” Ibn Taymiyya argues that food and dress purchased at festivals are not in themselves prohibited. What Muslims should not imitate are the collective symbols (*shiʿār*) that mark a stigmatized collectivity, such as Jews, Christians, pagans and Shiʿī Muslims. This distinction is very important because it demonstrates how Ibn Taymiyya imagines the enactment of Muslim distinction not as a undirected and ever-present phenomenon, but as a choreographed performance that surfaces during particular moments, at particular places and in particular ways.

To demonstrate precedence for this recognition among early Muslims, Ibn Taymiyya shares an anecdote about the founder of the Ḥanbalī school, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. Ibn Ḥanbal ruled that it was permissible to dig a grave for a Jew or Christian, but not a sarcophagus for a Zoroastrian. Ibn Taymiyya explains that this distinction is not due to a prejudice Ibn Ḥanbal held against Zoroastrians. Rather, the sarcophagus is from among the “markers (*khaṣāʿiṣ*) of the false Zoroastrian religion.” It carries a special symbolism of Zoroastrian distinction that the grave does not carry for Jews and Christians. After all, Muslims used graves to bury their dead as well.

---


A subtle thinker, Ibn Taymiyya recognized that not all foreign symbols are bad, however. He then explains why: some symbols strengthen infidelity and corruption while others do not. Ibn Taymiyya therefore authorizes Muslims to enforce and enhance the *shiʿār* of Jews and Christians in certain areas. Evoking the sartorial regulations of the Pact of ʿUmar, he authorizes Muslims to sell Jews and Christians dress that visibly distinguish Jews and Christians from Muslims in public spaces (*thiyāb al-ghiyār*). However, he forbids Muslims from selling drums, flags, and banners either the day of, or at their festivals. The difference between these rulings is, once again, explained by power. When non-Muslim symbols strengthen the public visibility of collective distinction between Muslims and others and places Muslims in a hierarchically superior position, Muslims should support of these symbols. However, when these symbols weaken these social distinctions and place Muslims in a position of weakness, support of such symbols is forbidden. Ibn Taymiyya’s desire for Muslim hierarchical superiority over other religious communities reveals the imperial imaginary that underpins his cultural logic of difference.

**The Innovation of Imitation**

*Bidʿa* was as an important boundary-regulating discourse that expressed a conservative spirit of Muslim religious thinking. It was the antithesis of *sunna*, and had a long

---

129 There have been many more studies in Western languages of *bidʿa* than *tashabbuh*: Fierro, *The Treatises against Innovations (Kutub Al-Bidaʾ)*; Vardit Rispler, *Toward a New Understanding of the Term Bidʾa,* *Islam* 68(1991); Berkey, * Tradition, Innovation and the Social Construction of Knowledge in the Medieval Islamic near East.*; M. Khalid Masud, *The Definition of Bidʾa in the South Asian Fatāwā*
history in shaping Muslim theological and legal discourses. If sunna indicates the single way that should be followed, the straight path, bid‘a indicates the multiple ways that should not be followed. Sunna circumscribed a normative center, or an orthodoxy for Islam. Acts that were stigmatized as bid‘a resembled practices of the sunna, but were actually devoid of authentic precedent. These innovative practices were dangerous precisely because of their historical indeterminacy. Treatises that warned Muslims of the dangers of religious innovation were penned as early as the ninth century.130

Ibn Taymiyya was the first to theorize the conceptual relationship between bid‘a and tashabbuh. By drawing this connection, Ibn Taymiyya signaled tashabbuh’s greater significance to the preservation of normative Islam. Both tashabbuh and bid‘a gained a negative charge in the hadith literature. Muslim religious scholars perceived imitation and innovation as social processes that potentially disrupt the stability and uniformity of the prophetic sunna. They recognized that regulating these processes is crucial to safeguarding religious orthodoxy.

Maribel Fierro acutely observes that the bid‘a discourse is associated with the “blocking the means” (sadd al-dharīʿa) legal mode of reasoning.131 Earlier, I discussed how this mode of reasoning underpins the discourse of tashabbuh. This underscores the shared discursive function of both bid‘a and tashabbuh as precautionary forms of reasoning that seek stave off danger and harm from the community.


130 For a bibliography of pre-modern Arabic treatises that includes Ibn Taymiyya’s Necessity of the Straight Path see, Fierro, “The Treatises against Innovations (Kutub Al-Bida‘)).”
131 Fierro, “The Treatises against Innovations (Kutub Al-Bida‘)).” 212.
Ibn Taymiyya conceptualized *bidʿa* and *tashabbuh* as symbiotic concepts that regulated innovation and imitation in order preserve Islamic norms. He observes:

> Every proof-text from the Quran, *sunna*, and consensus indicating the foulness and reprehensibility of innovation, whether strong or mild, include these similarities (between Muslims and non-Muslims) in them so that they combine both factors – that they are recent innovations and resemblance of nonbelievers…Now if both attributes *converge* in a single act they become two independent legal causes for judging the act foul and forbidden.\(^{132}\)

Ibn Taymiyya considers the hypothetical case where a practice constitutes both a reprehensible innovation and reprehensible imitation of non-believers simultaneously. In other words, Ibn Taymiyya considers the scenario where a religious innovation arises that was first a Muslim imitation of a non-Muslim practice. Paradoxically, in such exceptional cases, Muslims innovate and imitate simultaneously. According to Ibn Taymiyya, the reprehensibility of such practices increases in intensity because of the combined force of two Shariʿa-based rationales for prohibition – *bidʿa* and *tashabbuh*. It is worth noting that Ibn Taymiyya does not map imitation and innovation onto a cause-and-effect relationship.\(^{133}\) He does not say that religious innovations are *caused* by Muslim imitation of others, nor does he say that Muslim imitation is *caused* by Muslim innovations. It would seem, however, that Ibn Taymiyya perceived imitation (*tashabbuh*) as a source of innovation (*bidʿa*) since he was primarily concerned with Muslims

---


\(^{133}\) In her article examining the two earliest treatises on *bidʿa*, Fierro astutely recognizes the relationship between *bidʿa* and *tashabbuh*. However, she states that certain rulings are innovations (*bidʿa*) *because* they are reprehensible imitations (*tashabbuh*). She draws a causal relationship between the two concepts. The two treatises that she studies, those of Ṭurṭūshī and Ibn Waddāḥ, never explicitly declare this rationale in their treatises however. Fierro, “The Treatises against Innovations (Kutub Al-Bida’),” 237.
drawing upon practices that originated with Christians and Jews. In these instances, imitation was the gate through which innovations appear.

Of course, not all acts involved both imitation and innovation. Ibn Taymiyya therefore considers the case where a practice was either a reprehensible innovation or reprehensible imitation:

In either case prohibition prevails, since imitation is in general forbidden, even if the first Muslims (salaf) attempted it, and so is innovation, even if the non-believers did not resort to it.\textsuperscript{134}

*Tashabbuh* and *bid‘a* as discursive modes of reasoning were sufficient to outlaw a practice. Muslims imitation of non-Muslims is discouraged even if it can be proven that the first generations of Muslims had temporarily mimicked a foreign practice. Likewise, in the opposite scenario where Muslims innovate religious practices, then those practices are still wrong even if they did not originate from non-believers or non-Arabs. In sum, *tashabbuh* and *bid‘a* constitute two distinct and legitimate justifications for determining legal norms. They both function as independent discursive mechanisms for preserving Islamic orthodoxy.

This somewhat convoluted discussion is not just theory for Ibn Taymiyya. He mobilizes it to alert the reader to the danger of festivals. According to Ibn Taymiyya, festivals are instances where both innovation and imitation occur simultaneously; they are thus two distinct reasons for its prohibition. Ibn Taymiyya explains how festivals can lead to both reprehensible imitation and innovation.\textsuperscript{135} They lead to reprehensible imitation because when a Muslim participates in festivals, he (most likely) participates in

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
rituals and practices that are specific to and originate from non-Muslims. This blatant act of *tashabbuh* makes participation in festivals reprehensible at best, and illicit at worst.

Yet, according to Ibn Taymiyya even if “they may not involve imitating the People of the Book, all new festivals are still bad.” Why? Because a Muslim’s participation also leads to innovations. Ibn Taymiyya narrates a version of the famous hadith that communicates the gravity of this concept:

> The worst things are inventions. Every invention is an innovation. Every innovation leads astray. And every stray deed leads to the hellfire.

Ibn Taymiyya begins a lengthy discussion about whether a “good innovation” is possible - as some Muslims have claimed - before concluding that every innovation is necessarily bad. According to Ibn Taymiyya, innovating new religious rituals, practices, and norms morally corrupts an individual believer and contaminates the Muslim community’s grasp of pure Islam. Over time, such practices diffuse over larger numbers of people, becoming naturalized as habits, which are difficult, if not impossible to eradicate. In other words, these innovations spread because Muslims imitate other Muslims. These dual processes of imitation and innovation therefore converge to disrupt orthodoxy at its foundations and dislodge a Muslim’s connection to Islam’s paradigmatic past. Both *tashabbuh* and *bid‘a* undergird Ibn Taymiyya’s jurisprudential logic for prohibiting Muslim participation in festivals.

---

Signs of this shared function of *tāshabbūḥ* and *bidʿa* had materialized before Ibn Taymiyya, however. Two key hadith traditions that Ibn Taymiyya discusses in relation to *tāshabbūḥ* had already become recurrent textual markers of the *bidʿa* discourse. The Andulusian scholar, Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī (d. 1126), cites both the “Seventy-three Sects” and “Lizard Hole” hadiths in his treatise on innovation. As discussed in chapter two, both hadith forecast that Muslims will follow Christian and Jewish ways. Through these texts, Ṭurṭūshī suggests that Muslims will also follow them in spreading religious innovations. Although *tāshabbūḥ* is technically not part of the vocabulary of these hadith, they nonetheless suggest that imitation leads to innovation, that imitation is the root of innovation. This is a pessimistic and blameworthy forecast. These hadith rhetorically function to legitimize both the religious discourses of *bidʿa* and *tāshabbūḥ* so that (Sunni) Islamic orthodoxy can prevail.

*Bidʿa* and *tāshabbūḥ* applied to a shared field of religious and cultural practices, despite their respective emphases on ritual and cultural practice. Maribel Fierro’s catalogue of innovations in early *bidʿa* treatises overlap with some of those listed by Ibn

---


140 Despite these correspondences, one crucial distinguishing factor between *tāshabbūḥ* and *bidʿa* stands out. Whereas the *bidʿa* discourse emphasizes ritual practice (*ʿibādāt*), the discourse of *tāshabbūḥ* emphasizes cultural practice. Fierro, for example, defines the treatises of innovation (*kutub al-bidʿa*) as: “Those treatises dealing mainly with the condemnation of the innovations introduced in the *ʿibādāt* of ritual sphere of the law.” In her study of *bidʿa*, Rachel Ukeles also foregrounds its role in regulating the ritual sphere of Islam. This distinction suggests that the primary discursive function of *bidʿa* is to mediate internal differences among Muslims, while the primary discursive function of *tāshabbūḥ* is to mediate external differences among Muslims and non-Muslims. As discussed above, there are many exceptions where Muslims deploy *bidʿa* to regulate cultural practices and *tāshabbūḥ* to regulate ritual practice. With this definition, however, she would have excluded Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise since his main concern are “*īds* of a different sort, only some of which fall into the realm of ritual practice. Fierro, "The Treatises against Innovations (Kutub Al-Bida‘)," 206.
Taymiyya as imitations. This shared field includes ritual practices such as prayer, tomb visitation, and funeral processions, as well as cultural practices such as festivals, dress, and gendered interactions. To cite more specific examples, the Andalusian jurist, Ibn Waḍḍāḥ condemns the sanctification of places associated with the Prophet Muhammad (ittibāʿ āthār al-sunna) as innovations – a practice that Ibn Taymiyya also condemns. Ibn Waḍḍāḥ also condemns celebrating non-Muslim holidays, especially those associated with Persians such as Mihrajān and Nawrūz, which had special significance for Andalusian Christians. In his treatise on innovations, Ṭurṭūshī also condemns several practices as reprehensible innovations (bidʿa) that later Muslims would condemn as reprehensible imitation (tashabbuh). He emphasizes innovations in ritual such as the excessive decoration of mosques, taking Friday as a vacation day, and raising hands in supplication. He addresses the sartorial matter of wearing the turban properly. Ibn Taymiyya condemns these same practices as reprehensible imitations as well.

What has been often represented by Muslim and Western scholars alike as a sunna versus bidʿa polarity might be better represented as a triangulation between sunna, bidʿa and tashabbuh. This “triangle of orthodoxy” remaps bidʿa and tashabbuh in mutual opposition to sunna. Simply put, imitation and innovation lead to deviation from the beaten path. While the sunna operates in sacred time memorialized in a pure unadulterated past, bidʿa and tashabbuh operate in profane time, the contaminated present. This purity/contamination polarity is implicit in the supplication of Ibn

141 For all forthcoming references to specific bidʿa practices see, Fierro, “The Treatises against Innovations (Kutub Al-Bida’),” 211-38.
142 This “imitation” however is qualitatively different from the type of imitation of tashabbuh. This is a condemnation of the exaggerated reverence of the Prophet, not the importation of foreign practices from another inferior group. Imitating the Prophet is generally deemed a good thing.
Taymiyya’s student, al-Dhahabī who petitions God, “Oh Turner of the hearts! Inspire us to follow the sunna of your Prophet and save us from innovation and imitation…”143

IV. After Ibn Taymiyya

Ibn Taymiyya’s emphasis on Muslim distinction survived through his Damascene students. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya authored the first comprehensive treatise on legal rulings pertaining to non-Muslims.144 In it, he discusses in detail the Pact of 'Umar, including the meaning and significance of the sartorial distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims that became a hallmark of the tashabbuh discourse. Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 1348), who at times was critical of his teacher, authored his own brief digest on tashabbuh: The Despicable Imitation of the People of Thursday, Rejecting the Imitation of Pagans (Tashabbuh al-Khasīs bi-ahl al-Khamīs fī radd al-Tashabbuh bi al-Mushrikīn).145

As the title suggests, Dhahabī matches Ibn Taymiyya’s emphasis on Muslim participation in non-Muslim public celebrations, although it did not match the scope and sophistication of his teacher’s treatise. Dhahabi’s citation of Thursday in the treatise’s title is a shorthand and derogatory way of referring to Christians in general. While Damascene Christians did sanctify Maundy Thursday on the Thursday before Easter to commemorate Jesus’ Last Supper, a majority of the rituals that Dhahabī chastises - baking flat loaves of bread, painting eggs, dyeing hair, wearing special attire, and burning

143See fn. 1 above in this chapter for reference.
145This treatise has been translated into English. Footnotes refer to both the Arabic original and translation. al-Dhahabī, Imitating the Disbelievers.
incense – seem to have been associated with Easter Sunday.\textsuperscript{146} He castigates rituals associated with Good Friday, Christmas, and Nawrūz as well.\textsuperscript{147} Like his teacher, Dḥahābī supports his argument with a number of hadīth. He repeats the imitation hadīth five times from beginning to end, like a musical refrain. He also glosses its meaning with Qurān 5:51, which condemns friendship with Christians and Jews.\textsuperscript{148} As already mentioned, Dḥahābī even links the vices of imitation (\textit{tashabbuh}) to innovation (\textit{bid‘a}) as twin evils that undermine the \textit{sunna}.

Unlike Ibn Taymiyya however, Dḥahābī has a singular focus on Muslim imitation of Damascene Christians. He also avoids the theoretical and legal digressions that characterize his teacher’s more exhaustive and theoretically sophisticated work. Dḥahābī keeps the discourse simple and accessible in order to educate the common Muslim. Rhetorically, he even employs the second person, “You”, to personalize his appeal. In sum, it is an abbreviated and simplified digest of his teacher’s treatise.

\textbf{Conclusion: From Concept to Discourse}

In 1309, the Mamlūk Sultan Qalāwūn reconsidered imposing the color-coded sartorial distinctions on Christians, Jews, and Samaritans. Ibn Taymiyya, then in Cairo, paid him a visit, knelt down deferentially, and implored him not to reverse these laws.\textsuperscript{149} For Ibn Taymiyya Muslim distinction was not just a theory. It must materialize in everyday life. It was not just a religious discourse, but also a political practice. Both his writings

\textsuperscript{149} Lewis, \textit{Islam: From the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople}, 232-33.
and his biography indicate the importance of enforcing hierarchical social distinctions to the religio-political order of Mamluk Damascus. Ibn Taymiyya was a social reformer who had an activist approach to religious scholarship and was very attuned to the politics of his time. He was willing to speak truth to power even at the risk of his own life, finally dying in prison for his beliefs. As someone who was intensely engaged with the world around him, his religious imaginary reflected his highly politicized history. Indeed, while Ibn Taymiyya may have appeared at times to have a screw loose, he was a man of his times. His argument against Muslim participation in festivals reflects his integrated conception of human agency, the social diversity of Damascus, and the political vulnerability of the Muslim polity. Even his students carried forward his legacy by emphasizing the importance of Muslim religious distinction in their writings. This new emphasis on Muslim distinction corresponds with the observation by S. D. Goitein and others that the middle period of Islamic history witnessed an intensification of religious difference.

Ibn Taymiyya’s main contribution was to transform the language of *tashabbuh* into a discourse: a coherent set of concepts, forms of reasoning, and genres mediated through social relations, which assert a normative way of knowing and being in the world. It revealed his robust and dynamic model of human agency that connected spirit to body, individual to collective, interiority to exteriority, and was sensitive to dimensions of time and space. For Ibn Taymiyya, the discourse of *tashabbuh* articulated a universal principle of Islam: Muslim distinction. First, he assembled numerous discrete texts, especially hadith into a single theme of distinction. Next, his innovative and original exegesis folded these texts into a unified theory of distinction that both framed
and nuanced tashabbuh with the concepts of friendship, power, symbol, intentionality, and the collective good. Finally, by showing that tashabbuh functioned as a legal rationale in itself and by integrating it with other forms of legal reasoning, discourses, and genres, Ibn Taymiyya configured tashabbuh into a normative Shari'a-based discourse. He highlighted tashabbuh’s pivotal discursive function for preserving the purity of Islamic orthodoxy and staving off danger from the individual and collective body of Muslims.
CHAPTER FOUR

“A PERSON BELONGS WITH THE ONE HE LOVES”:
NAJM AL-DĪN AL-GHAZZĪ’S AFFECTIVE POETICS OF BELONGING AND BECOMING

Love is conformity.

— A popular Sufi aphorism

I imagine our time as a destitute invalid,

When every sparrow becomes a vulture.

— Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī

The Duality of Muslim Distinction

Distinction has two primary meanings. It can refer to the process of setting apart, dividing or being different in a neutral and non-hierarchical sense, as when distinguishing something from something else. It can also take on the alternative meaning of making hierarchical differentiations through rank and grade as well. In these instances, it can take on a positive meaning of achieving excellence, as when one graduates from college “with distinction.”

Muslim religious discourses of distinction also replicated the semantic duality of the English word. The distinct but related discourses of Shariʿa and Sufism each

---

1 “Al-māḥabba hiya al-muwāfaqa.”
highlight different dimensions of Muslim distinction. Jurists emphasized Muslim belonging; they emphasized *tashabbuh*’s negative semantic possibilities in order to separate and distinguish the collective body of Muslims from other communities. For them, Muslim distinction was primarily the exoteric manifestation of collective difference. Sufis, on the other hand, emphasized Muslim becoming; they emphasized *tashabbuh*’s positive semantic possibilities in order to harness the power of imitation to fashion a pious subjectivity. For these Sufis, Muslim distinction was primarily the esoteric manifestation of individual spiritual excellence. This formation of Muslim distinction into a discursive duality was already anticipated, however, in the latent interpretive possibilities of the imitation hadith, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.” While jurists pessimistically viewed the imitation hadith as a warning, Sufis optimistically viewed the hadith as an encouraging homily.

Throughout Muslim history, however, this Sufi “inversion” of *tashabbuh* into a positively valued concept, was marginalized by the overwhelming negative emphasis of the Shariʿa. Even modern invocations of *tashabbuh*, for example, have almost exclusively rehabilitated the negative Shariʿa gloss, not the positive Sufi gloss. This modern univocality marks a far cry from Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 1651) of Ottoman Damascus, who as both mystic and jurist, synthesized both positive and negative values of *tashabbuh* into an encyclopedic treatise, *The Beauty of Awakening to what has been transmitted about Tashabbuh* (*Husn al-Tanabbuh limā warada fi al-Tashabbuh*). Ghazzī’s exhaustive study blends both Muslim becoming and belonging into a unified but multivalent discourse that blurred the distinction between Sufism and Shariʿa, esoteric and exoteric, individual and collective.
The recently published treatise marks the historical apex of Muslim discourses of *tashabbuh*; yet it has been overshadowed by Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise. No Muslim before or since Ghazzî has come close to matching the comprehensiveness of Ghazzî’s magnum opus, a lifetime project said to have taken him nearly forty years to complete. The equivalent of twelve printed volumes, Ghazzî’s multidisciplinary exploration draws together history, psychology, sociology, natural science, literature, poetry and virtually the entire repertoire of Islamic religious disciplines. While Ibn Taymiyya concentrated on religious and ethnic distinction, Ghazzî wrote expansively on distinctions between male/female, freeperson/slave, human/angel, human/animal, scholar/commoner within a mimetic framework. Most importantly, he framed *tashabbuh* as a morally charged practice that could be both positive and negative. This treatise alone is an argument against the stereotypes of some Western historians that Arab-Muslim intellectual life had undergone a “sclerosis” after the fourteenth century. Far from a representing a contraction, Ghazzî’s encyclopedia is a remarkable expansion of the concept of imitation.

---

4 The treatise was published at the end of 2011, which permitted me to include the edition in this study. The entire manuscript in three volumes is contained in the original handwriting of the author. Two volumes of this manuscript exist at the Syria’s National Library in Damascus, *Maktabat al-Asad*. The third volume of this handwritten version is held by the Chester Beatty library in Ireland. Another copy of the manuscript in seven volumes also exists that the Asad National Library; this version was written by a contemporary of Ghazzî’s. Finally, a third and complete copy of the manuscript is held in the Süleymaniye library in Istanbul. The copyist as well as its copy date is unknown. The publication is a critical edition based on these three manuscripts. See al-Ghazzî, *Ḥusn al-Tanabbuh li-mā warada fī al-Tashabbuh*, 1:73-80.

5 According to one scholar, Ghazzî wrote the treatise during a span of ten years 1000 – 1010. He then edited and revised it for another twenty-eight years, bringing the total number of years to nearly forty! See the introduction of Mahmūd Shaykh in Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzî, *Luff al-Samar Qaff al-Thaman*, ed. Maḥmūd al-Shaykh, 2 vols. (Damascus: Wizārat al-thaqāfa wa al-irshād al-qawmī, 1981), 1:117.

6 Khaled El-Rouayheb, "Opening the Gate of Verification: The Forgotten Arab-Islamic Florescence of the 17th Century," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38(2006). Historians have shown that the Ottoman Empire witnessed economic expansion, not contraction during its tenure. This insight has chipped into the dogmatic historiographical armor of the decline thesis. Building on this reappraisal of Muslim life during the sixteenth – eighteenth centuries, historian, Khaled el-Roueyeb has attempted to demonstrate that stereotypes of intellectual life was also considerably more vibrant and innovative that has previously been acknowledged. He shows that treatises, commentaries, and supercommentaries on logic and other “rational” sciences came from Persian into Arab lands during the seventeenth century. It was therefore far from an intellectually dark period bereft of creativity and innovation.
into a robust interdisciplinary study. Yet, this treatise, only recently published from manuscripts, has gone virtually unnoticed by modern scholarship among Muslim and non-Muslim alike.\(^7\)

This chapter is the first attempt in Euro-American scholarship to highlight the importance of this treatise to Islamic intellectual history. While Ibn Taymiyya mobilized *tashabbuh* to address the particular topic of Muslim participation in non-Arab/non-Muslim festivals and public celebrations, Ghazzī invigorated and reshaped this discourse into a unifying mimetic theory that spans human and non-human social relations across the cosmos; nearly one fifth of the treatise is devoted to animals alone. For Ibn Taymiyya, *tashabbuh* was primarily a discursive means to regulate religious boundaries and enjoin Muslim collective belonging. While Ghazzī certainly shared with Ibn Taymiyya a desire to ensure the social integrity of the Muslim community, he built on Sufi discourses to transform *tashabbuh* into a discourse of Muslim becoming as well.\(^8\) In chapter three, I highlighted *tashabbuh* as a Shariʿa-based discourse in the writings of Ibn Taymiyya. In this chapter, I highlight *tashabbuh* as a Sufi discourse of becoming in Ghazzī’s treatise, despite his strong Shariʿa-oriented credentials. Not only does Ghazzī infuse *tashabbuh* with positive content, but his robust theorization of the concept

---


\(^8\) Both scholars were working within the Sunnī Muslim tradition, however.
foregrounds love – the affective “heart” of Sufi theories of \textit{tashabbeh}. For Ghazzī, ultimately it was love, above all, that framed alterity, how an individual truly became “one of them.” It is where the epistemological and social distinction between subject and object collapsed.\footnote{Some modern philosophers such as Georges Bataille and Slavoj Zizek have argued that love does not dissolve the subject-object binary, but reinforces it. Bataille, for example, argued that ecstasy, not love, resulted in the dissolution between subject and object. Love requires the “possession” of an object. Inspired by Lacan, Zizek described love as a “fundamental deception” due to the overlapping of two lacks – that of subject and object – which ultimately cancel each other out: Georges Bataille, \textit{Inner Experience} (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 59-60; Slavoj Zizek, \textit{The Sublime Object of Ideology} (London; New York: Verso, 1989), 116.}

Ghazzī and Ibn Taymiyya also share important historical parallels. As with Ibn Taymiyya, Ghazzī’s imagination of distinction was shaped by a social, cultural, and political context. Like Ibn Taymiyya, Ghazzī lived during a period of crisis when the established social, political, and economic order of the Ottoman Empire appeared to be disintegrating. A currency inflation catastrophe, population swells, peasant lawlessness, and rising power of the janissaries all contributed to a general sense of instability, insecurity, and anxiety during the late sixteenth through the seventeenth century, a period roughly spanning Ghazzī’s life. It is therefore not surprising that other significant socio-cultural parallels surface between Ibn Taymiyya and Ghazzī: both witnessed a state revival of sartorial distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims in public life; asserted Arab ethnic distinction amidst continued Turkish sovereignty over the province of Damascus; and was deeply bothered by public displays of social disorder. While Mamluk Damascus was plagued by the spread of public festivals, Ottoman Damascus was afflicted by the emergence of coffeehouses, which brought together people from different religions, classes, and cultures into a single enclosed space. Religious scholars
like Ghazzī viewed these cultural developments with suspicion and disdain due to their potentially corrupting influences on society and morality.

Parallel historical factors that contributed to a sense of disorder and crisis therefore framed both Ibn Taymiyya’s and Ghazzī’s discourses of *tashabbuh*. Within this greater historical framework, we can interpret their invocations of this concept as part of their attempt to reclaim a sense of order and normalcy. As one Ottoman cultural historian reminds us, “…the text is expressive of wider socio-economic transformations; it is indicative of specific cultural phenomena and is invested with meanings that need to be decoded.”¹⁰ Fully aware of the enduring interpenetration of text and context, I begin this chapter with the Ottoman historical context that helped shape Ghazzī’s discourse of *tashabbuh*.

**Ottomans and Arabs**

The Ottoman Turks displaced the Mamluk Turks as sovereigns of the central Arab-Islamic provinces in the second decade of the sixteenth century. Their domain extended much farther, however, encompassing territories in Europe and Central Asia. They wrested away the long-coveted capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople in 1453. The four hundred year Ottoman administration of the Arab provinces was far more than a superficial and distant engagement with their subjugated peoples. The social, cultural, and linguistic distinctions between ruler and ruled often blurred as a result of their frequent interactions.

Yet, Arabs continued to maintain a distinct sense of community. Arabs referred to the Ottoman Turks as the Arwām (s. al-Rūm), or the Romans, the same moniker formerly deployed to label the Christian Romans. This moniker persisted despite the Ottoman espousal of Islam, and the Sunnī Ḥanafī law school in particular. It was thus not uncommon for Arab-Turkish ethnic-political distinctions to come to the fore in moments of tension as in the polemical exchange between an anonymous Turkish religious scholar and the Syrian Arab Sufi-Jurist, ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731) in the latter part of the 17th century. The Turkish scholar had criticized the Andulusian-Syrian mystic, Ibn ĒArabī (d. 1240) for apparently permitting the possibility of salvation for Christians and Jews, and Nābulusī’s apparent endorsement of this position by claiming that they would enjoy a “happy” ending – eternal salvation along with Muslims. In his caustic reply to the anonymous Turk’s criticisms, Nābulusī ridiculed him as a religious outsider because of his non-Arab origins, implicitly criticizing his inability to comprehend properly the Arabic language:

There has appeared in the land of the Turks (bilād al-Rum) a man of the boors of the deserts and the unlucky ones of the steppe, who is keen on charging the Arab and the son of the Arab with unbelief. He does that despite the fact that he is a foreigner (ʿAğamī [sic], a non-Arab), son of a foreigner, although the Arabs are the masters of the non-Arabs (here: Persians) and the Turks, as all the ‘ulamā’ have established….He may

---

Nābulusī derived inspiration for this Arab chauvinism from his teacher, Najm al-Din al-
Ghazzī, whom Nābulusī quotes at length from *The Beauty of Awakening*:

There is no doubt that the Arabs' logic is better, their expression clearer, and their language the most perfect in eloquence and the ability to differentiate (between nuances)... The Arab mind is the most perfect, since language is the expression of one's understanding. Therefore, the Arab mind has no need of training by the formal apparatus called the science of logic in order to understand ideas and sciences and to protect it from error, unlike the minds of the non-Arabs...The author further states: Arab nature is more inclined than others to gentleness, forgiveness, tolerance, generosity, courage, loyalty, and other noble qualities.

Ghazzī’s endorsement of Arab religious and cultural superiority duplicates that of Ibn Taymiyya and other Arab religious scholars. The ethnic tensions resulting from continued foreign Turkish subjugation of Arabs surfaced during such religious turf wars, although it seems to have taken on a new gravity in an Ottoman political context.

**Religious Minorities and Ottoman Sartorial Decrees**

The Ottoman Empire was not only ethnically diverse, but religious diverse as well. Under the Ottomans, Christians and Jewish minorities conducted their affairs with relative autonomy. In 1569, a year before Ghazzī’s birth, the population of Christians

---

14 Ibid.: 95.
15 This did not mean coercion was not sometimes the norm. The Janissaries, the elite guard of the Ottoman Sultan, were conscripted from Christian families as young boys, forcefully converted to Islam, and raised in a Turkish Muslim family where they were expected to learn Turkish, personal discipline, and a trade. They were even prohibited from growing a beard to signal their social distinction. The most able were sent to the
and Jews in Damascus comprised more than 20% of the population. The Ottoman Empire was one of the few polities to accept exiled Spanish and Portuguese Jews who joined its indigenous Greek and Arabic speaking Jewish communities. Jewish ascendance within the Ottoman social hierarchy peaked during the first century of Ottoman rule, the sixteenth century, but slowly declined beginning in the seventeenth century.

In general, Jews and Christians of the empire dressed like Muslims. During the second half of the sixteenth century, the economic success of Jews enabled them to imitate Turkish dress in all aspects except color. Men grew beards and women wore head dresses. Jewish and Christian elites tended to imitate Ottoman Muslim elites, wearing expensive headgear, dress, shoes and jewelry. Some even obtained special permission from the court to dress like Muslims. Elite Jews in the empire were granted special dispensations that differentiated them from common Jews. Jewish court physicians were able to ride on horses – a privilege usually reserved for Muslims only – and were exempted from several taxes; Jewish pashas (ranked only under that lofty rank of vizier) wore silk caftans, also worn by recognized rabbis, as well as yellow shoes,
another sign of elite distinction. Ottoman cultural influence extended beyond the geographical borders of the empire as well. In the sixteenth century, elites in Eastern European countries such as Poland imitated Ottoman sartorial styles. This emulation reached such a degree that during the 1683 Ottoman siege of Vienna, Polish soldiers wore straw hats in order to distinguish themselves from their Turkish enemies.

This tendency towards similarity must have been among the factors that inspired Murad III’s (r. 1574 – 1595) revival of Jewish and Christian sartorial restrictions. Contributing to this sense of social instability, Murad III’s reign was also punctuated by a currency-devaluation crisis in 1585, which resulted in inflation, riots, thefts, and suicides. The first of these decrees (firman), issued in 1577 prohibited Jews and Christians from wearing silk and sandals colored red or white. A second decree of 1579 ordered Jews and Christians to replace their turban with conical hats: red for Jews and black for Christians. Both Jews and Christians were obliged to wear black shoes as well. Upon hearing that a Jewish lady had flaunted her social status with ornaments and jewelry on the public streets of Constantinople, Murad III impulsively issued a decree mandating the complete extermination of all the empire’s Jews. An influential Ashkenazi Jewish couple, Murad’s own mother, and his grand vizier all persuaded him to

---

22 Rafeq, "The Economic Organization of Cities in Ottoman Syria," 133.
rescind the decree.\textsuperscript{26} Ironically, Jewish communities themselves issued decrees placing sartorial restrictions upon Jewish dress. However, they were not explicitly connected to the Ottoman court decrees and seem to have originated with the desire to avoid Muslim hostility.\textsuperscript{27}

The anxieties expressed by these imperial sartorial decrees indicate the level of cultural sharedness Muslims, Christians, and Jews experienced in Ottoman urban neighborhoods. One key urban space for such intermingling was the coffeehouse, an institution that had taken root and become widespread in Ottoman lands during the sixteenth century. For many religious and political elites, the coffeehouse posed a new threat to the social, cultural, and political order that, like the public festival.

\textit{“The Devil’s Lair”: The Ottoman Coffeehouse}

Muslim men of religion debated the rise of new social habits such as drinking coffee, smoking, and mingling at coffeehouses.\textsuperscript{28} Examining Najm al-Din al-Ghazzi’\textquoteright s collection of biographies of sixteenth century Muslim notables, one is struck by the frequent references to coffee.\textsuperscript{29} Ghazzi himself produced legal responsa (\textit{fatwas}) on coffee, smoking, and hashish, substances that enjoyed wide usage not only in his native city of Damascus but across the Ottoman Empire. As one historian has argued, the rise of these new forms of pleasure produced new forms of sociability that threatened to disrupt

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Kohen, \textit{History of the Turkish Jews and Sephardim: Memories of a Past Golden Age}, 104.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Ben-Naeh, \textit{Jews in the Realm of the Sultans: Ottoman Jewish Society in the Seventeenth Century}, 49.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} There have been a few historical studies of coffee-drinking in Muslim civilization: Ralph S. Hattox, \textit{Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval near East} (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985); James Grehan, "Smoking and “Early Modern” Sociability: The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East(Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)," \textit{American Historical Review} December(2006).
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Najm al-Din al-Ghazzī, \textit{Al-Kawākib al-Sāʾira bi-A’yān al-mi’a al-‘āshira}, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmīyya, 1998).
\end{itemize}
established social distinctions and hierarchies. These substances were subject to a moral as well as a monetary economy; new guilds of coffee sellers, coffee roasters, and owners of coffeehouses formed. According to Ghazzī, a Yemeni named Abū Bakr al-Aydarūsī, first made coffee licit among religious scholars in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Yemen and Ethiopia provided the earliest sources for coffee in the Middle East in the late fifteenth century. Coffee drinking and coffeehouses soon spread to Mecca and Cairo, Damascus and Aleppo, and eventually arrived at the imperial capital, Istanbul, in the sixteenth century. Sufis stayed awake during the late night hours performing acts of devotion were among the first to extol the miraculous effects of coffee. However, as some religious scholars compared coffee and its yet undetermined effects to the intoxication of alcohol it did not become legalized in other regions of the Muslim world until the first half of the seventeenth century. During this period of controversy, many associated the habit of drinking coffee with larger themes of social critique, debauchery, and decline. A sermon by a character in Orhan Pamuk’s historical novel, My Name is Red expresses this sensibility:

Ah, my devoted believers! The drinking of coffee is an absolute sin! Our Glorious Prophet did not partake of coffee because he knew it dulled the intellect, caused ulcers, hernia and sterility; he understood that coffee was nothing but the Devil’s ruse. Coffeehouses are places where pleasure-seekers and wealthy gadabouts sit knee-to-knee, involving themselves in all sorts of vulgar behavior; in fact, even before the dervish houses are closed, coffeehouses ought to be banned. Do the poor have enough money to drink coffee? Men frequent these places, become besotted with coffee

---

30 Grehan, "Smoking and “Early Modern” Sociability: The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)."
32 Grehan, "Smoking and “Early Modern” Sociability: The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)," 1358.
33 Hattox, Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval near East, 46-60.
and lose control of their mental faculties to the point that they actually listen to and believe what dogs and mongrels have to say.³⁴

Despite the preacher’s claim, coffee was not yet available in seventh century Arabia, so the Prophet did not have the option of drinking it. Not only does Pamuk’s character have a poor sense of time, but also of space: he preaches this sermon in a coffeehouse. Despite the satire and irony saturating Pamuk’s humorous caricature, moralists’ association of coffee with a wide range of social ills was a common sentiment among many conservative Muslim cultural critics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By Ghazzî’s time coffeehouses had already become widespread in the city of Damascus. Responding to this new cultural and social development, Najm al-Din al-Ghazzî penned a fatwa, in the form of a short poem, on drinking coffee that evokes many of the sensibilities conveyed by Pamuk’s preacher above:

Oh petitioner who comes to us hoping
That we will permit him to drink coffee.

Coffee is not unlawful.
It does not cause the person dizziness,

Except he who frequents coffeehouses.
In them, coffee becomes the nullifier of honor,

Where a person sees beardless youths, musical instruments, and backgammon,
Everything that causes diversion or leads to diversion …

All of this contradicts the way delimited
By the Chosen One and leads away from it.

So avoid it and leave the folk who invite you to it
No matter how persuasive their call.

³⁴ Pamuk, My Name Is Red, 20.
Do not obey them even if they desire of you but one step
So that you obey the Accursed One in every step.

If you wish to drink coffee, even one sip,
You will desire one thousand more.

So let coffee remain in the midst of your home so that
You do not mix its purity with the cause of foolishness.\textsuperscript{35}

Ghazzī’s association of coffee with a multiplicity of immoral practices in the new space of the coffeehouse is not entirely dissimilar to the message of Orhan Pamuk’s preacher. Like the preacher, Ghazzī mentions that such places of ill repute deviate from the Prophet’s paradigmatic example. Like, the preacher, Ghazzī considers coffee drinking as part of Satan’s ruse to lure the unsuspecting believer into a web of sin. Like the preacher, Ghazzī associates coffee drinking with forms of sociability that offend pious sensibilities.

Unlike the preacher, however, Ghazzī does not resort to absolutes. He is sensitive to spatial and social context. Ghazzī does not issue a blanket prohibition of coffee, nor considers its consumption harmful to the body. Coffee drinking is only a problem inside coffeehouses. This distinction highlights the importance of how a specific social practice gains cultural meaning from its location both within a network of social practices and within a particular space. One of the indigenous words for coffeehouse was \textit{qahwa}, which was the name of coffee itself. This metonymic relationship signals coffee’s immediate association with the space in which it was consumed.\textsuperscript{36}


“The coffeehouse is the devil’s lair because it is a market that is actually a house, or a house that is actually a market,” observes Ghazzī in The Beauty of Awakening.\textsuperscript{37} Ghazzī’s anxieties over the coffeehouse also stem from its doubleness, its ability to blur the distinctions between public and private by blending the contrasting spaces of market and home into a new heterotopic space.\textsuperscript{38} Heterotopia, according to Michel Foucault, is “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.”\textsuperscript{39} This term accurately describes sixteenth and seventeenth century Ottoman coffeehouses, which were “spaces with connections to the neighbourhood [sic], home and market that made them at once familiar but contemporaneously novel in the way that men could gather within them as spaces of layered functionality and a multitude of ambiences.”\textsuperscript{40} Ghazzī found this caffeinated rearrangement of space to be brimming with satanic imitation. The coffeehouse metonymically signified the sense of social disorder and cultural disorientation experienced by Ghazzī – a cultural intoxication that required the sobriety of distinction.

In Ghazzī’s spatial imaginary, the coffeehouse was associated with a repertoire of sinful social practices such as playing backgammon and musical instruments, consorting with beardless youths, smoking hashish, and engaging in idle talk – all of which contravene proper Islamic conduct. In other words, Ghazzī objects to particular configurations of the body and sociability that occur specifically in the space of the coffeehouse. This resulted in a dialectical relationship between body and space. In the

\textsuperscript{37} al-Ghazzī, Ḥusn al-Tanabbuh li-mū warada fī al-Tashabbuh, 6:98.
\textsuperscript{38} Mikhail, “The Heart’s Desire: Gender, Urban Space, and the Ottoman Coffee House,” 137. Mikhail introduces the idea of the coffeehouse as a heterotopic space, although he refrains from using the Habermasian binary terminology of public and private.
\textsuperscript{39} Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” Diacritics 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 25.
\textsuperscript{40} Mikhail, “The Heart’s Desire: Gender, Urban Space, and the Ottoman Coffee House,” 137.
words of Henri Lefebvre, the body “produces itself in spaces and also produces that space.”

Ghazzī’s objections to coffeehouse iniquity were not limited to the body. He also objected to the coffeehouse’s corruption of pious sense and sensibility. The coffeehouse sensations of gazing at beardless youths, listening to music and gossip, touching the riff-raff of Ottoman society, drinking coffee, and inhaling tobacco smoke overwhelmed and engulfed the five senses, corrupting individual and society. This late-night socializing not only kept men apart from their families, but kept them from the mosque! Coffee drinking was therefore entangled in a web of practices and spaces that cast a negative value on it – at least among Muslim cultural critics. To highlight the significance of social and spatial context even further over and above the actual sipping of coffee, one only need read the popular quotation hung on the walls of several Ottoman coffeehouses: “The heart desires neither coffee nor a coffee house. The heart desires conversation. Coffee is simply an excuse.” So when Ghazzī informs his reader that if you take but one sip of coffee, “you will desire one thousand more” he is really alluding to the social addiction of conversing and interacting with friends in the coffeehouse. Only when coffee-drinking is disaggregated from this potentially disruptive public context does Ghazzī permit its consumption. Safe, in the midst of one’s private home, coffee is no longer dangerous.

Ottoman political elites were also deeply concerned about coffeehouse culture. Coffeehouses posed a political threat, echoing the subversive potential of festivals. Spy

---

42 Mikhail, "The Heart's Desire: Gender, Urban Space, and the Ottoman Coffee House," 139.  
43 Ibid., 154.
records illustrate that coffeehouses were a regular space for state surveillance. In fact, it became so pervasive that a unique term, “state talk,” was coined in reference to the subversive rumor-mongering that occurred in coffeehouses. The Janissaries, the elite guard of the Ottoman Empire, built coffeehouses of their own to discuss political affairs. Political anxieties were justified, in this case, however. Some of the most significant historical uprisings against the Ottomans state actually began in the coffeehouse. Coffeehouses could therefore bring suspicion upon regulars for seeking to create civil disorder and posing a threat to the Ottoman state. In 1633, Sultan Murad IV (r. 1623 – 1640) shutdown Istanbul’s coffeehouses and made smoking a capital offense. Such government intervention was unsuccessful, however, as coffeehouses gradually proliferated throughout the Ottoman Empire and the rest of the Muslim world.

The now ubiquitous and enduring urban presence of coffeehouses brought social upheaval in realms outside politics. Like urban festivals, coffeehouses brought different social classes - elite and commoner, rich and poor - together: “former officials searching for appointments, judges, teachers, and a bunch of the unemployed and idle,” often converged in one venue. According to the British traveler, Charles White, coffeehouses were “the solace of the rich and the principal sustenance of the poor.” Confirming this observation, Ottoman bureaucrat, Mustafa Ali, noted that the poor were “content with

44 Ibid., 156.
46 Ibid., 124-25.
47 Grehan, “Smoking and “Early Modern” Sociability: The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East(Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries).”
48 Ibid.: 1363.
coffee as a liquid and roasted coffee-beans and one or two dry biscuits as solid food.”

As Ghazzī’s fatwa indicates, coffeehouses also confounded gender norms. The seemingly ubiquitous presence of beardless youths threatened to thrust the feminine from the private to the public sphere, in full view of the penetrating male gaze. In fact, according to one scholar this inversion of domestic and public was signaled by its very name; “the coffee-house is so named with reason, instituting a public imitation of a private home.” In sum, like the festival, the coffeehouse was “a special kind of space, one where the rules of normal (public) space do not apply.”

Smoking tobacco also became fashionable in the Ottoman Empire during this period. One historian has argued that smoking tobacco must be understood as “the extension of a new sociability that first emerged with the spread of coffee drinking.” Tobacco also aroused the ire of religious scholars. Ghazzī believed that smoking induced slovenliness, a characteristic that he associated with non-Muslim minorities. Like many religious scholars, he declared the related intoxicants of nutmeg and hashish illicit, penning a separate treatise on the latter. Political elites also tried to stop the proliferation of smoking among the Ottoman population as well. In 1611, Ahmed I (r.

---

50 Andreas Tietze, Muṣṭafā ʾalī’s Description of Cairo of 1599: (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1975), 33.
53 Grehan, “Smoking and “Early Modern” Sociability: The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East(Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries),” 1375.
54 Cited in al-Kittānī, Iʿlān al-Ḥujja wa-Iqāmat al-Burhān ʿalā mā ʿamma wa-Fashā min istiʿmāl ʿushbat duḥān. He cites the hadith quoted in chapter two that associates Jews with not cleaning under the arms.
55 The entire manuscript copy of this fatwa in Ghazzī’s own handwriting is printed after his biographical entry on Ghazzī. See Muhammad Mutī Hāfiz and Nizār Abāzah, ʿUlamāʾ Dimashq wa aʿyānuhā fī al-qarn al-ḥādī ʿashar al-hijrī (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2000), 2:82-92.
1603–1617) prohibited the sale of tobacco throughout the empire. As his concern over coffee drinking and smoking illustrates, Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī remained engaged with the social and cultural developments of his time despite keeping aloof from direct political participation. One year before his death, the Ottoman Empire finally legalized tobacco in 1650.

Ghazzī clearly desired to regulate the moral life and social welfare of the Muslim community. His engagement with controversial issues affecting Muslim public life such as coffee, smoking, and hashish signal his attempts to make Islam relevant to contemporary issues. His efforts to restore social order and assert religious normalcy in a time of crisis materialized in his discourse on Muslim distinction.

**Awakening to the Power of Imitation**

Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī, when compared to Ibn Taymiyya, lived a relatively uneventful life; he was not a political activist, did not fight in jihad, and did not serve time in prison. Ghazzī was born in 1570 into a family of religious scholars who originated from Gaza in Palestine and eventually migrated to Damascus. His father, himself a religious scholar, initiated him into the Damascene religious culture at a very young age. While most of his teachers originated from Damascus, Ghazzī also studied with a number of teachers from other major centers of learning located within the Ottoman Empire including Aleppo, Mecca and Egypt. He studied under both Shāfiʿī and Ḥanafī teachers and

---

56 Grehan, "Smoking and “Early Modern” Sociability: The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries),” 1362.
57 Ibid.: 1365.
followed the Qādirī Sufi path. He authored legal responsa from 1616 – 1651, the year of his death, and taught under the cupola of the eagle (qubbat al-nasr) in the center of the Umayyad mosque for twenty seven years. He penned approximately fifty works, less than half of which survive in a wide range of subjects including: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, jurisprudence, medicine, Sufism, ethics, hadith, Quranic exegesis, history, and travel writing. His writings employed the forms customary among religious scholarship during his time including supercommentaries, commentaries, verifications, abridgements, and rhyming prose. While he excelled in hadith, he is most known today for his writings on the biographies of Muslims notables living in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. They portray life in the Ottoman Arab lands, especially among Syria’s religious elite.

His lifetime achievement in Islamic scholarship, however, is *The Beauty of Awakening to what has been transmitted about Tashabbuh*. It is a sociological encyclopedia glued together by his theory of imitation. It classifies human and non-human communities, and details their most significant morally charged attributes that make them either worthy or unworthy of imitation. The treatise is a testament to the breadth of Ghazzī’s cosmological vision at the eve of modernity.

*The Beauty of Awakening* is perhaps one of the most erudite yet underappreciated treatises in Islamic religious history. Amazingly, only recently has Ghazzī’s treatise been published. No serious study of this work exists in a Western language, aside from some

---

59 For the most up to date list of his works see al-Ghazzī, *Husn al-Tanabbuh li-mā warada fī al-Tashabbuh*; also see ———, *Lujf al-Samar Qaf al-Thaman*, 1:105-21.

60 These biographical works include: al-Ghazzī, *Al-Kawākib al-Sā’ira bi-a’yān al-mi’a al-‘āshira*; ———, *Lujf al-Samar Qaf al-Thaman*.  

243
Earlier, I mentioned the references to The Beauty of Awakening of the notable Sufi-jurist, ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī. A few Muslim religious scholars active during the early part of the twentieth century such as the secretary to the Ottoman Shaykh al-Islam, Muhammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1952), and Moroccan scholar, Muhammad Jaʿfar al-Kittānī (d. 1927), reference the treatise, but neither seriously engage it.

The scope and erudition of The Beauty of Awakening evokes the magnum opus of the Iraqi Sufi-jurist Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, The Revival of the Religious Disciplines (“The Revival”). In this now classic work, Ghazālī showcases his intellectual versatility through his engagement with a variety of religious disciplines from Sufism and theology, to exegesis and law. Ghazzī likewise deploys virtually the entire repertoire of Islamic disciplines including hadith, law, Quranic exegesis, ethics, and language.

Ghazālī’s Revival is also viewed by some Western scholars as a groundbreaking Islamic synthesis of spirit and law, the esoteric and exoteric. Like Ghazālī, Ghazzī’s double identity as mystic and jurist reverberates throughout The Beauty of Awakening.

---

61 See references to Ghazzī in Rafeq, "The Economic Organization of Cities in Ottoman Syria."
64 See Ebrahim Moosa’s engaging and original study of Ghazālī’s imaginative poetics in Ebrahim Moosa, Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
65 Ghazzī, however, tends towards repetition, and is more of a textualist, stronger than Ghazālī in hadith, but inferior in the “rational” Islamic disciplines such as philosophy and speculative theology. The authors of the introduction to his critical edition complain that he bases his references to hadith from secondary, not primary sources, which result in some errors, including the presence of fabricated and weak traditions: al-Ghazzī, Ḩusn al-Tanabbuh li-mā warada fi al-Tashabbuh, 1:54.
The treatise’s interdisciplinarity signals the complexity of imitation. Ghazzī divides his work into two main parts: good imitation (tashabbuh) and bad imitation. By balancing the positive and negative features of tashabbuh, Ghazzī infuses its semantic field with a multidimensional character. He rehabilitates the positive aspect that has been obscured by Shariʿa discourses. His attempt to balance both positive and negative meanings of tashabbuh marks a stark contrast to Ibn Taymiyya’s almost purely negative emphasis. Ibn Taymiyya’s purpose was different, however; he mobilized the concept to outlaw festivals and spectacles. Ghazzī’s ambitions are much greater. He wants to highlight the power of imitation for shaping human subjectivity and the collective good.

Ghazzī seems to have had some anxieties over Ibn Taymiyya’s influence. In The Beauty of Awakening, he transmits a considerable amount from Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise, The Necessity of the Straight Path, without proper attribution. Moreover, Ghazzī corroborates the attacks of scholars like the Egyptian jurist, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Ṣuyūṭī (d. 1505), who accuses Ibn Taymiyya of anthropomorphism; he also criticizes him for going against scholarly consensus for his controversial opinion not requiring the dissolution of marriage after a husband’s three-fold declaration of divorce in a single enunciation. Nevertheless, despite his occasional unacknowledged dependence upon Ibn Taymiyya, Ghazzī penned a truly original treatise whose unique synthesis of knowledge was unparalleled in Islamic intellectual history. Ghazzī’s impulse is to be exhaustive, comprehensive, and encyclopedic.

---

68 Ibid., 1:447-50; 8:198. The editors of the critical edition, who are sympathetic to the Ḥanbalī school, take issue with Ghazzī’s treatment of Ibn Taymiyya, suggesting his criticisms were “unfair.” See footnote above.
Following a mimetic logic, Ghazzī’s encyclopedia classifies living beings across the cosmos. Ghazzī structures the treatise according to social classifications implicit in the hadith traditions. The ninth and tenth century hadith scholars, however, did not articulate these classifications into formal social categories, although they remained conceptually implicit in their collections. Ghazzī gives these social concepts a semantic taxonomy. His formalized taxonomy documents his social imaginary, whose pivot is imitation. Ghazzī divides the treatise into a morally-charged binary division of good and bad versions of *tashabbuh*. It is the most fundamental division of his social taxonomy.

Ghazzī begins the treatise with good *tashabbuh*, which comprises almost half of his treatise. He begins with the imitation of the prophets and other pious exemplars, attempting to reconfigure profane conceptions of “success.” Success in its sacred sense is achieved by imitating and following the Prophets and their pious imitators. In this way, Ghazzī anchors Muslim normativity and orthodoxy in the social technology of imitation. Next, he spends hundreds of pages detailing the attributes of angels, who should also be emulated. He describes how they pray, repent, colorfully style their dress, and brush their “teeth” with a toothstick.  

He then follows the Quranic categorization of human exemplars into the righteous, martyrs, true servants, and Prophets in that order. This follows a hierarchical ranking that Sufis were fond of. Of the exemplars, he expends most of his energy detailing the admirable qualities of “the righteous”, which span attributes of good character such as gratefulness, patience, and generosity, as well as their exemplary conduct in ritual, belief, and other matters. The sections on martyrs and true servants are much briefer. Based upon the Prophet’s best friend, Abū Bakr, who was

---

69 See second half of volume 1 in Ibid.
given this honorific, the true servant has four basic attributes: 1) they care nothing for the
world; 2) believe in all divinely decreed affairs without exception; 3) speak the truth in
all situations; and 4) consistently maintain these qualities. His description of the
attributes of the prophets, including a separate section on Muhammad, overlap with many
of those possessed by the righteous. However, when embodied by prophets, these
qualities are refined, perfected, and more complete.

Despite Ghazzi’s emphasis on *tashabbuh* as a positive technology of Muslim
becoming and belonging, he still devotes the majority of *The Beauty of Awakening* to bad
*tashabbuh*. His list is more extensive and detailed than Ibn Taymiyya’s. He divides
bad imitation into three basic social categories: Satan, infidels, and corrupt people
(*faṣaqa*). He breaks down the category of infidel into other subcategories including: past
communities condemned in the Quran such as the communities of Noah and Pharaoh; the
People of the Book; pagans; non-Arabs; and hypocrites. He divides the category of
corrupt people into sectarian innovators and non-innovators. Ghazzī produces his own
list of seventy-two Muslim sects like Muslim heresiographers before him. His general
sectarian categories, which are divided into further subcategories, include the Qādiriyya,
anthropomorphists, Murji’ā, Khawārij, Shi‘a, and Sunnīs. The types of non-innovators
that he condemns include: adults imitating children; the sane imitating the insane; and
religious scholars imitating the ignorant. In these cases, Ghazzī’s moral valuation of
imitation follows a unidirectional vector. Muslims *should not* imitate Jews, but Jews
*should* imitate Muslims. Likewise, the ignorant should imitate religious scholars, but
religious scholars should not imitate the ignorant; children should imitate adults, but

---

70 Roughly about 60% of the treatise is devoted to bad *tashabbuh*.
adults should not imitate children. These asymmetric relationships suggest that some social categories were ontologically privileged over others.

Ghazzī takes a different approach for other relationships, however. In these cases, Ghazzī forbids bidirectional imitation. This applies to the other categories of non-innovators including: men and women, freepersons and slaves, rich and poor, settled and Bedouin Arabs. Men should not imitate women, nor should women imitate men; freepersons should not imitate slaves, nor should slaves imitate freepersons. For Ghazzī, these social counterparts should not imitate each other so they remain distinct. Men, freepersons, rich, and settled Arabs all enjoy a hierarchical position above their respective counterparts. For Ghazzī, the preservation of these social distinctions is necessary to the proper functioning for a hierarchical imperial order.

Animals are a unique category for Ghazzī because, unlike other categories, he divides the imitation of animals into both good and bad types. Comprising a surprisingly large part of his encyclopedic treatise, this section exemplifies the wide scope of Ghazzī’s social imaginary. Animals were an integral component of his cosmic moral and ethical vision: Muslim becoming is a truly mimetic phenomenon. Throughout, Ghazzī draws analogies between negative human habits to the attributes of specific animals. Ghazzī is especially hard on dogs, although his list of blameworthy traits span a variety of animals. They include becoming obsessed with worldly matters like a monkey; sniffing food before eating it like a dog; working too hard like an ant; usurping another person’s home like a snake; and rejecting generosity like a donkey. However, Ghazzī does not think badly of all animals, and devotes an entire section to their good qualities. He is

71 See volumes 11 and 12 of al-Ghazzī, Ḥusn al-Tanabbuh li-mā warada fī al-Tashabbuh.
especially fond of birds, some insects, and other four-legged animals. For example, he lauds feeling sadness at the separation from loved ones and longing for one’s homeland like an eagle; being aware of the time for ritual prayer like a rooster; adoring and supplicating for religious scholars like speechless animals; producing good things like a bee; and being nimble like a gazelle.

Ghazzī explains the wisdom behind his taxonomic scheme. He begins his treatise with angels and ends with animals because they represent figuratively the two polar opposites in the cosmic ontological spectrum of mimesis, with, of course, the angels being at the highest and animals being at the lowest end of this spectrum. Even more, a human who ascends the ranks of angelic imitation becomes foremost among them, and a human who descends the ranks of bestial imitation becomes lowermost among them. Ghazzī places the section on emulating the divine attributes in the middle of the treatise since that is where all roads lead for the spiritual wayfarer. He places the section on satanic mimesis right after it in order to illustrate what happens when someone does not adorn himself with these noble qualities: he becomes “Satan’s companion.”

Ghazzī closes his treatise with a section on seeking forgiveness for one’s sins, suggesting that one who uses this treatise as a manual for personal transformation will find spiritual redemption. With this historical and biographical context in place, I now examine the Sufi discursive background that made Ghazzī’s affective poiesis of tashabbuh possible.

---

72 Ibid., 10:434.
Tashabbuh and Sunna

In one of the earliest commentaries ever written on the canonical Sunnī hadith collection of Bukhārī, the Andulusian Mālikī jurist, Ibn Baṭṭāl (d. 1057), accents the importance of aesthetically mediated practices to the Prophet’s normative religious conduct, the sunna.73 Ibn Baṭṭāl first distinguishes between binding (wājib) and nonbinding sunna. In its binding sense, sunna is “everything the Prophet commanded or prohibited or did…whose (application) is not restricted to him.”74 In its not nonbinding, or optional sense, sunna comprises supererogatory practices whose omission is permissible. What habits of the Prophet constitute non-binding sunna? Ibn Baṭṭāl offers a few examples: wearing sandals tanned with animal hair; dyeing his loincloth with waras; his predilection for perfume; sleeping on the right side; his quick pace when walking; beginning his travels on Thursdays. So while the Prophet did not request his followers to do these things, Ibn Baṭṭāl perceives spiritual value in performing these ordinary practices: “Whoever imitates (tashabbaha) him out of love for him is nearer to his Lord.”75

Ibn Baṭṭāl blends the concepts of tashabbuh and sunna to construct a framework of prophetic authority. While his use of tashabbuh can be understood as a general command to follow Muhammad’s way, it also stresses the virtue of the aesthetic,
corporeal and ordinary features of the Prophet’s life for posterity. Wearing sandals with
animal hair, sleeping on the right side, and walking fast are mimetic ways of embodying
the prophetic conduct in everyday life. For Ibn Baṭṭāl, they are not insignificant and
superficial details; they are waymarks of spiritual distinction. Therefore, a believer who
goes beyond the mere necessities and adorns his conduct with practices that evoke the
beauty of the Prophet out of genuine love for him, adorns himself in divine grace.

Sufism: Disciplining the Soul

The Sufis take the aestheticization of sunna in new directions, redefining tashabbuh’s
semantic field in the process. While Muslim jurists were also concerned about the
spiritual well-being of the individual believer, their discourses emphasized the exoteric
and collective. Classical Sufis recognized the power of imitation as a powerful tool of
individual spiritual becoming. From the tenth century, Sufis constructed a poetics of
Islamic piety, which stressed the importance of modeling one’s conduct after pious
exemplars as a key technique for disciplining the soul. Sufis, like Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī,
believed that imitating the wrong models would lead the believer down the path to
damnation. Imitation was morally bipolar.

Ghazālī on the Bipolarity of Imitation

In his magnum opus, The Revival of the Religious Disciplines (Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn), the
“Proof of Islam,” Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), reminds us that “human nature is bred
to imitate and follow.”76 In other words, human beings are social beings who are
inherently vulnerable to their surroundings: they will generally imitate and follow the

company they keep. Throughout *The Revival*, Ghazâlî’s highlights the powerful role of exemplars such the wealthy and powerful, prophets and angels in shaping social relations.

However, Ghazâlî’s most important contribution to shaping a Sufi conception of *tashabbuḥ* was showing how it could lead to both virtue and vice – that *tashabbuḥ* was bipolar. In the fourth step of his anger management program, Ghazâlî exhorts the believer:

…let him reflect upon the ugliness of anger’s appearance when it emerges by recalling the [ugly] appearance of another angry person. Let him reflect upon the ugliness of anger within himself and the resemblance of its possessor to a vicious dog or an ordinary beast, and [by contrast the resemblance of the forbearing one who controls his temper to the prophets, gnostics, scholars, and wise folk. Then, let him choose between imitating the habits of dogs, wild beasts, and the vilest of people, and between imitating the habits of scholars and prophets so that his ego-self inclines to the love of following the latter…if any sound judgment from his intellect remains with him.77

Ghazâlî shows us how imitation hangs in the balance between virtue and vice. He empowers the individual believer to choose who he wants to be like: a vicious dog or forbearing prophet. For Ghazâlî, imitation is a process of becoming.

**The Suhrawardî School and the “Sufi Imitator”**

“The beautification of the self (*tahalli*) is achieved through imitation (*tashabbuḥ*) of the Sufi in both word and deed,” declared Abû Naṣr al-Sarrâj of Tûs (d. 988), the author of a canonical tenth century manual of Sufi terminology, *The Book of Flashes (Kitâb al-

---

77 Ibid., 3:225.
A precursor to Ghazālī, Saṟrāj recognizes that imitation is a technology of the self. Suggesting that a clear contrast between Sufi and legal usages of tashabbuh was already taking shape by the tenth century, Saṟrāj highlights the positive possibilities of the term for beautifying the self.

Other early Sufis were more skeptical, however. One century later, the famed Persian Sufi, Âlī b. Uṯmān Hujwīrī (d. 1072 – 77), flips Saṟrāj’s definition on its head. He states that the Sufi adept must be able to distinguish true Sufis from those who merely imitate them – those who dress and act like them, but are not really them. In contrast to Saṟrāj, he writes, “Tahalli, then, is to imitate people without really acting like them. Those who seem to be what they are not will soon be put to shame, and their secret character will be revealed.” Hujwīrī’s sober analysis reminds us of the potential cleavage between esoteric and exoteric practice. Imitation might actually be a mere exoteric surface effect that deceptively poses as esoteric spiritual realization.

This dialectical tension between positive and negative values of Sufi imitation continued into the twelfth century until the Sufi, Âbū Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 1168), affirmed a positive connotation for tashabbuh – though not without some nuance. Âbū Najīb was among a number of famous figures from the Northwestern Iranian town of

---


Suhraward who took the Sufi path during the twelfth century. Abū Najīb penned a concise but influential treatise, which detailed the proper approach to becoming a Sufi adept, *The Etiquette of Spiritual Aspirants*.

This treatise expands on a key notion: the “Sufi imitator,” or *mutashabbih*. No previous Sufi manual had expounded on this unique category in such detail. More precisely, it refers to a lower ranking member of the Sufi community who resembles and imitates the truly committed Sufis, the community’s fullest members.

This concept expanded the inclusivity of the Suhrawardī Sufi community just as it asserted new social and spiritual hierarchies. In his manual, Abū Najib devotes a special chapter on dispensations, which list the situations where the rules governing the Sufi community can be relaxed. These dispensations are meant to facilitate the inclusion of the Sufi imitator (*mutashabbih*) into the social orbit of the Sufi community because they did not participate in the spiritual exercises that were required of more committed aspirants. Otherwise, the community’s stringent rules and regulations would have alienated aspirants whose spiritual ambition and commitment failed to meet the high standards of the relatively small number of committed adepts.

This did not mean, however, that an ordinary Sufi should not try to transcend superficial adherence to exoteric form. In an exegesis of the imitation hadith, Abū Najīb writes, “When the Prophet said, ‘Whoever imitates a nation is one of them,’ he intended

---


81 *Ādāb al-Murīdīn* has been translated into English: Ibid.

82 Ibid., 8–9; Salamah-Qudsi, “The Idea of Tashabbuh in Sufi Communities and Literature of the Late 6th/12/Th and 13th Century in Baghdad,” 179.

assumption of their way of life, not of their dress." He then stresses this point more forcefully: “Whoever imitates a group in his style of speech and dress while his practices do not cohere with his appearance is accursed by God, the angels, and all humans.”

Like Hujwīrī, Abū Najib recognizes the potential incoherence between interiority and exteriority. He therefore urges the Sufi imitators to not settle for mere exterior conformity, but to strive for interior transformation. Clearly, Abū Najib was attempting to limit a persisting habit among imitators who simply imitated corporeal and aesthetic forms through their “style of speech and dress” but failed to reinvent themselves spiritually. Ideally, Sufi imitation should result in esoteric and exoteric coherence.

Abū Najib then makes an important conceptual distinction that turns Platonic conceptions of imitation on its head. He writes,

He who adheres to the dispensation and accepts the rules which govern them is one of the ‘True Imitators’ (al-Mutashabbihin al-Ṣādiqin), about whom the Prophet said, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them,” and “Whoever increases their numbers is one of them.”

For Plato, the concept of a true imitation was an oxymoron. Every imitation, no matter how close to the original was always a deficient copy, an approximation, a mimetic other; the act of mimesis is an act of deception that distorts reality. No imitation then could ever be truly true. However, his more elastic conception of imitation enables Abū Najib to further refine and nuance his rank of Sufi imitator into “true imitators” and - although he does not use the term - false imitators. By acknowledging the possibility of a true

86 al-Suhrawardi, Ādāb al-Murīdīn 98; al-Suhrawardi and Milson, A Sufi Rule for Novices: Kitāb Ādāb al-Murīdīn of Abū al-Najib al-Suhrawardi, 82.
imitator, Abū Najīb infuses the imitation hadith with a positive connotation of becoming. According to Abū Najīb, the imitation hadith only applies to the “true imitator” since only he is worthy of becoming “one of them” – one of the Sufis. Abū Najīb cites three practices that true imitators must follow in order for the imitation hadith to apply to them: performing ritual worship, eschewing the forbidden, and relinquishing worldly possessions. The false imitator, on the other hand, does not bother with these practices, and therefore cannot become “one of them.”

What is truly significant about this literal application of the imitation hadith is that, contrary to its jurisprudential usage, which foregrounds its exclusive sense of collective distinction, Suhrawardī’s interpretation emphasizes its inclusive sense - albeit at a moderated level. Suhrawardī attempts to diffuse the tension between imitation as a genuine technology of the self and as superficial exoteric practice by bestowing the term, mutashabbih, the Sufi imitator, with the meaning of “beginner.” The Sufi imitator was an official member of the Sufi spiritual community.

“The Imitator of the Imitator”

Abū Ḥafṣ ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī (d. 1234) formalized and elaborated the spiritual distinctions originated by his uncle, Abū Najīb. Even more than his uncle, Abū Ḥafṣ brought the Suhrawardī Sufi path to prominence. Abū Ḥafṣ materialized the conceptual

---

88 This mode of membership ranking resembles modern organizations that differentiate between membership levels, permitting a large number to claim membership at a minimum level of commitment and rank, and a small number to claim membership at higher levels of commitment and rank.
89 For more on his life, works, and pivotal role in establishing Sufi orders across the Muslim world see the following monographs: Ohlander, Sufism in an Age of Transition: ʿUmar al-Suhrawardi and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods; Qamar-ul Huda, Striving for Divine Union: Spiritual Exercises for Suhrawardi Sufis (London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).
groundwork of his uncle into a Sufi community that resided at a lodge (ribāṭ) along the Tigris river. Abū Ḥafṣ authored his own manual on Sufi etiquette as well. In the classic treatise, *The Perceivers of Gnosis* (ʿAwārif al-Maʿārif), he elaborated his uncle’s teachings on the Sufi imitator’s role in the spiritual community.

Abū Ḥafṣ provides an even more inclusive conception of the Sufi community than that of his uncle. He ultimately embraced even those who failed to qualify as “true imitators” into the Sufi community. In his more formalized socio-spiritual hierarchy, Abū Ḥafṣ ranks the Sufi imitator, the *mutashabbih*, at the lowest rung of the Sufi order, below the “Would-Be Sufi” (*Mutaṣawwif*) and the “(True) Sufi.” At once, this formalized spiritual-social hierarchy honors imitation by including the *mutashabbih* in the Sufi community, and devalues imitation by ranking him below everyone else.

Yet, for Abū Ḥafṣ, imitation is also a technology of becoming that contains the possibility of undoing this hierarchy. In a very rich passage, he explains the situation of the “True imitator” and introduces a new rank, the “Imitator of the imitator”:

As for the True Imitator...he advances to the rank of the Would-be Sufi, one who observes himself and meditates over his relationship to God and his creation. Next, he advances to the rank of Sufi, one who witnesses God. As for the one who neither advances to the state of the Would-be Sufi or the Sufi through imitation, nor aspires even to inculcate the fundamentals of their spiritual objectives, and is rather committed only to outward imitation of the superficial aspects of dress and of sharing a common style and appearance, and is devoid of their inward characteristics and attributes, he is not a Sufi Imitator (*mutashabbih biʾl-ṣūfiyya*); because he does not mimic them by entering into their beginnings. He is therefore an Imitator of the Imitator (*mutashabbih biʾl-mutashabbih*). He connects to the community solely through his dress.
Despite that, they [the Sufis] comprise a community whose associates will not be reduced to misery. The True Imitator (al-mutashábbih al-haqiqi) could ascend the ranks of the spiritual elite, becoming a Would-be Sufi and, eventually, a True Sufi. Abū Ḥafṣ then creates a novel category for the imitator who does not seek to transform himself internally, but only adorns himself externally in Sufi style and dress: “The Imitator of the Imitator.” The spiritual practice of the Imitator of the Imitator materializes into form without substance. This label is a brilliant way to express the distinction from the True Imitator. If the imitator, in its Platonic sense, is a deficient representation of the original, then the Imitator of the Imitator is even farther removed from the True Sufi.

Despite this apparently lowly status, Imitators of Imitators are still part of the Sufi community; this category pivots an even more expansive and inclusive conception of the Sufi order than his uncle’s, which did not acknowledge the communal membership of such people. Had Abū Ḥafṣ deployed a more crude classification such as “false imitator” for these lukewarm participants, he would have all but excluded them from the communal fold of the Sufi order. However, the subtlety of his conceptual distinction allows him to welcome them into the fold of the Sufi community despite their marginal status. As the final line of the passage above indicates, even the Imitator of the Imitator benefits from simply associating with Sufis, despite lacking any intention to engage in spiritual struggle. Alluding to a famous prophetic hadith, these Imitators of Imitators “will not be reduced to misery” because of the blessing that infuses the spiritual company of Sufis.  

91 “Huwa al-julasā wa lā yashqā bihim jalīsuhum”; Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-dawaṭ, bāb faḍl dhiqr Allāh; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-dhiqr wa al-daʿāʾ wa al-tawbā
Through this final dispensation, Abū Ḥafṣ also suggests that Sufi style and dress are infused with spiritual blessing, despite his prior denigration of blind adherence to exterior form. In the Sufi spiritual imagination, dress possesses transformative power.\footnote{Jamal J. Elias, "The Sufi Robe (Khirqa) as a Vehicle of Spiritual Authority," in Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture, ed. S. Gordon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 286-87.}

Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. 1126), an Iranian Sufi and lesser known brother of the more scholastic Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, is reported to have explained to Abū Najīb al-Suhrawardī:

If we invest him [the novice] with the cloak so that he resembles (yatashabbahu) the community of Sufis and dresses in their style it will draw him nearer to their gatherings and to the blessing derived from their company. By observing the spiritual states and inward attributes he will grow to love their spiritual path, and through that love, he will attain a portion of their spiritual states.\footnote{al-Suhrawardī, Al-ʿAwārif al-Maʿārif, 83-84; cited and translated in Salamah-Qudsi, "The Idea of Tashabhu in Sufi Communities and Literature of the Late 6th/12/Th and 13th Century in Baghdad," 185-86.}

Aḥmad al-Ghazālī explains how aesthetic style draws the adept into a social world that transforms his internal spiritual and emotional states. This imaginary weaves together individual and collective, and exoteric and esoteric into a single experience. Beginning as early as the ninth century, membership of a new spiritual adept in a Sufi community took material and visible form through the bestowal and investiture of the Sufi cloak (khirqa).\footnote{For more on the Sufi robe, or khirqa, see al-Suhrawardī, Al-ʿAwārif al-Maʿārif, 108-15; Elias, "The Sufi Robe (Khirqa) as a Vehicle of Spiritual Authority."} Based on Ahmad al-Ghazālī’s teaching above, Abū Ḥafṣ al-Suhrawardī, believed that the imitator should receive this cloak because the assumption of the outward form of a Sufi will aid in transforming the imitator’s internal spiritual state into that of a True Sufi. In his manual, he distinguishes between two different types of cloaks: the
cloak of the true aspirant (irāda) and the cloak of blessing (tabarruk). The former applies to True Sufis while the latter applies to the Imitator. These distinctions correspond to his conception of the “Imitator of the Imitator” and further indicate that many imitators had no aspiration (or ability) to be anything more than just imitators. They were content with minimum membership in the community, and the availability of differentiated Sufi cloaks visibly materialized these social distinctions. The role of the cloak in assigning membership in a Sufi spiritual community illustrates how dress functioned as a material signifier of both community affiliation and individual spiritual status and mediated the relationship of the individual adept to the collective Sufi community. However, the Sufi cloak signified more than status. It indexed a direct correspondence between spiritual and physical states. Many Sufis differentiated spiritual states according to the cloak’s color. Blue was a favorite.

This concern with imitation underscores the centrality of the concept of companionship (ṣuḥba) to Sufi orders. Sufis recognized the power of companionship to individual moral and spiritual being. The role extended to the imitator implicitly expresses the potential of the pious collective to radiate this piety outward to new individuals through the practice of imitation. It recognizes imitation as a key

96 Blue was often considered the most appropriate Sufi color because it signified the perpetual state of mourning one’s earthly separation from God: Annemarie Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 102; Carl W. Ernst, "Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center," Oxford University Press.
instrument for constructing community and extending the reach of community beyond a select group.

ṣuḥba was not an abstract affair. It was a very visceral experience involving the aesthetic configuration of the body and the senses, especially of sight and sound, although taste (dhawq) became the sensual Sufi metaphor par excellence for describing deeply-felt spiritual experience. Sessions involving musical instruments (samāʿ) were often a part of these communal disciplinary exercises, although controversial among some circles for the tendency to devolve into licentiousness. One imitated the litanies and dances, modes of dress and comportment, gestures and movements in the particular communal space of the ribāṭ. Imitation in the Sufi context meant configuring the body in particular ways during specific times and in specific spaces in order to transform oneself. If one could not cry, they made themselves shed tears. Yet individual agency was not always required. The gaze, or even just one glance of a spiritual master, could propel one into a radically different spiritual state.

Ultimately, however, what makes an imitator worthy of participating in the Sufi community is love. Abū Ḥāfṣ quotes his uncle who narrates the famous incident where a man asks the Prophet, “When is the Day of Judgment.” The Prophet responds with a question of his own: What have you prepared for it?” The person responds that he had not prepared much in the way of ritual worship and good deeds, but he says, “I love God and his messenger.” Abū Ḥāfṣ then quotes the famous response of the Prophet: “A person belongs with the one he loves.”

99 al-Suhrawardī, Al-ʿAwārif al-Maʿārif, 80.
In light of this incident, Abū Ḥafṣ defines the Imitator as: “One who chooses to imitate the Sufis and not others due to nothing other than his love for them. Despite his shortcomings in comparison to their religious performance, he is on par with them because of his desire and love.”¹⁰⁰  And this love does not occur except through a mutual attraction of the spirits (arwāḥ).¹⁰¹  So the desire to imitate is induced because of the affective causes of love and attraction, a key feature that Ghazzī expands on in his theory of imitation.

In this context, it is possible to make sense of the famous line of poetry coined by their fellow countryman, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), the “Illuminationist” theosoper, who was executed for heresy in Aleppo by Saladin’s son at the youthful age of thirty-six.¹⁰²  The Syrian geographer Yāqūt al-Hamawī (d. 1226), quotes Suhrawardī’s most famous poem, “Al-Qasīda al-Haʾiyya,” which includes the following verse still popular among Sufis today:

Imitate (tashabbabū) if you do not resemble them,
For imitation (al-tashabbuh) of the noble is success.¹⁰³

---

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.
¹⁰¹ Ibid., 81.
¹⁰² Much has been written about this controversial figure in Muslim history: Otto Spies and S. K. Khatak, Three Treatises on Mysticism (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1935); Henry Corbin, Suhrawardī D'alep; Fondateur De La Doctrine Illuminative (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1939); Fuat Sezgin et al., As-Suhrawardi, Shihābaddīn Yahyā Ibn Ḥabash (D. 587/1191): Texts and Studies (Frankfurt am Main: Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, 2000); Hossein Ziai, Knowledge and Illumination: A Study of Suhrawardi’s Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1990); Mehdi Amin Razavi, Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997).
¹⁰³ “Fa-tashhababāhū in ʾlam takānū mithlahum…inna al-tashhabbaha bi-l-kirāmi falaḥu al-Hamawī, Yāqūt b. ‘Abd Allāh. Mu’jam al-Udābāʾ: Irshād al-Arib ilā maʿrifat al-adīb. Edited by Iḥsān ʿAbbās. 7 vols. Beirut: Dar al-gharb al-Islami, 1993, 6:2808. During field research in Damascus from 2009–2010 I encountered a Sufi Shaykh of the Shādhilī order from Aleppo who taught me a line of poetry almost identical to the above line, but with a slight variation in the first hemistich: “If you are not one of them, then imitate them, for imitation of the noble is success” (In ʾlam takānū min huma fa-tashabbabāhū, inna al-tashhabbaha bi-l-kirāmi falaḥu).
In its most rudimentary sense, this verse suggests that if an adept currently does not resemble in character, ethics, persona, and appearance the spiritual elect, then he should emulate their ways in order to become like them and gain eternal felicity. In its context—specific sense, it suggests that although an adept may not ever hope to become among the spiritual elect, one can still benefit spiritually by simply being in their presence as a \textit{mutashabbih}, an imitator. In both senses, the verse reflects the power of \textit{suhba}, or companionship of the righteous, especially a spiritual master (\textit{shaykh}), for shaping one’s conduct and character. It eloquently summarizes how \textit{tashabbuh}, imitation, leads to a different – and positive - distinction: the distinction between one’s current and future self. This hierarchical distinction encompasses inward states - the transformation of internal qualities – and also outward states – aesthetically mediated practices such as dress and hairstyle.

**Ghazzi’s Affective Poetics**

Ghazzi intensifies the Sufi accent on imitation as a tool of Muslim becoming into a robust theory. By stressing interior dimension of affect, or feeling, Ghazzi highlights a different dimension of the socially constituted self altogether. True belonging is affective and visceral; it is deeply felt. For Ghazzi, love, above all, engenders belonging. Imitation, then, becomes a reflection of this love and belonging. According to Ghazzi, when someone imitates another it “indicates love for them, contentment with their states and their activities.”\footnote{al-Ghazzi, \textit{Husn al-Tanabbuh li-mā warada fī al-Tashabbuh}, 1:17.} He interweaves a number of hadith traditions to support his claim:
“Whoever loves a people, God will resurrect him in his group;”

“A person does not love a community except that it makes him one of them;” and the famous prophetic tradition, “A person belongs with the one he loves.” Highlighting the eschatological effects of social belonging, Ghazzī paraphrases the imitation hadith, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them,” as follows:

Whoever agrees with a people and loves them is one of them and with them in this life and the next.

This anticipatory gloss forecasts a correspondence between earthly and heavenly communities. Ghazzī then cites several prominent Sufis such as Qushayrī (d. 1074), Muḥāsibī (d. 857), and Tustarī (d. 896), all of whom relate the following maxim: “Love is conformity.” This statement suggests that if a person truly loves someone, he will assimilate both exterior and interior characteristics and ultimately become like that person. Finally, Ghazzī expands beyond the Muslim tradition and quotes the Greek sage, Euclid, by way of the Muslim heresiographer, Sharastānī (d. 1153): “Whoever desires that his love becomes your love should love what you love, so that if you both share one love you will come towards agreement (in other areas).” This observation suggests that love is a process that happens over time and is connected to shared practices and things.

Based on this love-centered hermeneutic, Ghazzī divides tashabbuh into two basic types: one that engenders love and one that does not. Ghazzī therefore states that if

---

105 “Man aḥabba qawman ḥarādu Allāhu fi zumratihim” Ibid., 1:21.
106 “Lā yuḥibbu rajulun qawman illā jaʿalahu min hum.” Ibid., 1:22.
108 “Man wāfaqa qawman wa aḥabbahum kāna minhum wa maʿa hum fi al-dunya wa al-ākhira.” Ibid., 1:21.
110 Ibid., 1:19. I was unable to find a corroborating reference to this quotation in Euclid’s writings.
someone imitates appearances for purposes of debate (munāẓara) or opposition (muʿāraḍa) or to make fun of them that type of imitation does not indicate love and is not tashabbuh in its manifest sense (ṣūra ẓāhira).\textsuperscript{111} True tashabbuh requires emulating their character, habits, and their states – practices that index true love. For Ghazzī, if an individual merely adores another’s practices, but not their actual person, then he still will not want to associate with them nor become like them. To truly follow and become like another person or community one must have a connection to them (nisba ilayhim).\textsuperscript{112} Superficial imitation in the form of debate, opposition or scoffing lacks this connection and therefore does not incite the love necessary for true tashabbuh. Only the former counts as true tashabbuh. This conceptual distinction shows how important feeling is for Ghazzī: love and its absence pivot his conceptualization of belonging and trumps the value of exoteric imitation alone. Exoteric imitation must be coupled with esoteric love in order to indicate belonging.

Ghazzī’s theory suggests a dynamic, interactive, and mutually reinforcing dialectic between imitation and love. Embedded in Ghazzī’s analysis is a dynamic and interactive conception of the relationship between love and imitation. Joking and debate are superficial mimetic practices that indicate an absence of love. Truly assimilating another’s character and habits, on the other hand, are substantial mimetic practices that indicate the presence of love. According to this analysis, imitation functions as an index of one’s emotional disposition. Imitation is also a dialogical practice that cultivates love for another. Yet, the opposite vector is also true. Imitation is also borne of love. In this

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 1:20.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 1:20-21.
scheme, belonging is a dialectical product of the feeling of love and the practice of imitation.

Like Ibn Taymiyya, Ghazzî acknowledges that imitation is a practice differentiated by degree, and not absolutes. Ghazzî explains this dynamic through the binary opposition of similarity (muwâfaqa) and difference (mukhâlafa).\textsuperscript{113} He reduces this complicated spectrum of human interaction into three basic scenarios: first, one could completely assimilate the practices of a different group in every way; second, one could oppose the practices of a different group in every way; and third, one could do both simultaneously, assimilating some practices while rejecting others. In the first two scenarios, Ghazzî states they are “from them and (belong) with them” without any doubt.\textsuperscript{114} The final scenario is more ambiguous, however.

According to Ghazzî, complete assimilation demonstrates the highest degree of love (mahabba). Ghazzî reads this scenario within a distinctive Islamic framework. A person who completely assimilates the Prophet Muhammad’s way realizes the Quranic verse, “If you love God, then follow me (Muhammad) and God will then love you” since it echoes the principle of divine reciprocity, “Whoever loves God, God loves him.”\textsuperscript{115} A person then becomes the beloved of God (ḥabīb Allāh). As for the second scenario in which one opposes the practices of a people in every way, his case is very simple: he is just not one of them.\textsuperscript{116} A believer cannot claim to love his native community when he promiscuously imitates others. Such love is baseless and false according to Ghazzî.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 1:25-27.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 1:25.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 1:26.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
Finally, for the more complicated (and more common) hybrid case of an individual who maintains an imperfect mimetic relationship to a particular group, the ultimate criterion will come down to the interior presence or absence of love and faith.\textsuperscript{117} The continued presence of love and faith in one’s heart enables one to remain a member of the community, despite periodic mimetic lapses.

At this point, Ghazzī introduces a different dimension of social belonging: religious belief. He conceptualizes the distinction between friend and enemy in terms of faith, arguing that if an individual does not possess the same faith as a particular community then he does not really belong to them. However, even faith is founded upon an affective politics of love. Ghazzī argues that, "Every enemy desire its love," and therefore, the true enemy “is one who opposes you in religion (\textit{dīn})."\textsuperscript{118} Turning to the specific cases of the Jewish and Christian communities, Ghazzī argues that their claims of loving and having faith in their prophets does not benefit them since they disobeyed them, and purposely turned away from following their ways and from assimilating their moral uprightness.\textsuperscript{119} For Ghazzī, Jews and Christians lacked the fundamental requirement of a normative community: the coherency between faith and conduct. The incoherency of their faith and conduct ultimately negated their claims of having faith in and loving their prophets. Ghazzī leverages this negative moral appraisal of Jews and Christians in order to discredit their religious credentials.

Ghazzī identifies other emotions that determine belonging such as contentment, admiration, and attraction. He cites a number of prophetic traditions that evoke both the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 1:26-27.
  \item \textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 1:27.
  \item \textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 1:27-28.
\end{itemize}
literary form and rhetorical force of the imitation hadith: “When a person is content with the guidance and activities of another he is like him (mithlihi)”\textsuperscript{120}; “Whoever admires the conduct of a person he is like him”\textsuperscript{121}; “None of you has true faith until his desires conform to what I [Muhammad] have brought.”\textsuperscript{122} These prophetic traditions all center social belonging in the emotional heart.

Based on this critique, one senses that Ghazzī shares with his Damascene predecessor, Ibn Taymiyya, a recognition that the preservation of religious normativity is crucial to the constitution of community. Ghazzī nuances his discussion concerning the incoherence of faith and conduct by considering two more scenarios that foreground the significance of intention. The first case is summed up by the prophetic tradition: “Whoever turns away from my way is not of me” which once again evokes the form and force of the imitation hadith.\textsuperscript{123} This statement functions as a warning for Muslims to imitate and follow the Prophet; by threatening social exclusion, this prescriptive utterance ties together community and orthodoxy. For Ghazzī, this utterance is also a condemnation of Christians and Jews who did not follow the normative conduct of their prophets and no longer have the right to claim fidelity and affiliation to their original communities. Ghazzī then returns to the “heart” of the matter. He declares that when someone intentionally deviates from the prophetic way, “it is a sign that his love is not true.”\textsuperscript{124} However, if their deviation is unintentional, and results from incapacity,

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 1:17-18.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 1:18.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} “Man raghaba ʿan sunnatī fa-laysa minnī.” Ibid., 1:27.
\textsuperscript{124} “Dalīl ʿalā anna al-maḥabbatahu tilka lā haqiqa lāha,” Ibid.
weakness or lack of will-power, then Ghazzī does not exclude them from the community of believers. He justifies this liberal position in poetic style:

    Whoever aspires to reach the farthest station,
    On Resurrection Day despite his shortcomings in devotion
    Let him make sincere his love for the Master of Creation, the Chosen One,
    For “A person belongs with the one he loves.”125

The prophetic utterance, “A person belongs with the one he loves” pivots his love-centered anthropology.

    Ghazzī further intensifies his affective accent on the moral status of an individual when he quotes the South Arabian historian, Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 728), who transmits an excerpt of a conversation between Satan and God:

    Satan: “Your servants love you and disobey you, but they hate me and obey me.”
    God: “I have forgiven them due to their love for me despite their disobeying me, and I have forgiven them for obeying you since they hated you.”126

Ghazzī suggests that, ultimately, love trumps all – even a lifetime of disobedience. Ghazzī ontologically privileges the visceral over the corporeal - even at the limit point of a complete rupture between interiority and exteriority. Ghazzī’s affective discourse echoes Abū Ḥaṣṣ al-Suhrawardi’s statements about the Sufi Imitator who cannot perform the devotional acts of truly-committed Sufis, but still becomes part of the Sufi community through his love for them. However, Ghazzī extends Suhrawardi’s conceptual

---

125 Ibid., 1:31.
126 Ibid., 1:38.
framework beyond its original Sufi context to include general membership in the Muslim community.

This does not mean that Ghazzî is not concerned about the influences of social interaction. On the contrary, he advises caution when interacting with others. He observes that, in general, the more time two people spend together, they become alike. One should sever his relationship with someone who does not increase him in faith. Sometimes, however, someone’s spiritual state is not readily apparent. In such circumstances, one should spend time with him until his state becomes apparent. If his conduct conflicts with the basic parameters set by the normative basis of Islam - the Quran and sunna - then one must sever this relationship because “loving sinful people is sinful.”

Feeling viscerally repulsed by sinful conduct for the sake of God is actually a form of religious obedience and an extension of divine love.

Supplementing this basic advice, Ghazzî advises how to handle different categories of people along a sliding scale of potential harm. The infidel should be killed if combated in war. The Jew or Christian (dhimmî) must be repelled; it is strongly disliked to converse with them at length or be cheerful and happy around them. Loving (mawadda) them is categorically not permitted. The Muslim innovator who commits infidelity through his religious innovations is more dangerous that either an infidel or scriptuary because his evil is covert. A Muslim who sins publicly should be avoided while the one who sins privately should be advised to reform himself.

---

127 Ibid., 1:76.
128 Ibid., 1:77.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid., 1:77-78.
What happens when a Muslim refuses to take on this responsibility and essentially increases the population of the corrupt? Ghazzī glosses the imitation hadith with two similar hadith that help answer this question. Based on the first hadith, “Whoever increases the number of a nation is one of them,” Ghazzī declares that Muslims should not live among infidels, but should only live among other Muslims. Otherwise he will be subject to humiliation and “A Muslim should not demean himself.”

Emphasizing this point in The Revival, Ghazālī narrates the following anecdote regarding the Children of Israel: “God revealed to Joshua (Yūsha b. Nūn), ‘I killed forty thousand good people from your community and sixty thousand bad people.’ Yūsha replied, ‘What was the matter with the good people?’ God responded, ‘They did not become angry for my sake [at the wrongdoing of the bad people] so they ate and drank with the bad people.’”

Ghazzī hedges on this position however, and makes exceptions for preserving Muslim collective interests through spying and similar pre-emptive activities. Ghazzī also excuses weak Muslims who viscerally detest their infidel countrymen but are powerless to take action. This calculative political rationale echoes Ibn Taymiyya’s utilitarian reasoning. Despite the hadith’s literal implications, Ghazzī once again recenters the criterion for belonging on one’s “visceral mode of appraisal.”

---

131 Ibid., 1:57.
132 Ibid., 1:54.
133 al-Ghazālī, Ḳhayāt Ulūm al-Dīn. (2: 151
135 Ibid., 1:79-80.
136 William E. Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 27.
**Ontological Hierarchies of the Senses**

Regulating Muslim imitation necessarily had both synchronic and diachronic dimensions. Later generations of Muslims who never met the Prophet can cultivate affection for him by imitating his example and becoming part of a transhistorical imagined community. Despite Ghazzî’s call for imitating the Prophet and those who followed him, he sets limitations on its transformative power – mainly, in order to preserve the generational distinction of Muhammad’s Companions and their paradigmatic role in shaping normative Islam. The pious sensibilities cultivated by the first Muslims who lived alongside the Prophet can never be replicated. Ghazzî explains this generational distinction in terms of the body and the senses. Ghazzî observes that the most intense type of love is built upon companionship and actual observation of a person’s qualities – a unique status possessed only by the Prophet’s Companions. They enjoyed a corporeal intimacy with the Prophet that those in succeeding generations simply could never share. The later generations’ love for the Prophet was built only upon the sense of hearing. According to Ghazzî, this was necessarily deficient in comparison to the Companions because love based upon sight is generally stronger than love based on hearing. He applies this insight to explain why the Prophet says, “Give glad tidings to one who saw me and believed in me, but give glad tidings seven-fold to one who never saw me but (still) believed in me.”

Because it was more difficult to believe based upon only having heard about the Prophet without having seen or met him, later generations merit this greater distinction relative to the Prophet’s Companions. Ghazzî does not exclude the possibility that the sense of hearing might foster a more intense love than the sense of

---

sight, however. Ghazzī transmits the following poetic verse: “Sometimes, the ear incites love before the eye.”

**Corporeal Simulacrum of the Spirit World**

Like Suhrawardī and Ghazālī before him, Ghazzī draws mimetic analogies between human and spirit worlds, the visible and the invisible. Quoting Suhrawardī’s treatise on Sufism, *Perceivers of Gnosis*, Ghazzī describes how this love originates in the intermingling of spirits (*arwāḥ*) in the primordial spirit-world and translates into embodied spiritual community in this ordinary world. According to Suhrawardī, the Sufi imitator’s love only emerges because Sufi spirits alert his spirit. This demonstrates that “love is a divine affair.” Ghazālī observes that the angels circumambulate around their own *kaʿba* just as humans do on earth. This angelic circumambulation reflects the mimetic relationship between the invisible spirit-world and visible material-world. Humans should aspire to these lofty ranks because ‘Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.”

Ghazzī believes that divine mediation makes it possible for the hearts and spirits of lovers to enjoy intimate companionship “even when their bodies are far apart.” True intimacy and love transcend the body and are ultimately rooted in the invisible spirit-world. However, “If their bodies come together one day,” Ghazzī observes, “these meanings will become manifest between them in their appearance, imitation, companionship, and conformity.” According to Ghazzī this spiritually-

---

138 Ibid., 1:83.
141 al-Ghazzī, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*.
143 Ibid.
based love is true and lasting love because it is rooted in the love of God. True love and true faith constitute one another. For Ghazzî, the enduring love of faith contrasts the false and fleeting love possessed by religious hypocrites whose this-worldly companionship is based on infidelity (kufr). Like communities of faith, communities of infidelity corporeally mimic communities that had formed in the primordial spirit world.

**Conclusion: Restoring the Future**

In *The Beauty of Awakening*, Ghazzî narrates an obscure anecdote in which Satan attempts to impersonate Jesus in order to dupe an unsuspecting Christian monk.\(^{144}\) He is outsmarted by the monk, however, who sees through his ruse. Ghazzî then draws an analogy from this anecdote to a radically different – and seemingly irrelevant - scenario: the hypothetical case of a debt collector who knocks on the door of an insolvent debtor seeking to reclaim his money. Ghazzî imagines a typical exchange at the door in which the debtor first asks the collector, “Who is it?” The collector then responds, “I am so and so,” while changing his name in order to hide his true identity. According to Ghazzî, the collector (and the one who imitates him) commits a satanic deception (and impersonation). Through this creative exegesis, Ghazzî takes us from the past – a magically real anecdote involving satanic anthropomorphism – to the possible future of a very ordinary event – debt collection. By addressing the ethics of debt collection, Ghazzî might also be critiquing state-administered tax collection practices; Ghazzî’s condemnation becomes a subtle form of socio-political critique.

\(^{144}\) Ibid., 5:514.
Throughout *The Beauty of the Awakening*, Ghazzī creatively engaged the past in order to address everyday challenges he encountered in the present and those he might encounter in the future. Ghazzī’s ambitious attempt to recenter the Muslim normative social order in *The Beauty of Awakening* is partially an expression of his widespread anxieties over the social, cultural, political and religious disorders that prevailed in his time. No one before or after him managed to weld together such a magisterial homage to Muslim distinction through the lens of imitation. With Ghazzī the discourse of *tashabbuh* reached its apex at the eve of modernity.

Yet, Ghazzī’s anxieties are tempered by his Sufi-inspired affective sensibilities. His emotive accent on *tashabbuh* centers a robust interiority to Muslim imaginations of belonging and becoming that decenters the Shari‘a emphasis on exteriority. He creatively applies the love-centered Sufi discourses of Suhrawardī to Muslim becoming and belonging on a global scale. He also departs from the exclusive emphasis of Shari‘a discourses on *tashabbuh*’s negative possibilities by stressing its positive possibilities. Ghazzī’s imaginary of imitation and human action extends beyond affective sensibilities, however. His poiesis connects affect, body, spirit, and belief into a coherent poetics of mimesis and alterity. Ghazzī shows us an integrated and connected cosmos where individual blurs into the collective, Sufism blurs into Shari‘a, text blurs into context, and the past blurs into the future, opening up new possibilities for both becoming and belonging.
PART THREE:
SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPES

Introduction
In the third and final part of this study, I shift focus from discourse to semiotics. I assemble a wide range of aesthetically-mediated practices that highlight the sartorial, corporeal, and sensational features of Muslim distinction; acts of Muslim distinction are mediated through the body and the senses. This approach not only accents the quotidian practices of everyday life, but it also foregrounds their semiotic meanings, their symbolic dimensions. As Ibn Taymiyya’s theory of imitation illustrated, Muslims perceived the cultural world as teeming with meaning. Muslim scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya, deployed the Arabic keyword *shi’ār* to mean distinguishing symbol or marker in order to circumscribe the limits of reprehensible imitation. They recognized the significant role of symbols in shaping Muslim social interactions, aesthetics, and politics.

Symbols span a whole range of human experiences, leading the great scholar of religion, Mircea Eliade to name humans, *homo symbolicus.*¹ In other words, symbols comprised the timeless human existential endeavor of constructing meaning in the world, whether spiritual, social, cultural or political. Yet symbols are inherently unstable. They can diffuse from a point of historical and geographic origin, and spread over time and space, losing their coherence in the process. Practices accrue symbolic value in particular historical and cultural contexts. Some symbols, like remaining shod in ritual prayer, are transient and specific to a particular time and place. Others symbols, like the Christian

---

Symbols can also be reappropriated and reshaped into new meanings that advance the ideological ends of specific groups. It is part of the existential function of polities and religions to monitor, regulate, and control the meaning of key symbols in public life.

The concept of *shiʿār* both invigorated and set limits upon the *tashabbuh* discourse. The semantic field of *shiʿār* encompasses a range of related meanings, including sign, badge, and distinguishing marker. As I discuss in chapter seven, in tandem with its related linguistic derivatives of the three-letter root, sh-ʿ-r, *shiʿār* evokes the interconnectedness among the concepts of sense, feeling, cognition, and symbol. The term has valences that cross the fields of politics, war, religion, and sexuality. Yet its usage defines and marks a specific collectivity, whether defined as nation, religion, or gender. The earliest usages of the term among early Muslims were very concrete, evoking a linguistic relationship to the senses. For example, *shiʿār* were signs of people in war that identified fellow soldiers in an army. It also referred to the standard or banner of an army, whether visible and audible. Throughout Muslim history, another important collective marker was color. The Prophet used to employ black banners during war. Explaining this prophetic *sunna*, the medieval commentator, Sarakhsī, explains that, “Black is recommended for banners because it is the sign of war combatants.”\(^2\) The Yemeni collector of oral traditions, ʿAbd al-Razzāq, informs us that that among the Prophet Muhammad’s battle cries, or *shiʿār*, was: “They will not be victorious! (*Ḥā mīm*
lā yanṣurūn!” In sum,” Sarakhsī concludes, “the shi‘ār is a distinctive sign (al-ʿalāma) that the Muslim general should determine; the only condition is that he choose a slogan that optimistically anticipates victory over their enemies.”

Muslims applied the concept to ritual as well, as in “the rites of hajj (shi‘ār al-Hajj).” “Ṣafā and Marwa are indeed among the symbols of God (sha‘ā’ir Allāh),” clarifies the Quran. Ṣafā and Marwa are two stations between which Abraham’s servant-wife Hagar, ran when frantically searching for water to slake the thirst of her son, Ishmael. The spring of zamzam literally sprang from this event. This term applies to other pilgrimage rites as well such as the stoning of Satan, circumambulating the ka‘ba, and offering a sacrifice. These rites have all become saturated with symbolic value through mimesis of the historical figures of Muhammad, Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael. God, eventually becoming sacred symbols. Despite the predominance of its public associations with war, the semantic field of shi‘ār extends to the mundane and private domain of female menstruation. Shi‘ār can refer to the female vagina, or the rag that is used to stop the flow of blood from a menstruating woman (shi‘ār al-dam).

Muslim religious scholars recognized that symbolic meanings were not static; they shifted across time, place, and culture. The Egyptian hadith-master, Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī (d. 1449) argued that once a practice diffused outside it geographic or cultural origin, it no longer remained a distinctive marker of the original group. The normative implications of this acknowledgement were significant. Muslims would be permitted to

---

4 Quran 2:158
imitate such practices. He cites the authoritative precedence of the Iraqi jurist, Aḥmad b. Hanbal, who initially disapproved of a particular style of wearing the turban, but later approved of it because the style had become so common among Muslims, that its cultural signification no longer smacked of foreignness. In an analogous case from early Islamic history, Muslims initially ascribed praying without shoes and parting the hair as practices unique to the Jews that Muslims should not imitate. Yet, over time, Muslims appropriated these practices until they became distinctive markers of Muslims themselves!

The concept of *shiʿār* is crucial to understanding how and why Muslims circumscribed and delimited practices of distinction. The human sensory regime cannot process all phenomena; humans can only focus on a limited number of things at a given moment. They must block out far more sensory phenomena than they take in. These sensory habits are not only unique to an individual but are grounded in specific cultures as well. Early Muslims were unable to block out all foreign cultural practices that they encountered because socialization, acculturation, and adaptation were necessary to the endurance of a rapidly expanding Muslim empire. Muslims deployed the concept of *shiʿār* as a discursive term in order to foreground those practices, gestures, postures, languages, and styles that became symbolically charged as distinctive markers of collectivities defined across, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, and even species. In the form of episodic narratives, the following chapters illustrate the sorts of practices of distinction that Muslims delimited. The first two chapters highlight the body as a pivot of Muslim distinction; they show how sartorial and gestural practices became symbolically
charged. The final chapter highlights the role of the senses in inscribing new Islamic meanings onto the public landscape.
CHAPTER FIVE
EMBODYING DISTINCTION:
SARTORIAL STYLE

People’s outward styles do not become alike until their inward states do.

— ʿAbd Allāh b. Masʿūd (d. 653)

Fashioning an Islamic Sartorial Style

When Satan bewitched Adam and Eve so they ate from the forbidden tree, their first reaction was to dress themselves. This critical moment in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim creation myth is saturated with meaning. It marks a striking instance of how dress literally and figuratively fashions human experience. The functions of dress are many; protection, beautification, personal style, and collective distinction are among the most basic. This chapter examines the significance of sartorial style to Muslim collective distinction across lines of religion, ethnicity, class, and gender. It highlights the aesthetic and material convergence of politics and religion in Muslim history.

For the French theorist of fashion, Roland Barthes, style mediates the body’s relation to its social and cultural context. “Imagery, delicacy and vocabulary,” writes

1 “Lā yushbihu al-zayy al-zayy ḥattā tushbihu al-qulūb al-qulūb.” Zayy is a robust Arabic word that can mean style, fashion, dress, and appearance. It can also signal interior qualities such as character and conduct. In this context, however, it refers to outward form. The individual attributed with this saying is Ibn Masʿūd, who became known as one of the most learned of Muhammad’s Companions. The Hanafi school of law, especially, ascribes many of its positions to him. See “ʿIbn Masʿūd” in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition. This saying is transmitted in a ninth century collection of renunciant sayings attributed to Waki b. Jarrāh (d. 812): Waki b. Jarrāh, Kitāb al-Zuhd, 2 vols. (Medina, S.A.: Maktabat al-dār, 1984), 1:597, hadith # 324. The editor casts doubt on the authenticity of the attribution to Ibn Masʿūd, however.

2 What I call “sartorial style” comprises both clothing and hair.
Barthes, “spring from the body and the past of the writer and gradually become the very reflexes of his art.” Literary and bodily styles merge into and reinforce the other. Barthes understood dress as a culturally and historically self-contained system, a vestimentary system that is built upon sartorial styles of the past. We can therefore view our examination of Muslim sartorial styles as an Islamic sartorial system.

Dress both clothes and fashions the body. It hides the body. It reveals the body. It shapes and is shaped by the body. Dress is therefore an extension of the body. And like the body, dress weaves together a complex web of cultural meanings. Clothing became significant to Muslims due to its simultaneous visibility, materiality, and symbolic value. Sartorial style inflects not only the specificity of its cultural context, but also of an individual’s identity. Fashion is therefore a dynamic site of both cultural and individual distinction that is subject to historical change. The volatility of fashion styles corresponds to the volatility of its cultural meanings.

This volatility is due in part to the synchronic relationality of dress. Each article of clothing forms part of a greater ensemble of social meanings. In this chapter I attempt to “match” shoes with hats, belts and other articles of clothing in order to assemble their sartorial meanings; the resulting “outfit” is a loosely—connected but colorful patchwork. I locate sartorial practices within the greater assemblage of Muslim practices of distinction.

It becomes clear that dress inflects a constellation of social meanings. Dress, then, mediates the two bodies: the physical body and the social body. As Mary Douglas

---

has argued, during moments of political crisis, social regulation of the physical body intensifies. However, Muslim regulation of sartorial practices illustrates that, even in times of relative political stability, dress functions as an enduring aesthetic expression of religio-political memory and power. As I illustrate below, dress became an important marker of distinction across the pre-modern Muslim world, East and West. Sartorial style became more than just fashion in Islamic Central Asia, Syria, and Andalusia.

Dress signals more than just religious distinction. Like the overlapping layers of a dress ensemble, religious difference often overlaps ethnic, class, and sexual differences. Dress is a dynamic site for mapping how different dimensions of collective identity intersect. Ibn Taymiyya, for example, interwove his condemnation of non-Muslim dress and customs with his condemnation of non-Arab dress and customs: “Whatever is different from the dress of the Arabs and resembles that of the non-Arabs is disapproved.” Ibn Taymiyya’s sartorial appraisal illustrates how Arab and Muslim distinction overlapped, even if they were not coextensive. He and other Muslim jurists also condemned gendered cross-dressing. Muslim religious and political elites sought to forge an ideal Islamic religious and political order by regulating sartorial styles.

Social theorists of dress have linked anxieties over fashion’s vulnerability to imitation. Dress’s capacity for imitation threatens to diffuse vestimentary modes into flux. Sartorial mimesis threatens to render culturally-specific origins and group-specific associations irrelevant, portraying a process by which Arab, Persian, and Byzantine

---


sartorial norms become “Islamicized.” This mimetic process also illustrates the opposite cultural vector: how Muslim sartorial styles spread into non-Muslim cultures. The common practice of gifting revered textiles such as swords, belts, and robes for both pious and political purposes was another means of facilitating imitation and assimilation. The gift of a patched cloak from spiritual master to disciple or a bejeweled dagger from sultan to courtier not only functioned as expressions of generosity, but propelled the imitation of clothing styles across and beyond Muslim lands. Many social theorists have attempted to explain the basic motivations that drive sartorial imitation. Marcel Mauss coined the phrase, “prestigious imitation” to explain the vertical dynamic of how people seek to imitate members of higher social strata. An often overlooked pioneer of modern sociology, Herbert Spencer, theorized a more nuanced concept of competitive imitation. While Mauss’s theory highlighted vertical dynamics between different strata of society, Spencer’s theory accented the horizontal dynamics of imitation. According to his theory, the imitation of fashion styles of higher status individuals is driven by competition among members of equal social status.

Muslim stress upon the regulation of sartorial styles supports Spencer’s and Mauss’s theories. As we have already seen, Muslim religious texts frequently deploy the language of imitation in order to regulate sartorial matters. In the Pact of ʿUmar, for example, the conquered Christians are made to say; “We shall not attempt to imitate and resemble (tashabbuh) Muslims in any way with regard to their dress, as for example, with

---

7 See chapters one and five of this study. For a monograph length study of this subject see Linda Komaroff et al., Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts (Los Angeles; New Haven [Conn.]: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Yale University Press, 2011).
the qalansuwa (hat), the turban, footwear, or parting the hair.”¹⁰ These ordinances explicitly acknowledge the vulnerability of sartorial styles to imitation. By attempting to limit imitation, the Pact indicates how imitation functions as a powerful conduit of cultural transmission that must be regulated in public spaces such as markets, mosques, and public baths. Through sartorial imitation, visible social distinctions between Muslims and others blur; the established hierarchical social order is threatened.

**Colors of Distinction**

Dress also illustrates how social meanings quite literally take on different colors. Commentators of Aristotle claimed that no one understood the harmony among colors better than those who worked with textiles.¹¹ Color, like dress, does more than simply adorn an individual; it marks collectivities as well. It can therefore carry symbolic values and meanings that bind aesthetics to memory and power. While other features of sartorial distinction such as the shape, ornamentation, pattern and material of clothing also function to mark different groups, color is an especially easy means of visible identification. “The gentle variety of colors clarifies the doubtful form of things, distinguishes the confused, and decorates everything.”¹² The Quran even suggests that color is a mark of the sacred: “Such is God’s coloring: and who is better than God at coloring?”¹³

---

¹² Quotation taken from a nineteenth century inscription. See Ibid., 11.
¹³ Quran 2:138
Muslims were not colorblind to difference. They viewed society through a polychromatic spectrum of hierarchical distinctions. Early Muslims colored robes, turbans, shoes, and beards diverse hues to create a new Islamic cultural legibility – a visual sign language of an Islamic social landscape. While color brought certain collective distinctions into relief, like other markers of distinction, it could also blur those same distinctions. Impostors could appropriate colors for deceitful ends. Color could hide identity just as easily as it could reveal it. An individual’s “true colors” was not always easily visible. And so, the cultural meanings of color in the Muslim religious imaginary were anything but static. They changed in relation to a constellation of historically contingent variables.

In this chapter, I present a colorful patchwork of key textual moments spanning roughly the first half of Islamic history in order to illustrate how Muslims infused dress with a multiplicity of social, cultural, political and religious meanings. At once, this kaleidoscopic assemblage illustrates how meanings of dress both endure and shift over time and place. More specifically, it depicts the attempts of Muslim religious scholars to resignify the political and cultural landscape by regulating sartorial style. Although this treatment is by no means comprehensive or exhaustive, it both builds and expands upon previous studies by incorporating a more eclectic range of Muslim religious texts, sartorial styles, and social theories.14 I broadly follow the template set out by the Pact of

---

14 Y. Stillman’s excellent historical study of Arab dress, though exhaustive, is more an attempt to document the history of Muslim sartorial practices, rather than explore their social meanings. F. Flood’s recent chapter on sartorial style among early Muslims in Sindh, is excellent for drawing attention to the significance of imitation and exchange to cross-cultural transmission, but does not engage religious literature, the primary source engaged here. He therefore does not explore the normative implications of clothing for distinction among early Muslims. M. Levy-Rubin’s examination of the Pact of ‘Umar provides much needed historical context, but is primarily concerned with drawing a genetic relationship between Persian courtly custom and early Muslim practices of distinction. Its scope, historical and
ʿUmar (see table 5.1), which, as already discussed, is a variegated expression of how Muslims sought to use political power to codify key markers of their collective identity, stereotype their non-Muslim subjects, and fix a new social order. As mentioned in chapter one, norms of fashion and dress play a significant role in the Pact; a non-Muslim’s style of saddle, headgear, shoes, belts, and hair should reflect his social status in public life. However, the Pact is limited to mediating relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. I therefore weave together material drawn from hadith, jurisprudence, legal responsa (fatwas), ethics, biographies, historical chronicles, as well as data drawn from material culture to display how sartorial style mediated a range of social distinctions. In what follows, I examine a series of specific sartorial styles, some in more depth than others, in order to piece together a multicolored patchwork of early Muslim distinctions.

Table 5.1 –Pact of ʿUmar: Sartorial Regulations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Prohibition</th>
<th>Regulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dress/Fashion</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We shall clip the forelocks of our heads</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We shall not attempt to resemble (tashabbuh) Muslims in any way with regard to their dress, as for example, with the qalansuwa, the turban, footwear, or parting the hair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We shall dress in our traditional fashion wherever we may be and we shall bind the zunnār around our waists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We shall not ride on saddles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We shall not wear swords or bear weapons of any kind, or even carry them on our person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hairstyle

Hairstyle is among the most easily imitable and transmittable styles. Hair’s proximity to the primary locus of an individual’s identity, his physiognomy, facilitates its social function as an almost universal marker of belonging and collective identity. The Arabic word, *shaʿr*, means hair, referring to any hair on the body from head to toe. When viewed within the greater semantic field of its trilateral root, *sh-ʿ-r*, from which the words for senses (*mashāʿr*) and symbol (*shiʿār*) are derived, *shaʿr* suggests the overdetermined capacity for hair to become entangled in a web of sensational and symbolic values. The preponderance of hair-related topics such as beard and moustache length, hair dye, and hair style in the *tashabbuh* discourse confirms this etymological interpretation.

The sheer diversity of possible hairdos means that collectivities can easily define new styles to visually distinguish themselves. It is therefore not surprising that two ordinances in the Pact of ʿUmar pertain to hair: the first ordinance requires that non-Muslims must cut their forelocks, and the second requires that they not part their hair. Hadith traditions also address both issues. As I discussed earlier, the Prophet is said to have first let his hair hang down without a parting in order to imitate Arab Jewish and Christian fashion and be different from Arab pagans who parted their hair. He then reversed course, and decided to part his hair instead. The Pact of ʿUmar completes this narrative circle by decreeing that Damascene Christians not part their hair so that they remain distinct from Muslims, who had appropriated the Arab pagan fashion of parting the hair in order to visibly set themselves apart from their Arab Jewish and Christian rivals. Parting the hair down the middle had become a Muslim style.
This “minor difference” in hairstyle indicates the gradual increase in Muslim anxieties over Jewish and Christian influence. Eventually, Arab pagans became an afterthought. Muslims were religiously nearer to Jews and Christians – People of the Book – than to pagans. Yet, they became more concerned with differentiating themselves through hairstyle from Christians and Jews than from pagans. It matters little whether this narrative corresponds to historical reality.\textsuperscript{15} This narrative enacts Freud’s theory of the Narcissism of Minor differences, where individual and collectivities differ in minor ways (like hairstyle) from those who are most similar to them. It shows how rivalries are constructed through both similarities and differences in key areas. This change in hairstyle also illustrates a truth about imitating fashion: that fashion can easily be imitated, transmitted, and appropriated. In this narrative circle, Muslims first let their hair down like Arab Jews and Christians, then appropriated Arab pagan fashion and parted their hair. Finally, after gaining political power, Muslims kept this style for themselves and forbade Damascene Christians from parting their hair. This new Muslim style of parting the hair also corresponded to the fashion of Persian nobles who also grew out and parted their hair.\textsuperscript{16} Early Muslim efforts to secure this style suggest that parting the hair carried a wider cultural association with prestige and nobility in the Late Antique Near East.

The clipped forelock became such a widespread marker of non-Muslims (\textit{dhimmī}) that it even became a metonymic label for them. Muslims might refer to a \textit{dhimmī} as

\textsuperscript{15}It is difficult to determine to what extent Muslims actually regulated the hairstyles of their new Christian subjects. Late Antique Byzantine coinage depicts figures, whether Jesus or an emperor, with multiple hairstyles, suggesting that Christian norms shifted. See Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, “The Quran in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Quranic Milieu” (Leiden; Boston, 2010), 176.

muqasṣay, one whose forelock has been clipped.¹⁷ An anecdote from the early eighth century reign of the Umayyad caliph, ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (ʿUmar II, r. 717 - 720) illustrates the significance of this style. According to one widely transmitted anecdote, a group of Christian Arabs from Najrān appeared with their hair parted down the middle, while adorned with turbans and the Persian robe (qabāʾ).¹⁸ ʿUmar II immediately ordered that their forelocks be clipped and turbans removed. This anecdote suggests that the clipped forelock was a key way of distinguishing Muslims from Christians, and Arab Muslims from Arab Christians, especially. Arab Christians who dressed and spoke Arabic like Arab-Muslims could easily pass for them. It appears that ʿUmar II realized this danger, which explains his alarmist response. More generally, this anecdote indicates how dress not only reveals identity, but conceals it as well. Dress has the capacity to deceive. This recognition is important because it suggests that, contrary to some scholarly conclusions, dress codes could have served the purpose of making the early caliphates more secure. Security was a very high, if not the highest priority for the still nascent and vulnerable Muslim polity. Enforced dress codes advanced this objective by visibly making clear who was Muslim and who was not. It helped limit the possibility of “foreign” spies meddling with affairs of the state, and non-Muslims posing as Muslim soldiers.¹⁹ Making clear religious distinctions through marks such as the clipped forelock also advanced the economic objectives of the state by ensuring proper tax collection.

Under most surrender agreements, Jews and Christians paid a poll tax to the Muslim

¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of this anecdote along with references to a wide range of early sources, see Ibid., 88-96.
polity in exchange for protection. Collecting these taxes, however, depended upon first being able to distinguish Muslim from non-Muslim. The clipped forelock (and other sartorial distinctions) facilitated two key objectives of the state: security and tax revenue. Sartorial regulations enforced more than just social status. Dress at once mediated political security, economic wealth, religious distinction and aesthetic beauty.

**Long and Unkempt Hair in Andalusia**

Let us fast forward to eleventh century Andalusia for another hair-related dilemma. The *Mālikī* jurist and hadith scholar, Yūsuf b. ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 1071), was especially anxious about the prevalence of long and unkempt hair among eleventh century Andalusian men. In one of his commentaries of Mālik’s famous collection of traditions, *The Well-Trodden Path (al-Muwatṭa’)*, he declares that although men are obligated to cleanse and beautify themselves, they must not go so far as to imitate women, or else incur the curse of God. He then complains that men in Andalusia no longer shave their heads, but grow their hair long. The only exceptions to this new fashion trend are members of the military and pious folk who continue to adhere to the old ways of cutting their hair short.

---

20 Levy-Rubin, for example, tends to reduce the significance of sartorial regulations of the Pact of ʿUmar to a matter of social status and hierarchy, while marginalizing the role of aesthetics, politics and economics.

21 Yūsuf ʿAbd al-Barr was born in Cordoba and lived in Andalusia for his entire life. Although he flirted with the Literalist (*Ẓāhirī*) legal school of his brilliant friend, Ibn Ḥazm, he eventually committed himself to the *Mālikī* legal school, which dominated North Africa and Spain. He expended great effort commenting upon the school founder’s foundational text, the Muwaṭṭa’. His *Al-Tamhīd limā fī al-Muwatṭa’ min al-Maʿānī wa al-Asānīd* (“The Facilitation to the Meanings and Chains of Transmission Found in Mālik's *Muwaṭṭa’*”) follows the conventions of hadith commentaries. He penned another commentary on the Muwaṭṭa’, which follows the conventional organization of a legal treatise, *Al-Istidhkār li-Madhhab ‘Ulamāʾ al-Amṣār fi-mā Tadammanahu al-Muwatṭa’ min Maʿānī al-Raʾi wa al-Āthār* (“The Memorization of the Doctrine of the Scholars of the World Concerning the Juridical Opinions and the Narrations Found in Mālik's *Muwaṭṭa’*”). His commentary on long hair is taken from the first treatise, *Al-Tamhīd*. For additional information on his biography, see Charlie Pellat ‘Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition.

According to Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, long hair had become a sign of the weak-minded and foolish (ṣufahāʾ). Yet, these aesthetic choices were not merely issues of fashion and style. For Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, they had cosmic repercussions:

> It has been related from the Prophet that he said: ‘Whoever imitates a people is one of them’ or, in other words, he is gathered along with them [on the Day of Judgment]. Therefore, it is said [that the hadith refers to] whoever imitates them in their actions. It is [also] said [that the hadith refers to] whoever imitates them in their appearance. This [gloss] should be sufficient for you [to realize] that it is a general statement about following the guidance of the righteous in any situation; even growing or shaving off one’s hair are [acts] that are not excluded [from consideration] on the Day of Judgment.

This might very well be the earliest written gloss of the well-known imitation hadith that has survived. According to Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, to be “one of them” also means to be part of a soteriological community whose fate will be determined on the Day of Judgment.

An individual then joins one of two communities: the saved or the damned. One’s social belonging in the earthly realm is therefore mimetically reproduced in the heavenly realm. While collapsing the distinction between heaven and earth, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr also collapses the distinction between social practice and aesthetic style. For Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, the field of social belonging includes all human experience. Aesthetic style defines social belonging as much as social practices do, and should not be belittled as superficial or insignificant. Copying the hairstyle of the righteous is therefore a meaningful act with soteriological repercussions.

Yet, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr hedges on this bold religious emphasis on aesthetic practice. In the same section, he writes:

---

23 Ibid., 6:80.
24 Ibid.
Ultimately, however, divine recompense depends upon intentions and deeds. Perhaps a person whose head is shaved is better than a person with long hair or perhaps a person with long hair is a pious individual.\textsuperscript{25} Ultimately, for Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, one’s hairstyle is irrelevant. What matters most to a believer’s piety are his intentions and deeds. He recognizes that substance and form, piety and appearance do not necessarily correspond to one another. The relationship between piety and appearance may be ruptured or inverted. Despite his personal aversion to long hair, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr is thus forced to concede that a long-haired believer may sometimes be better regarded in the eyes of God than a short haired one.

**Beards**

Facial hair also became entangled in a variety of different and sometimes conflicting meanings. Beards were not merely an issue of style and fashion but a marker whose meanings spread across a range of fields. A full beard becomes a thick and bushy surface that stands in for the already overdetermined face. While the beard became a key religious marker of the Muslim male, enshrined as part of the *sunna* of the Prophet, its meanings spread across the fields of ethnicity, politics, gender, and beauty.\textsuperscript{26} It carried with it manifold opportunities for distinction.\textsuperscript{27} In the Near East, Muslim men, of course, were not the only members of religious communities to grow out their beards.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} In contemporary Europe and North America, a long dark beard stands out as the quintessential visible marker of a Muslim male. Perhaps the most famous of these Muslim beards is Osama Bin Laden’s. The color of his beard became a source of controversy after it was apparently dyed black in later videos. As the face of terrorism, Bin Laden’s beard symbolized danger for Americans. See Karen Culcasi and Mahmut Gokmen, ”The Face of Danger: Beards in the U.S. Media's Representations of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners,” *Aether: The Journal of Media Geography*, no. Summer (2011).
\textsuperscript{27} See for example, Carol Delaney, ”Untangling the Meanings of Hair in Turkish Society,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (1994).
Jewish males have a long tradition of growing the beard. Byzantine representations of Jesus after Justinian also depicted him with a beard.

**Coloring Beards**

Dying the beard was a controversial issue among early Muslims. There are many conflicting hadith traditions about this topic. G.H.A. Juynboll has surmised that this issue became important because Muslims appropriated *henna*, a specific dyeing agent, from the customs of the conquered territories. This reason, however, fails to address the greater social meanings and symbolism of coloring beards, which I attempt here. Deploying the language of *tashabbuh*, many of these traditions take the form of an imperative command and exhort Muslims to not imitate/be different from Jews and Christians:

Change (dye) your grey hair and do not imitate (*lā tashabbahū*) the Jews and Christians.

The Jews and Christians do not dye (their hair/beards) so be different from them (*khālifūhum*).

These traditions associate the refusal to dye the beard with both Jews and Christians generally, and emphatically exhort Muslims to do the opposite: to dye their beards.

Muslim beards became figuratively “colored” by a logic of difference. Juynboll argues

---

29 Ibid.: 55.
that Iraq, Syria, and the Hijaz produced an abundance of these traditions about hair dye, suggesting that dyeing the beard became important in most geographical centers of the early Muslim polity.

However, Juynboll notes that despite the clarity of these traditions, early Muslims remained ambivalent about dyeing on multiple fronts. First, it was not clear whether the Prophet Muhammad himself dyed his beard. Muslims also disagreed over both the appropriate color and substance with which to dye the beard. Black dye in particular was controversial: “The Prophet saw a man with black hair whom he had seen the day before with white hair. He asked, ‘Who are you?’ He replied, ‘I am so and so.’ He said: ‘No you are Satan.'” The Prophet’s severe reaction indicates how early Muslims associated the falsification of bodily form – even facial hair – with the diabolic.

These disagreements anticipate the ways in which dying the beard became a way of distinguishing Muslims from each another. In the eighth and ninth centuries, it was common for effeminate men and hermaphrodites (mukhannathūn) to habitually dye their hair.

---

32 This ambiguity surfaces because of the presence of traditions that record the number of grey hairs on the Prophet’s beard, which would not have been possible had he dyed it, and the absence of authentic hadith that describe the Prophet dyeing his hair. If the Prophet has not dyed his hair, how could dying the hair carry positive value, let alone be obligatory? Even the Companions of the Prophet disputed this fact, such as Anas b. Mālik who was asked whether the Prophet used a hair dye or not. Anas replied, "The Prophet did not have enough grey hair to dye..." In another instance, he replied, "The Prophet only had a few grey hairs." See Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-libās, bāb mā yudhkarū fī al-shayb.

33 Saffron was a popular dye that issued forth a yellow color. The hues of other dyes ranged from yellow and orange to fiery red. Soldiers often made use of these dyes to signal their identity.

34 Twelver Shi‘is agreed with Sunnis about the virtue of dying hair with the exception of black dye. Muslims did, however, permit soldiers to dye their hair black, while others dissented, such as the eleventh century Baghdadi Hanballi jurist and reformer, Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1200), who considered such traditions forged.


hair. This observation helps contextualize the condemnation offered by the tenth century Baghdadi Sufi and Ḥanbalī jurist, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996), who stated that those who dyed their beards red and yellow for purposes of eccentricity were committing a reprehensible religious innovation. His condemnation also suggests that non-pious folk were appropriating this colorful marker, threatening to recast its pious signification. According to Makkī, those who colored their hair white to emulate elders and gain social status were also committing a sin, as were those who did the opposite, and plucked out their white hairs in order to look forever young. For Makkī, pious intention (bāṭin) and aesthetic form (ẓāhir) needed to cohere in a specific way to have positive religious value. Juynboll has also observed that dyeing was a symbol of hadith scholars’ political and ideological affiliations. The ninth century biographical work by Ibn Saʿd (d. 844-45) is also rife with reference to the beard color of different early Muslim figures. The caliphs, Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, were said to have dyed their beard while ʿAlī did not. Individual Muslims therefore cultivated their own opinions on this issue. More generally, this divergence suggests that the meanings of the beard were varied and many, shifting, as did its visual style, according to context. The meanings of visual signs like the beard remained vulnerable to imitation, appropriation, and resignification by different groups.

Growing Beards

The logic of distinction not only colored the Muslim beard, but shaped it as well. Length was another key attribute of Muslim beards. However, while the key objective of coloring the beard was to visibly distinguish Muslims from Jews and Christians, the primary objective of growing the beard was to oppose the Zoroastrians/Persians.

Traditions abound that attribute the shaving of beards to pagans and Magians:

- Cut the moustaches and grow your beards. Be different from the Magians (khālifū al-majūs).\(^{41}\)

- Be different from the pagans (khālifū al-mushrikīn); trim your moustaches and grow out your beards.\(^{42}\)

Muslim commentators identified the pagans mentioned in these hadith traditions as Persian Zoroastrians, whom Muslims also referred to as Magians, the priestly class. This interpretation is strengthened by the following tradition that explicitly attributes the practice of growing the moustache and cutting off the beard to Persians:

Abū Hurayra reported that the ruler of Yemen, appointed by the Persian emperor Kisrā, sent two envoys to the Messenger. They entered upon him clean-shaven except for their moustaches, which they had grown out. Disliking their appearance, he [the Prophet] turned his face away and said, “Woe be to you, who told you to do this [shave off their facial hair except for the moustache]?” They replied: “Our lord [Kisrā] did!” The Messenger responded: “But my Lord commanded me to grow my beard and trim my moustache.”\(^{43}\)

\(^{41}\) Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-ṭahāra, bāb khiṣāl al-fiṭra

\(^{42}\) Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-libās, bāb taqlīm al-aẓfār; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-ṭahāra, bāb khiṣāl al-fiṭra

This tradition suggests that Muslim motivations to grow out their beards were partly determined by ethnic considerations. The Prophet’s command to grow out the beard is nothing less than an assertion of Arab identity through the rejection of Persian aesthetic and cultural norms. It is also an apparent rejection of the Persian courtly practice of shaving off facial hair and growing the moustache. Of course, lurking behind these assertions of ethnic and class distinction, is an assertion of Muslim religious distinction. This tradition marks another instance of how religious, class, and ethnic identity became entangled in early Muslim history.

And so it appears that after the conquests, Muslims became occupied not only with distinguishing themselves from Persian Zoroastrians, but also with redefining their imperial aesthetics. These traditions illustrate how early Muslims tried to assert their distinction in the face of all sorts of potential rivals who claimed distinctive styles of grooming their facial hair. The rhetorical objective of these traditions - like most of the tashabbuh traditions - is to attribute an undesirable practice to some stigmatized group in order to exhort Muslims to do otherwise. Partially through such exhortations, long beards became a key marker of Muslim belonging. However, whereas it was unclear whether or not the Prophet dyed his hair, numerous traditions claimed that the Prophet had a “copious beard” (kāna kaththa al-liḥya), as did the four caliphs who succeeded him: Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, ʿUthmān, and ʿAlī.44 ʿAlī’s beard was reportedly so large that it spanned the distance between his two shoulders (malaʿat mā fī bayna al-mankabayn), and Prophet Aaron’s beard was so large that it reached down to his chest.45 This Muslim obsession with beard size resulted in the circulation of what Makkī calls “a strange

45 Ibid.

298
interpretation” of the Quranic verse, “He increases his creation in whatever way he pleases (yazīdu fī al-khalq mā yashā”).46 According to Makkī, some Muslims creatively interpreted this verse to mean that God increases the size of a beard in whatever way He pleases.47 Other hadith traditions state that growing a long beard is part of human nature (fiṭra) itself.48 Late Antique Christians such as the theologian, Augustine, praised the masculine virility of beards: "The beard signifies strong men; the beard signifies young, vigorous, active, quick men. When we therefore describe such men, we say that a man is bearded."49

The beard not only mediated religiosity, but was also perceived as a sign of beauty. The Prophet’s beloved wife, Ṭāʾīsha, reportedly said, “Praise be to the one who beautified men with beards.”50 Paraphrasing Makkī, the famous medieval jurist-mystic, Ghazālī opined that “Beards are the ornaments of men (zīnat al-rajul)” and “the perfection of creation (tamām al-khalq).” He adds, “By means of it, men are

46 Quran 35:1. The immediate context of the verse refers to the varying number of wings with which God creates the angels.
48 The Prophet’s wife, Ṭāʾīsha, is said to have transmitted the following tradition from the Prophet: “There are ten qualities of human nature (fiṭra): trimming the mustache, growing out the beard, using a toothbrush (siwāk), inhaling water (to clean the nose) [and rinsing the mouth], clipping one’s nails, washing the finger knuckles, plucking the armpit hair, shaving the pubic hair, washing the private parts with water.” One of the transmitters (Muṣ‘ab b. Shayba) forgot the tenth quality. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-ṭahāra, bāb khiṣāl al-fiṭra
50 This hadith is also considered part of a prayer made by the angels. It is not part of the canonical hadith collections. However, it is found in the ‘Uyūn al-Akhbār of Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), a ninth century collection of sayings, anecdotes, and poetry. Interestingly, even Ibn Qutayba acknowledges its potential spuriousness by stating that "perhaps" Ṭāʾīsha said it. Abū Muhammad Ibn Qutayba al-Dinawarī, ‘Uyūn al-Akhbār, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1996). Early Muslims wished to further strengthen the beard’s social value by attributing to it an aesthetic value. Considering the likelihood that many an ungroomed beard may not have looked so appealing, periodic reassurances of a beard’s beauty may have been necessary. For a modern Salafi critique of this hadith’s authenticity see Muhammad Nāṣīr al-Dīn al-Albānī, Sīilsa al-Aḥādīth al-Ṣa‘īfa wa al-Mawdū‘a, 14 vols. (Riyadh: Maktubat al-Ma‘ārif li al-nashr wa al-tawzi‘, 2001), 13:52-53.
distinguished from women."  

Through the beard, Muslim scholars attempted to figuratively and literally shape a distinctive but universal Muslim masculine aesthetic.

The beard was a precious object whose shape, size, and color could be altered to signify different meanings. Ungroomed, the beard becomes an unwieldy tangled mass of hair, an unruly and potentially volatile signifier. Early Muslim jurists therefore attempted to shape not only its appearance, including how it should be washed, wiped, cleaned, trimmed, shaped, and colored, but also its significance and meaning as well. For later Muslim jurists, growing the beard became not merely a meritorious act (sunna), but an obligation for men who could grow one. Shaving the beard, even to trim it, was according to some schools of law, disdained.

Beards, Youth, and Religious Meritocracy

The tenth century Sufi, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, who at one point is said to have consumed only wild herbs that turned his skin into an environmentally-friendly green, offers a truly rich and often humorous commentary on beards, knowledge, and age in his celebrated work, *The Nourishment of the Hearts (Qut al-Qulūb).*  He offers a contrarian

---


52 Many modern scholars, such as the contemporary Egyptian scholar, now Qatari exile, Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, have stepped away from asserting the mandatory nature of a beard. They argue that such practices may have merely conformed to existing cultural custom only, and may not have carried any transhistorical religious rationale that would require all Muslim males to grow one. Qaradāwī writes, “Perhaps there was no need to shave, and perhaps growing the beard was a custom among them.” See Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Al-Falah Foundation, 2001), 91-93.

53 Despite traveling to Iraq where he lived the remainder of his life, Makkī retained the appellation of his birthplace, Mecca. In addition to his affiliation with the partisans of hadith, he gained a reputation as an
interpretation of the hadith: “The best of your youth imitate (yatashabbahu) your elders and the worst of your elders imitate (yatashabbahu) your youth.” This hadith urges youth to emulate their elders and urges elders to not imitate the youth; it enforces hierarchical social distinction based on age.

Makkī, however, overturns the literal meaning of the hadith. Instead of lambasting unruly youth who disregard the traditional ways of their elders, Makkī criticizes unruly elders who disregard the novel ways of their youth. According to Makkī, haughtiness and arrogance prevent elders from imitating the youth when religious piety requires otherwise. Instead of abiding by the literal interpretation of the hadith tradition, which valorizes a clearly-defined social hierarchy between old and young, Makkī seeks to subvert it. This position is quite surprising since, prior to invoking this tradition, he had extolled the virtues of long beards as a prophetic sunna.

In his social critique of stubborn elders who refuse to adapt to new ways, however, Makkī casts aspersions at overgrown beards. He quotes some pious authorities: "I read in one of the books of God, 'Let not beards deceive you, for the goat [also] has a beard.'" According to another figure: "The longer the beard grows the more the intelligence shrinks." Makkī then quotes the first Umayyad caliph Muʿāwiya: "A man's stupidity is shown by the height of his stature, the breadth of his beard, his surname, and..."
the engraving on his signet ring." This quotation shows how the body, hairstyle, lineage, and the signet ring functioned as markers of social status. In light of Makkī’s earlier support of growing the beard, it is unlikely that he was criticizing the long beard per se. Rather, he was criticizing its ostentatious use as a status symbol of age and wisdom.

Normally, religious conservatives will criticize younger generations for deviating from the time-tested ways of older generations. Makkī overturns this narrative. Instead, he claims that by ignoring the youth, the elders of today have deviated from their elders who were willing to follow their youth “with humility and lowliness, not puffed up with pride or bigotry.” As an example, he cites the caliph ʿUmar’s willingness to seek advice from the youthful cousin of the Prophet, Ibn ʿAbbās, who became distinguished through his religious knowledge at a very early age. The moral is that elders should respect the religious credentials of young people.

Having renarrated the past, Makkī then attempts to renarrate the future. Makkī depicts an apocalyptic vision that turns the past (and the hadith tradition) upside down: in the beginning of Islamic history, youth learned from their elders; in the end times, however, elders will learn from their youth. Makkī argues that this future reversal of social norms does not oge evil, but forecasts the positive distinction of the Muslim community from other religious communities. In Makkī’s creative reinterpretation of events, this scenario signifies that God has generously diffused religious knowledge from a small number of elites to the Muslim masses, the youth, especially. By attempting to

---

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.: 106.
eviscerate social distinctions between young and old, Makkī simultaneously invigorates religious distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim.

To support his contrarian outlook with textual evidence, he quotes the egalitarian hadith of the prophet: "My people are like the rain. One does not know whether its beginning or end is better." To restate, history has not yet decided who is better: the first Muslims or the last Muslims. This potentially progressive attitude toward history marks a blatant contrast to prevailing wisdom that privileges the first generations of Muslims above later ones. Makkī adds a Christian-friendly hadith tradition to strengthen his case against blind traditionalism: "How will a people perish of whom I (Muhammad) am at the beginning and the Messiah Son of Mary is at the end?" Here, Makkī evokes Islamic theological narratives of the end times when Jesus will return to earth and live out the rest of his days. At once, this tradition bestows equal religious value to Muhammad and Jesus as well as to the beginning and end of Islamic time.

Makkī continues his social critique of elders by reversing other stereotypical representations of Islam. Earlier in his treatise, Makkī had condemned the use of hair dye to look deceptively younger or older than one’s true age. He condemned the use of black dye in particular - the only color of dye not religiously commendable. However, Makkī reverses course and undermines this widespread and well-entrenched Muslim perception about using black dye by citing an exception - a soldier in combat who dyes his hair black in order to appear young and vigorous so that he can instill fear in his enemy. He deploys this extreme case to show that even using black dye, which the Prophet had roundly condemned, could become a virtuous act if done for the noble

59 Ibid.: 109. It can also be found in al-Quḍāʿī, Musnad al-Shihāb, 2:276. I have altered the translation of this hadith.
objective of appearing young. Once again, Makkī overturns received wisdom by infusing youthfulness with a positive social and religious value.

Makkī then sums up his egalitarian objective of flattening hierarchical distinctions between young and old by appealing to the importance of intention:

If anyone does something with sincere and worthy intention by which he desires to honor God, and if he is knowledgeable in a school of thought (madḥhab) to which [he professes] to hold, he is superior in his knowledge and in his action.61

In other words, it does not matter whether one is young or old as long as one’s intention is pure. Intention, not age should be the primary criterion for determining piety and status. Makkī’s religiously egalitarian spirit subverts social and religious hierarchies based on age. Sometimes, it is incumbent upon elders to imitate the youth, despite what the hadith tradition says. Makkī’s ultimate emphasis on right intention echoes the Andalusian Yūsuf b. ʿAbd al-Barr’s egalitarian twist on long hair. Jurists and Sufis often shared an egalitarian religious outlook even if their emphases diverged.

Turbans and Hats

Like hair, hats complemented an individual’s physiognomy and became a key marker of early Muslim distinction. Covering the head had become common in the Near East prior to Islam. Jews covered their heads during prayer out of humility. Pre-Islamic Arabs wore turbans, in part to shield their heads from the desert sun. Sasanian elites wore a hat called a qalansuwa, the value of which increased according to one’s degree of nobility.62 Both the Prophet and the third caliph ʿUthmān are said to have worn qalansuwas, the

61 Ibid.: 110.
62 Levy-Rubin, Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence, 147.
latter to honor the first night after wedding one of his wives. The tall qalansuwa associated with Sasanian court ceremonials, however, appears to have entered Muslim courtly ritual later, during the Umayyad period. The caliph and others of noble rank wore it. The Abbasid litterateur, Jāḥiẓ (d. 868-9), or pseudo-Jāḥiz, claims that fashions adopted by the Sasanian king such as the tall qalansuwa would not have been adopted by Muslims prior to Umayyad usage. It is noteworthy that the Pact of ʿUmar only mentions the regular-sized qalansuwa, not the tall qalansuwa. Ultimately, Muslims recognized the prestige associated with both styles of the qalansuwa, and incorporated this style into their own fashion norms. The Pact of ʿUmar suggests that Muslims preferred to reserve this fashionable headgear exclusively for themselves, and desired to deny non-Muslims the prestige of wearing such items.

The Pact of ʿUmar also denied non-Muslims the prestige of wearing the turban. Many traditions required that a turban not be worn without a cap underneath so that the crown of a person’s head is not exposed like the capless turbans worn by Zoroastrians. From this “minor difference” we learn that the turban was not just an Arab style, but an Iranian style as well. The ancient historian, Herodotus, even claimed that the Persians had weak skulls! Why? Because they wore turbans, as illustrated by archaeological evidence from the Achaemenid period. However, the Prophet associated the turban with both Arab and Muslim sartorial distinction. He is reported to have declared:

---

64 See Ibid., 29-34.
65 Ibid., 30.
“Turbans are the crowns of the Arabs” and “The difference between us (Muslims) and the pagans is the turbans wrapped around the qalansuwas.” Muslims eventually associated the turban with the normative practice (sunna) of the Prophet Muhammad himself. What had once been an Arab norm thus became a marker of Muslim distinction. Headgear magnified the distinction between Muslim conquerors and their non-Muslim subjects. Denying non-Muslims the privilege of wearing both the qalansuwa and turban not only intended to create religious distinctions, but also to enforce hierarchical class distinctions.

Like the qalansuwa, turbans distinguished different strata of Muslims from one another. The early Muslim biographer Ibn Saʿd records an anecdote where ʿIkrima (d. 723), the famous mawlā (client) of Ibn ʿAbbās, wore a tattered turban, but refused the offer of a new one from a commoner because, in his words, “We only accept (things) from elites (al-umarāʾ).

His interlocutor responds by quoting the Quranic verse, “Indeed, man will be a clear witness against himself” to emphasize the egalitarian significance of good deeds as the great social equalizer. On hearing this response, ʿIkrima went silent. ʿIkrima, despite his status as a client, assumed that he was among the elite given his association with the distinguished Companion Ibn ʿAbbās. However, ʿIkrima’s initial response suggests that social status was not purely a material matter, but also resulted from mediating practices of gifting and exchange. An object’s value usually derived partly from its social association. This incident suggests that during the first century of Islamic history the turban became a sign of social distinction among elite Muslims. These social distinctions became more pronounced in later Muslim history.

68 Ibid., 7:286.
when caliphs wore especially large turbans, and members of different professional guilds and mystical groups wore turbans that were unique to their social group. While Muslim women also wore turban-like dress, Muslim exegetes of the Quran even listed the turban, along with the beard, among the factors that made men inherently better than women. As we shall see below, Ibn Taymiyya even penned a fatwa trying to stop women from wearing the turban.

Color was another key mode of distinction for those who wore the turban. The spectrum of turban colors encoded a spectrum of social meanings. At the sacred geographical location of Ghadīr Khumm, the Prophet is said to have placed a black turban upon the head of ʿAlī, which Shiʿī Muslims subsequently would recognize as a symbolic gesture of the Prophet’s designation of ʿAlī as his rightful successor. Black turbans and the color black in general also became a visible symbol of the Abbasid caliphate, which traced its political legitimacy to the family of the Prophet. They imposed black turbans upon ʿAlī’s sympathizers known as ʿAlids in order to visibly signal their political loyalty to the caliphate.

This fixation on color extended to non-Muslim turbans as well. Despite the Pact of ʿUmar’s prohibition, the fashion of wearing turbans became common among non-Muslim populations living in Muslim lands. In the ninth century, the caliph Mutawakkil (r. 847 – 861) forced them to wear honey-colored turbans to distinguish Jews and

---

69 Karen Bauer, ”Room for Interpretation: Qurʾānic Exegesis and Gender” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2008), 143-49.
Christians from Muslims rather than ban them from wearing turbans outright.⁷¹

Apparently, during this period, blue and black turbans were reserved for Muslims only.⁷² This marked one of several ordinances legislated by Mutawakkil reminiscent of the Pact of ʿUmar. Later caliphs color-coded non-Muslims with a different aesthetic. Rivaling the Abbasid caliphate, the Fatimid caliph, Ḥākim (r. 996 – 1020) forced Jews and Christians in North Africa to wear black turbans.⁷³ His decree transformed the color black from a positive symbol of Abbasid power into a negative symbol of non-Muslim subjection under the Fatimids. The Mamluks, who had the most colorful imagination, made Jews wear yellow turbans, Christians blue, and Samaritans red.⁷⁴ The Ottomans, in turn, made Jews wear black hats and Christians wear red hats; turbans were reserved for Muslims only.⁷⁵

At the fateful battle of Badr, even the angels were said to have worn white, yellow, green and red turbans to distinguish themselves.⁷⁶ Some hadith reports stigmatize Muslim males who wear yellow or red, even though the Prophet was reported to have owned a yellow standard.⁷⁷ Many religious authorities considered yellow a feminine color that also carried a negative stigma because of its associations with dishonorable professions such as singers and servants.

---


⁷² Levy-Rubin, Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence, 106.


⁷⁴ Ibid., 121.

⁷⁵ “Turban,” Encyclopaedia of Islam, first edition. Different narrations describe the angels wearing turbans of different colors.


⁷⁷ See for example the section on “The Prohibition of a Man Wearing a Yellow Garment” in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-libās wa al-zīna, bāb al-nahiʾ an al-rajd al-thawb al-muʾaṣfar
Ibn Taymiyya’s Fatwa against Cross-Dressing

In his collection of Egyptian fatwas, Ibn Taymiyya decries what had become a customary practice among women – winding large turbans upon their heads. He writes, “The turbans that these women wear are without doubt forbidden; they resemble the humps of the Bactrian camel (\textit{asnimat al-bukht}).” He lifts this last derogatory analogy from a hadith tradition in which Muhammad criticizes the head-covering worn by some disreputable women as the humps of the Bactrian camel. Corroborating this perspective, Ibn Qudāma (d. 1223), the itinerant Ḥanbalī Jurist who fought alongside Saladin, argued that although a man is permitted to wipe over his turban during ablution, a woman cannot. Why? Because she should not be wearing a turban in the first place; a turban was part of a man’s attire, not a woman’s. The opinions of the two aforementioned Ḥanbalī jurists identify the turban as a marker of sexual difference.

Ibn Taymiyya’s anxiety over women donning the turban signals his concern with the potential of women to rival the authority of men. He cites the famous tradition where the Prophet said: “The most severe trial (\textit{fitna}) I have left behind me for the men of my community is [the trial of] women”.

---


temptresses who consciously or unconsciously provoke the otherwise tamed desire of men. Ibn Taymiyya then links the danger of sexual disorder to the domain of imperial politics. He alerts his readers to the potential consequences of women assuming political power: “It is submission to women that brings corruption to kingship and empire.” Ibn Taymiyya then cites the Prophet who himself is said to have been reciting the verse of an Arab poet, “Women are the worst of conquerors.” These narrations all suggest that women are primarily emotional and irrational, functioning to unsettle and disrupt the natural order of things. For Ibn Taymiyya, female-inspired disorder threatens to unravel the Muslim empire.

Ibn Taymiyya leverages these negative stereotypes of women in order to amplify the negative stereotypes he attributes to non-Muslims. In Ibn Taymiyya’s time, not only were women attempting to resemble men by wearing turbans, but non-Muslim elites also attempted to flout the laws of distinction that mandated that only Muslims wear white turbans. Ibn Taymiyya spoke out against dispensations that permitted non-Muslim elites to wear white turbans and resemble Muslim dress. The turban enforced both gender and religious distinction at once. For Ibn Taymiyya, the white turban was the sole preserve of Muslims males. The multiple layers of the turban therefore signify its capacity to signal multiple social distinctions simultaneously. It bound gender and religious distinction into a single piece of clothing.

---

Popular Religion, 220. See also Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, kitāb al-nikāḥ, bāb mā yuttaqa min shu’m al-mar’ā; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-dhikr wa al-du’āʾī wa al-tawba wa al-istighfār, bāb akthar ahl al-janna al-fuqarāʾ wa akthar ahl al-nār al-nisāʾ.


Shoes

Shoes marked collective identity and status much as they do today. Muslims wanted to distinguish both the topmost and lowermost parts of the body. Shoes can function as a metonym for the whole individual, as suggested by the common phrase, “Put yourself in his shoes.” In the pre-modern Islamic context, shoes also carried religious significance. Early Muslims had anxieties about ensuring that their shoes, and the ritual practices associated with them, were different from those of other religious groups, especially the Jews. The Prophet ordered Muslims: “Pray in your shoes, and do not imitate (lā tashabbahū) the Jews!” Despite Moses’ precedent of taking off his shoes upon entering holy space, the Prophet urged Muslims to remain shod during ritual prayer in the mosque in order to distinguish Muslim from Jewish ritual practice. As we will see in the following chapter, the gesture of wiping over footgear during ritual ablution marked intra-Muslim religious distinction, shaping relations between Sunnī and Shiʿī Muslims. The Pact of ʿUmar, however, expands the social significance of footgear beyond ritual to include all public spaces at all times. Non-Muslim shoes should be distinguished from those of Muslims. This ordinance illustrates that shoes carried social meaning beyond ritual. Even the caliph distinguished himself from his subjects by wearing red shoes, a style that he shared with Iranian royalty.

---

86 Ironically, this commandment became obsolete with the building of ornate mosques and the practical need to keep the prayer area clean.
87 Levy-Rubin, Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence, 148.
The Zunnār Belt

Prior to the rise of Islam, Byzantine officials and Christian Monks wore belts that functioned as markers of social distinction. In the Pact of ʿUmar, the Christians declare, “We shall bind the zunnār around our waists.” This statement follows the declaration that “We shall dress in our traditional fashion.”88 When viewed in light of the historical context of Late Antiquity, this statement suggests not only that the zunnār was indigenous to native Christian customs, but also that it was the most significant emblem of their native style.89 When Justinian prohibited non-Christians from public service he prohibited them from wearing the special belt as well.90 Even Jews and Zoroastrians living under Sasanian rule wore belts, each with their own unique religious significance.91 In Islamicate civilization, the zunnār diffused throughout the society and gained normative status as the pre-eminent marker of non-Muslim (dhimmī) religious identity. It even became part of Muslim theology. Muslim theologians declared that wearing the zunnār was equivalent to an act of apostasy, a public and visible “sign (alāma)” that indicates a voluntary rejection (takdhīb) of the Prophet’s message.92

This social and religious significance of wearing the zunnār is poetically expressed in the following anecdote of the early Iranian Sufi, Bayazid Bistami (d. 874).

88 See Table 6.1 above.
89 Levy-Rubin, Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence, 154. Also see fn. 290.
90 Ibid., 156-57.
91 Ibid., 154-55.
92 Aḍud al-Dīn al-iḥā, Kitāb al-Mawāqif, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-jīl, 1997). Al-iḥā (d. 1355) rejects the notion that the wearing zunnār and similar sartorial practices does not indicate apostasy if the individual affirms his belief in Islam in general. For al-iḥā, wearing the zunnār signaled voluntary rejection of Islam. Also see: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Al-Maḥṣūl, ed. Taha Jābir al-Alwānī, 6 vols. (Beirut: Muʿassasa al-risāla, 1418/1997), 4:38. In al-Maḥṣūl, a multivolume treatise on legal theory, Al-Rāzī (d. 1209), the Persian Shāfiʿī jurist, philosopher and “Asharī theologian, mobilizes the example of the zunnār to argue for the legal force of community consensus (ijmaʿ).
Bistami is said to have ecstatically declared, “Glory be to Me, how great is My dignity.” At face value, Bistami is equating himself to God. Associating partners with God (shirk) is the most grievous sin in Islam. However on the day of his death, he is said to have recanted this statement, stating, “God, if I said one day, ‘Glory be to Me, how great is My dignity,’ then today I am only a Magian infidel. (Now) I cut the zunnār, and I say: ‘I testify that there is no god but God, and I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.’” Here the metaphor of cutting the zunnār indicates his repudiation of (Magian) infidelity and affirmation of divine unicity.

The Pact of ʿUmar, then, reflects the moment when Muslims deployed imperial power to resignify and fix the zunnār as a distinctively non-Muslim fashion. It helped set in motion a series of processes that transformed the zunnār from a social marker of nobility to one of inferiority. It is then not surprising that Muslims had developed their own unique style of belts, which they frequently gave as gifts to dignitaries. ʿUmar II even prohibited non-Muslims from wearing Muslim belts (mintaqā).94

Swords and Bows

Swords and bows were not merely weapons of war and empire but also markers of social distinction.95 Like dress, they carried social and aesthetic meaning that conferred prestige upon their bearers. The Pact of ʿUmar decrees that the conquered non-Muslims shall not carry swords. To strip non-Muslims of the right to bear arms not only represented a security measure but also an affirmation of their subjected status under Muslim rule.

94 Levy-Rubin, Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence, 148, 57.
95 Levy-Rubin makes a compelling case for arguing that the ordinance prohibiting swords or weapons inflects social status as well as security concerns. See Ibid., 152.
Iranian nobles wore belts with daggers as marks of social distinction. A Companion tradition alludes to a widespread custom among unspecified conquerors who decorate their swords: “Some people conquered many countries and their swords were decorated neither with gold nor silver, but were decorated with leather, lead, and iron.”  Whether this tradition is referring to the Sasanian Empire is uncertain; it demonstrates, however, that a sword signaled its bearer’s sartorial style and social status in the Late Antique Near East. Muslims had gone so far as to adorn swords (and combat) with sacred status. “Paradise lay under the shade of swords” proclaimed the Prophet. ʿAlī, who was memorialized by posterity as a fierce warrior, possessed dhuʾl-ﬁqār, the legendary sword that he received from the Prophet Muhammad who received it from none other than the Angel Gabriel during the fateful Battle of Badr.

In addition to his nine swords, the Prophet is said to have owned six bows. The pragmatic medieval Shāfiʿī jurist, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d. 1058), provides a very illuminating discussion about the early controversy surrounding Persian bows. The Persian bow attracted Greek fascination as far back as the fifth century B.C. According

---

96 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-jihād wa al-siyar, bāb hilya al-suyūf
97 See for example: Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-jihād wa al-siyar, bāb al-janna taḥta ẓill al-suyūf; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-imāra, bāb thubūr al-janna li al-shahīd. Ironically, in another context, the Prophet makes this statement after advising his audience not to hope to meet the enemy. See Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-jihād wa al-siyar, bāb lā tamannaw liqāʾ al-ʿadū
98 Even the genealogy ascribed to dhuʾl-ﬁqār is sacred. The sword has become a metonym for the charismatic persona of ʿAlī himself, exemplified by the following testimony that evokes the Islamic testimony of faith: “There is no hero except ʿAlī, there is no sword except dhuʾl-ﬁqār” (lā fata illā ʿAlī wa lā sayf illā dhuʾl-ﬁqār). It is also pronounced dhuʾl-ﬁqār. Faqār is the plural for vertebrae, which describes the sword’s unique toothed blade.
to the Greek historian, Herodotus, “Persians teach their sons three things only: to ride a
horse, to use the bow, and to speak the truth.”

The famed Battle of Marathon was
framed as a battle between Persian bows and Greek spears, the Greek tragedian,
Aeschylus, wanted to see, “whether the draw of the bow is victorious or the iron-headed
spear.” The materialization of this civilizational rivalry into bows and spears suggests
that weapons functioned as important distinguish markers of a nation. Māwardī
recognized the cultural specificity of weaponry when he wrote, “The types of bows differ
in accordance with the differences in the types of people.”

Yet, nearly four centuries after the collapse of the Sasanian Empire, why would
Muslims still be concerned about using Persian bows? Persian civilization had
essentially been absorbed and appropriated by Muslim civilization. However, as
discussed in chapter one, many Muslims were concerned about the enduring prestige of
Persian cultural traditions and the threat that it posed to Arab-Islamic norms. What the
historian of Islam, Marshall Hodgson, has termed “Persianate”, denotes that realm of
Muslim geography where Persian language and cultural norms prevailed. Māwardī
therefore devotes more energy than expected to the problem of the Persian bow.

Drawing upon his knowledge of “Firsts (Awā’il)”, a genre of Muslim literature that
recorded the pioneers of various fields, Māwardī informs the reader that the Prophet
Abraham invented the bow! Despite Abrahamic approval, the Prophet Muhammad did

---

102 Peter Krentz, The Battle of Marathon (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2010).
103 The Persians also used spears. The author emphasizes their difference to draw a contrast between Greek
and Persian stereotypes. See Michael M. Sage, Warfare in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook (London; New
105 Ibid.
not approve of all bows, especially the Persian bow. Māwardī records a well-known incident where the Prophet sees someone carrying the Persian bow, and declares, “Cursed is its user. You should use the Arab bow and arrow so that you will become victorious through it.”

Māwardī proposes three different interpretations of this incident before selecting his preferred opinion. In the first possible reading, the Prophet aims to preserve Arab traditions in opposition to foreign Iranian-Persian influences. In the second possible reading, the Prophet attempts to distinguish Muslims during battle in order not to resemble (yatashabbahū) the Pagan enemy and be mistakenly killed by “friendly fire.” While the first interpretation expresses a conservative reflex to preserve Arab ways, the second interpretation is a pragmatic one; the aim is simply to avoid unnecessary Muslim casualties during combat. In a third potential reading provided by Māwardī, the Prophet did not curse all warriors who used a Persian bow, but only the specific individual who killed a Muslim with a Persian bow. According to this last interpretation, an Arab bow is not inherently any better than a Persian one. Therefore, the Prophet is not attempting to distinguish the genus of Arab bows from that of Persian bows for either cultural or pragmatic reasons. The pragmatic Māwardī sides with this last interpretation, and proceeds to outline the rules for bow and arrow shooting competitions that permit the use of both Arab and Persian bows. It is worth noting that Ibn Taymiyya also legitimizes the use of the Persian bow in combat despite its foreign origins because the first generations

---

106 Ibid. Another canonical hadith condemns the Persian bow: “The Messenger of God was holding an Arab bow, and upon seeing a man holding a Persian bow, he said, "What is this? Throw it away. Keep to this and similar types, and to spears with shafts, for God will help you to support the religion through them and establish you in the land.” Sunan ibn Māja, kitāb al-jihād, bāb al-silāh
of Muslims (*salaf*) appropriated its use. The presence of conflicting hadith traditions, however, indicates that this was a disputed subject among early Muslims.

**Veiling Living and Dead Bodies**

Anas b. Mālik, a close Companion of Muhammad, narrates a cryptic anecdote about the caliph ʿUmar’s encounter with a female slave who had veiled her hair:

ʿUmar espied a slave girl who belonged to us but had veiled her hair (*mutaqanniʿa*). He struck her and told her: “Do not imitate free women (*lā tushbihī biʾl-harāʾir*)!”

Again, ʿUmar figures prominently in another case of reprehensible imitation. He witnesses a slave girl belonging to Anas who had veiled her hair. He then reprimands her for doing so by striking her and ordering her not to imitate free women. Why did ʿUmar become so angry? What drew his ire is that the slave girl was hiding much more than her hair. By posing as a free woman she was also hiding her true social, political and religious status as a slave girl. The anecdote justifies ʿUmar’s erotic exposure of her hair by revealing that he had also exposed the truth of her social status. The existence of analogous traditions in the oldest topical collections of the Yemeni, ʿAbd al-Razzāq, and the Iraqi, Ibn Abī Shayba suggests that Muslim prohibitions of slave women from veiling

---


was not an isolated incident. It might have been a policy of ʿUmar to ensure visible
distinctions between slaves and freewomen in public spaces.

In this anecdote, including its variants, ʿUmar orders the slave girl not to imitate
freewomen, employing a linguistic derivative of *tashabbuh*. By incorporating the act of
veiling into the linguistic register of *tashabbuh*, the tradition highlights the complex
aesthetic register of the veil – its relation to visible sensation, embodied practice, style
and symbolic value. The language of imitation indicates that donning the veil was an
everyday embodied performance that carried particular cultural meanings in public life.
The slave-girl was attempting to imitate freewomen by veiling.

While veiling certainly produces visible and stylistic distinctions between male
and female, this anecdote forcefully asserts the veil’s function of materializing
hierarchical social distinctions between women. In this scenario, the primary social
distinction the veil enforces is therefore not between men and women, but between
women and other women. “The veil served not merely to mark the upper classes but,
more fundamentally, to differentiate between ‘respectable’ women and those who were
publicly available.” In this specific case, the aim of maintaining visible class
distinctions between slave-girls and freewomen in public life trumps the aim of
controlling male excess sexual desire. By ordering the Prophet’s wives to sequester
themselves behind a curtain (*purda*) when non-related male visitors enter the home, the
Quran at once asserts that they were not like men and “not like other women.” And so,

---

109 Because this narration is not a hadith about or by the Prophet it does not qualify for inclusion in the later Sunnī canonical collections such as Bukhārī and Muslim.
111 The Quran rationalizes this command by stating that this practice is “purer for your hearts and for theirs (Q 33:53).” Both male visitors and the Prophet’s wives spiritually benefit from mediating their social
early Muslims recognized the veil as a sign of class and status distinction. During the formative period of Islam, only urban middle and upper class women would have donned the veil in mixed-gendered public spaces. This custom was not unique to Muslims. It was in use “among Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Assyrians, all of whom practiced veiling to some degree.” Early Muslim emphasis on the veil as a marker of female distinction from other females appears to contradict modern scholastic representations of the veil as mandatory for all women who have reached maturity.

In early Muslim history, slave-girls were treated as objects. On having received his inheritance, a Muslim man during the Abbasid period might purchase, “a house, furniture, concubines, and other objects.” And so “woman, and slave, and object for sexual use came close to being indistinguishably fused.” These attitudes became

relations through a curtain. Excluding all other women from this command suggests that the Prophet’s wives held a special social and religious status. They were given the honorific, “Mothers of the believers” as they also did not marry after the Prophet’s death. The Quran later makes this explicit by telling the Prophet’s wives: “You are not like other women (Q 33:32).” However, the Quranic command for women to “draw a veil (khimār) over their chests (Q 24: 31),” does not restrict itself to a special group of women – at least explicitly. While Muslim exegetes, early and late, interpreted this verse to mean that women should cover their hair too, the text itself does not explicitly mention the hair or face as body parts to be covered. This of course does not mean that covering the head is not implied in the verse itself. Contemporary translators of the Quran, Muhammad Asad and M. A. S. Haleem, translate khimār as head-scarf, imposing a specific interpretation of khimār, as already having been mandated to cover the hair. The more benign translation, veil, however makes no such assumption, and suggests that primary function of the khimār may only be to covering women’s chests. This of course does not conform with how later Muslim exegetes interpreted khimār, which became one of many terms synonymous with headscarf. Both Ibn Abī Shayba and ʿAbd-Razzāq classify the anecdote of ʿUmar striking the slave girl under a title the employs the term, khimār.

112 Early Muslim meanings ascribed to the veil parallel those ascribed to it by Late Antique Christians and Jews. Jewish and Christian women in Late Antiquity also wore headscarves. Jewish law mandated that Jewish women who go out unveiled are liable to be divorced without return of their dower. The New Testament encourages women to attend church with their heads covered although the enforcement of this practice varied according to church. See for example Stillman and Stillman, Arab Dress, a Short History: From the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times, 144.
113 Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate, 55.
114 Ibid., 83.
115 Ibid., 67.
enshrined in Islamic law and slaves were treated as less than fully human.\footnote{See chapter one for some examples of how slaves received half the punishments but also half the entitlements of a free person.} As a result of the differential treatment of slaves in Islamic law, Muslims needed to be able to visibly distinguish slave from freeperson; among the easiest ways to identify someone’s social status was through their dress, and for women, a headscarf. Donning the veil was (and is) a political practice.

ʿUmar’s strike reinforced other social distinctions as well. While it might seem obvious, ʿUmar’s strike also symbolically inscribes the privilege of male patriarchy and control over women’s bodies characteristic not just of pre-modern Islam, but of pre-modern societies in general. If the slave-girl was non-Arab and non-Muslim - not an unlikely scenario given that most slaves from the early conquests were women and children - ʿUmar’s strike would have physically inscribed on her body two additional social distinctions. The veil’s social function is therefore multivalent. The veil carried a range of symbolic and social values during the formative Muslim period much like it does today. However, it materialized very different political and social orders.

The Muslim practice of veiling not only applied to the living, but also to the dead. As earlier discussed, the funeral was a dynamic site of religious and other distinctions. According to the medieval Baghdad jurist Ibn Qudāma, men and women should not resemble one another even when dead; a male corpse should not be covered with a veil because only female corpses should be veiled.\footnote{Ibn Qudāma, \textit{Al-Mughni}, 2:373-74.} However, the Shāfiʿī jurist Māwardī argued that veiling a male corpse was permissible. He based his opinion on the hadith
tradition, “Veil (the faces of) your dead, and do not imitate (lā tashabbahū) the Jews.”\(^{118}\)

This tradition stereotypes Jewish practice, and commands that Muslims do the opposite by covering the faces of their dead. It stresses distinction according to religion, not gender.

However, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), the brilliant rebel jurist from Andalusia who attempted to revive the now defunct literalist legal school of Zāhirism, argued that Muslims have no reason to veil their dead in order to be different from the Jews.\(^ {119}\) Ibn Ḥazm argues that this tradition has no legal application on the basis of three reasons. First, there is a gap in its chain of transmitters, which casts doubt on its authenticity. For Ibn Ḥazm, this automatically disqualifies the tradition from legal consideration. Next, he criticizes its (lack of) context. Muslim jurists had applied this ruling to a person who dies during the pilgrimage (muḥrim), but the text of the tradition contains no indication of its context; it is therefore too vague to carry normative value. Finally, Ibn Ḥazm attacks the historicity of this tradition. He argues that the tradition cannot authentically be attributed to the Prophet “because he – upon him be peace – only spoke the truth, and the Jews do


\(^{119}\) Ibn Ḥazm became an eloquent but fierce opponent of the Sunnī legal schools, challenging the hegemony of the Mālikī school in eleventh century Spain. His writings spanned literature, theology, comparative religion, poetry, and law. In his polemical works, he relentlessly attacked his opponents. He rejected analogical reasoning as a discursive means of expanding Islamic law to regulate situations not explicitly mentioned in the original sources – the Quran, sunna, and consensus of the Prophet’s Companions. The title of his magnum opus, The Book Ornamented by Traditions (Al-Kitāb al-Muḥallā bi l-āthār) highlights his dependence on oral traditions and indicates his minimalist hermeneutical approach to the religious sources. Ibn Ḥazm displayed a much more lenient attitude to instances of gender confusion. Against, the majority of Muslim jurists, he argued that homosexual relations between women should not be punished by the more severe scripturally-mandated (hudūd) laws; instead it should be treated as a discretionary/civil offense (taʾzīr). Such radical departures from the main body of Muslim jurists illustrate how legal reasoning is partially a product of a jurist’s individually and culturally-informed constructions of gender. For additional biographical detail see “Ibn Ḥazm,” Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition; Ignaz Goldziher, The Zahiris, Their Doctrine and Their History: A Contribution to the History of Islamic Theology, trans. Wolfgang Behn (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971).
This type of “content” criticism is rare because hadith critics preferred to lampoon the chain of transmitters in order to “objectively” ascertain a prophetic tradition’s veracity; they preferred to bracket their “subjective” opinions. Ibn Ḥazm, however, does not bind himself to such formalities.

This last criticism highlights the discrepancy between representation and reality. Ibn Ḥazm claims that this tradition does not correspond to empirical reality; Muslims have concocted a Jewish stereotype. By stating that Jews do not uncover the faces of their dead as this tradition claims, Ibn Ḥazm is calling this tradition’s bluff. For Ibn Ḥazm, Muslims cannot base religious normativity on baseless stereotyping and prejudice in violation of fact. Ibn Ḥazm’s polemic is a reminder about the complex relationship between text and reality - that the discourse of tashabbuh is first and foremost a discourse of representation. And representations are fluid and dynamic.

A Wobbling Pivot

The changing cultural meanings of Muslim dress over time and place signals the enduring role of the body as a wobbling pivot of Muslim distinction. Hairstyle, beards, veils, belts, turbans, hats, shoes, swords and bows adorned the body, layering it with a constellation of meanings and distinctions. This patchwork of social distinctions crossed religion and ethnicity, gender and class, as well as the living and dead. The changing significations of Muslim dress illustrate how the body functions as a prism for historical, geographic, and cultural change; and as a discursive site for the interaction of religion, culture and politics. In the next chapter, I show how gesture was another technique

---

through which the body mediated cultural meanings and social distinctions. As with sartorial style, Muslim religious and political elites sought to regulate the imitation of distinctive gestures in order to erect a stable hierarchical social order.
CHAPTER SIX

GESTURES OF DISTINCTION

Every community has a direction to which it turns.

— Quran, 2: 148¹

Man is regarded as microcosm because he has shown himself capable of making anything with his hands and imitating all sounds with his mouth.

— Jāḥiẓ, *The Book of Animals*²

Corporeal Techniques

What happens when the time for ritual prayer arrives but a Muslim prisoner cannot make ablution – the basic prerequisite to ritual prayer? Lacking access to both water and dry earth with which to make ablution, does the prisoner simply skip the prayer and make it up later? Does he pray without ablution in an “impure” state? Does he just pray in his heart and mind? The eleventh century Hanafi jurist from Islamic Central Asia (Transoxiana), Sarakhsī, attempts to address this exceptional situation.³ Considering that he himself authored his magnum opus (*Al-Mabsūṭ*) from prison, he was especially well qualified to propose an answer.⁴ He transmits an early opinion that requires the prisoner

---

¹ This Quranic verse can also be rendered as, “Everyone has a direction to which he turns (*Wa li-kulli wijdhatun huwa mawlliha*).” However, the immediate context of the verse, which discusses the relations between the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities, suggests the above translation. See the authoritative Quran translations of Muhammad Asad and M. S. Abdel Haleem for example.


⁴ The default state is to perform ablution with water. However, when no water is available one can use dust instead (*tayammum*). Muslim jurists specify in great detail the qualities of both the water and the dust that
to simulate (tashabbuh) the postures, gestures, and movements of prayer, without making ablution. Although the prerequisites for prayer have not been met, the prisoner must still pray, even if it does not count. The prisoner must still simulate the outward form of prayer, to discipline his body and to inspire viscerally-felt memories of God. These techniques enable the body to function as a pivot for the believer’s interaction with the divine. It is not enough to pray in one’s heart and mind. The body must pray too.

As we have seen, Muslims choreographed techniques in order to distinguish Islamic ritual and everyday practice from those of others. Muslims regulated specific techniques of ritual prayer such as how to kneel, when to prostrate, and where to face, as well as the techniques of everyday life such as how to sit, eat, and greet someone. They became corporeal techniques of distinction. Muslim distinction not only took the form of static techniques of the body – sartorial style – but also moving, or kinesthetic techniques of the body. What the prescient sociologist, Marcel Mauss, called techniques of the body, or more simply corporeal techniques, are socially and culturally learned practices that can be imitated. They help render the body culturally legible. Although at first blush, corporeal techniques like gestures and postures appear to be an individual biological phenomenon, they actually encode collective cultural memories, meanings, and relations of power. In this sense they blend nature and culture into an historically specific composite. In “Techniques of the Body” Marcel Mauss claimed:

---

5 Abū Ḥanīfa argued that it was sinful to perform prayer without having performed ablution properly and therefore discouraged the prisoner’s simulation of one performing prayer. Abū Yūsuf disagreed, and argued that the prisoner should become a simulacrum; both opinions are attributed to Muhammad Hasan al-Shaybānī.
“To know why he does not make a certain gesture and does make a certain other gesture neither the physiology nor the psychology of motor symmetry is enough, it is also necessary to know the traditions which impose it.”

Gestures, too, have a history.

Like sartorial style, corporeal techniques function as mediators of meaning. The dynamic motion of these techniques poetically captures the dynamic fluidity of social meaning. Bowing, standing, walking, waving, kneeling are all corporeal techniques that can mediate between individual and collective, self and other, male and female, nature and culture. What is distinct about these corporeal techniques, however, is that they inscribe the collective order physiologically into the body. They literally trace new memories into the muscles, diffusing memories throughout the body. Memories are not just contained in the mind. The French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, was correct to observe, “I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body.”

In the context of pre-modern Muslim empire, corporeal techniques in the form of “obligatory signs and gestures” helped configure imperial authority and power. As I discuss in more detail below, gestures such as standing up and giving up one’s seat to elites were corporeal techniques that performed, affirmed, and enacted Muslim imperial power - despite their apparent non-Muslim origins. These gestures of distinction complemented sartorial markers of elite status such as large turbans, luxurious robes adorned with silk brocade, and other distinctive symbols of imperial power and memory.

---

However, if a non-Muslim subject refused to stand up for a Muslim at a gathering in pre-modern times, as Rosa Parks refused to stand up for a white person on a bus in modern times, such gestural insubordination could undermine, disrupt, and unravel the social order. Muslim political and religious regulation of gestural regimes therefore disciplined the physical body in order to shape the collective body.

In this chapter, I highlight three tangential but important conceptual relationships that an analytical focus on gestures illuminate: space and the body; nature and culture; performance and identity. Corporeal techniques do not gain their distinction in a cultural vacuum. They take on culturally-specific meanings in particular spaces. As I illustrate below, turning away from Jerusalem toward Mecca during ritual prayer dramatically affected early Muslim conceptions of religion, space, and community. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre urges us to consider space as more than a passive repository of social relations, but as an actively generated social product. “Space,” Lefebvre asserts, is “enacted (through physical gestures and movements).”\(^9\) Lefebvre imagines space not as an abstract absolute entity, but as a concrete product of embodied social practice. The body’s configuration in space is thus itself a corporeal technique that produces social distinctions.

In turn, the spatial reconfiguration of the body produces new imperial and religious memories. In this chapter, I deploy the concept of the chronotope (literally, time-space), coined by Russian literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, to illustrate how the

---

body at once can mediate both space and time. It suggests that space cannot be conceptualized without reference to time, that spaces are part of history. The chronotope is where “space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history.” New religious or political orders often spur transformations in spatio-temporal orientation. They create new chronotopes. Chronotopes are not merely moments when constellations of power materialize, but also spaces where social distinctions become embodied. I introduce the concept of the chronotope of distinction to illustrate how the production of new Muslim social distinctions corresponds to new orientations in space and time. They comprise contact zones where collective distinctions take shape.

Highlighting how corporeal techniques mediate social relations also illustrates the porous boundaries between culture and nature in the pre-modern Muslim social imaginary. Muslim religious elites recognized humans were connected to both human and non-human collectivities in the cosmos. As Bruno Latour has persuasively argued, this cosmic perspective contrasts modern perceptions of a human society distinct and separate from nature. However, the ability of gestures and postures to diffuse across social boundaries of all types reminds us how human subjectivity is also shaped by the non-human world – that mimesis invariably occurs across different species as well. In attempting to regulated Muslim behavior, religious scholars often drew comparisons to animals, angels, and devils.

10 M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84-258. Bakhtin conceived the chronotope as a literary unit that helped differentiate literary genres from one other. In turn, it configured the relationship of literary texts to history, of representation to reality. It was the conceptual fulcrum through which literary narrative unfolded.
11 Ibid., 84.
Finally, I explore how pre-modern Muslims anticipated Judith Butler’s recognition that gender is a embodied mimetic performance. Performance theory, which has theorized the concept of performativity as individual and collective poiesis, or identity-making, opposes essentialist representations of identity that are static, fixed, and reductionist.  

In this chapter, I once again string together a series of episodes from early Muslim history in order to highlight the variety of Muslim distinctions and their manifold meanings. The result is an assemblage of corporeal techniques - gestures, postures, movements, and orientations - that illuminate a different way in which the body pivots the pre-modern Muslim social imaginary. I draw primarily upon collections of hadith and their commentaries, although I also incorporate substantial material from the Quran and its exegesis, treatises of jurisprudence and theology, as well as biographies, historical chronicles, and material culture. These sources help us to appreciate how corporeal techniques played a vital role in mediating collective distinctions in both ritual and everyday life – the two dimensions that frame the basic two-part structure of this chapter.

I Ritual

Turning Away from Christians and Jews: Reorienting Ritual Prayer

Muslim prayer was not just an individual act of religious devotion, but a social practice of religious distinction. Although religious distinction tends to be defined along sharper

lines in the hadith literature, the Quran also sporadically distinguishes Muslim from non-Muslim. The Quran’s role in promoting Muslim distinction is not only important because it is the most authoritative source of normative Islam, but also because it is the earliest Islamic literary source we have. In this section, I examine the most dramatic Quranic moment for the aesthetic and corporeal realization of Muslim distinction: the reorientation of ritual prayer toward Mecca.

Verse 2:144 of the Quran orders the Prophet Muhammad to “Turn your face toward the Holy Mosque.” According to Muslim tradition, this verse authorizes the Prophet to turn away from Jerusalem and to face the ka‘ba (the holy sanctuary; literally, cube) in Mecca during ritual prayer.¹⁴ To emphasize this new direction, the Quran repeats two more times in the following verses the command, “Turn your face toward the Holy Mosque.” Anticipating the failure of Christians and Jews to follow this new direction (qibla), the Quran then states, “Yet if you should bring to those that have been given the Book every sign, they will not follow your direction; you are not a follower of their direction, neither are they followers of one another’s direction.” The communal significance of this physical orientation is also made explicit: “Every community has a direction to which it faces.”¹⁵ For the controversial Syrian polymath, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), still haunted by Crusader incursions into Muslim lands, this moment signified a literal “turning point” in early Muslim relations with Christians and Jews. Drawing upon the verses cited above, he argues that this new physical orientation marked a new social, religious, and political orientation as well; it marked a change in Muslim inter-faith

---

¹⁴ As I mention below, the verse does not mention Jerusalem explicitly. Quranic exegesis would later clarify that Muslims had turned away from Jerusalem.
¹⁵ See footnote 1 above.

This spatial reorientation produced a new hierarchy of geographic space, a new spatial politics that claimed profane dominion of sacred space. Muhammad’s conquest of Mecca marked the apex of his prophetic career. Later Muslims even enumerated the precinct’s sacred status relative to other holy places. They assigned ritual prayer performed in and around the precinct 100,000 times more spiritual value than that of ritual prayer performed in a non­sacred space.\footnote{For example, the Prophet is reported to have said: “A prayer in Mecca is worth 100,000 times, a prayer in my mosque [in Medina] is worth 1,000 times, and a prayer in the \textit{al-Aqṣā} Sanctuary [in Jerusalem] is worth 500 times more than anywhere else.” Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, \textit{Jamʿ al-Jawāmiʿ} (Jāmiʿ al-Kabīr), 25 vols. (Cairo: al-Azhar, 2005), 5:475. Other traditions measure the relative worth of prayer at 100,000 in Mecca, 50,000 in Medina, and 5,000 in Jerusalem. See \textit{Sunan Ibn Māja}, \textit{kitāb iqāmat al-ṣalāt wa al-sunna}, \textit{bāb lā jāʾa fī al-ṣalāt fī al-masjid al-jāmiʿ}. Although the hierarchy is the same, the variation in relative values suggests that Muslim perceptions of the relative holiness of these sacred spaces varied as well.} This manifold reward applied not only to the sacred precinct immediately surrounding the \textit{kaʿba}, but to all of Mecca. The precinct’s sacredness overflowed outside its confines and submerged the surrounding vicinity. Mecca itself became an inviolable sanctuary. Mecca, in general, and the sacred precinct in particular, became a sacred symbol subject to religious ideology. Not only did the sacred precinct signify a new historical center for the narrative of Islam, but also signified a political and geographic center as well. Muslims eventually expelled non-Muslims from the Arabian peninsula, reserving the holy space of Mecca for Muslims only. Muhammad’s conquest of Mecca not only climaxed his prophetic career; the city
of Mecca, and the sacred precinct in particular, became the primary geographic symbol (\textit{shi'\textasciiacute{a}r}) of Islam.\textsuperscript{18} This new synchronic order (space) accompanied a new diachronic order (time). It produced a new chronotope that transformed both the geographical and historical landscape of Muslim relations to Christians and Jews. The Quran supports the new Muslim spatial orientation of prayer with a new historical orientation: it fashions a new cultural memory with Abraham at its historical center. Just preceding the verses commanding Muslims to face Mecca, the Quran narrates the story of how Abraham and his son, Ishmael, built the original sanctuary in Mecca; they supplicated to God that it become a place of worship for future generations.\textsuperscript{19} The Quran then rhetorically asks, “Who would forsake the religion of Abraham except a fool?”\textsuperscript{20} The Quran also rejects Christian and Jewish exclusive claims upon the legacy of Abraham by bluntly declaring that Abraham was neither a Christian nor a Jew, but a pure Muslim monotheist (\textit{\textasciiacute{h}an\textacute{i}f}).\textsuperscript{21} Other verses criticize Jewish and Christian exclusive claims to salvation as well as their desire to bring Muslims into their communal fold.\textsuperscript{22} At first blush, these verses seem like an ecumenical attempt to transcend religious parochialism. However, Quran 2:144 reveals the true logic for these denials:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} The Quran 2:158 declares that \textit{Ṣafā} and \textit{Marwa}, two geographic landmarks of the Hajj pilgrimage, are the \textit{shi'\textasciiacute{a}r} of God. Abraham’s servant-wife Hagar is said to have run back and forth between these two poles as she frantically searched for water in order to slake the thirst of her son Ishmael.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Quran 2:124-129.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Quran 2:130
\item \textsuperscript{21} Quran 2:140: “Or are you saying that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes were Jews or Christians? Ask them, ‘Who knows better: you or God?’” Quran 3:67 is even more explicit: “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian. He was a pure monotheist (\textit{\textasciiacute{h}an\textacute{i}f}) - a Muslim, not an idolater.”
\item \textsuperscript{22} See Quran 2:111: “They also say, ‘No one will enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian.’ This is their own wishful thinking. [Prophet], say, ‘Produce your evidence, if you are telling the truth’”; and Quran 2:120: “The Jews and the Christians will never be pleased with you unless you follow their ways.”
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
We have seen you turning your face toward heaven; now We will surely
turn you to a direction that shall please you. Turn your face toward the
Holy Mosque; and wherever you are, turn your faces towards it.

These verses mark a dramatic Muslim appropriation of the Abrahamic monotheistic
tradition. During the most fundamental devotional practice, Muslims must now face the
house that Abraham built – the holy sanctuary. This new orientation resets both space
and time.

This new chronotopic configuration is also a new corporeal configuration. At
once it reorients the two Muslim bodies: the physical body and the social body. The
deployment of the “face” (wajh) as a metonym for the body in verse 2:144 is significant.
The Quran even anticipates this new spatial imaginary by stating prior to this verse: “To
God belong the East and the West; wherever you turn, there is the Face (wajh) of God.”23
The overdetermined surface of the face is a window into the soul, an individual’s
subjectivity, her true self. It is the clearest “expression” of one’s personal identity. This
recognition is reflected in the Muslim intellectual tradition, which built on the Greco-
Roman tradition of physiognomy, the art and science of examining facial structures and
expressions to elicit the character of an individual.24 Although a wholly exterior part of
the body, the face is the most significant and important marker of the interiority of the
subject. The face, then, stands in not only for the body, but also the transcendent soul,
the essence of being: “Everything on earth perishes; while the face of your Lord remains
forever…”25 The face is even a marker of one’s collective identity: “Every community

23 Quran 2:115
24 For a masterful cross-cultural study of how Polemon of Laodicea’s classic work of antiquity,
“Physiognomy,” was translated and preserved by medieval Muslims see: Simon Swain and G. R. Boys-
Stones, Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon’s Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval
has a direction (*wijhatun*) to which it faces” states the Quran just after ordering Muslims to face a new direction in prayer.\textsuperscript{26} *Wijha*, translated here as direction, derives from *wajh*, the key Arabic-Quranic term for face. The collective Muslim face, or *wajh*, must now face Mecca.

Facing Mecca during ritual prayer, then, merged time and space, body and spirit into a series of choreographed bodily gestures and motions. This convergence materialized Muslim distinction five times a day in publicly palpable ways that could be seen, heard, and felt by both participants and observers. The call to prayer acoustically penetrated the urban landscape five times a day, from dawn until evening, marking and reorienting time into cyclical time. Mecca’s imaginary was carved physically into mosques, in the form of niches, which directed the believers’ spatial orientation in ritual prayer. This mechanical function of the niche also aesthetically reconfigured how the Muslim body locally and globally positioned itself in space; it helped configure a new Muslim corpo-spatial imaginary.

This new Muslim orientation extended beyond prayer and included other rituals and habits. Considered the fifth ritual pillar of Islam, making the pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Mecca is an obligation upon every able Muslim. Pedagogical manuals encourage aspiring religious scholars to face Mecca when studying in order to enchant their scholarly pursuit with spiritual blessing.\textsuperscript{27} The believer should also orient her body

\textsuperscript{26} See footnote 1 above.
\textsuperscript{27} Burhān al-dīn al-Zarnūjī, *Instruction of the Student: The Method of Mearning*, trans. Gustave E. von Grunebaum and Theodora Mead Abel (Chicago: Starlatch Press, 2003), 44-45. The author transmits an anecdote about two students who went abroad seeking religious knowledge. While studying one faced Mecca, while the other did not. When they returned to their native land after many years, only the former had reached the status of a jurist. According the author, this disparity in scholarly status was primarily due to the difference in their bodily orientations while studying. It is also recommended to face Mecca while
towards the qibla as she goes to sleep, interpreted as a form of death in which the soul is suspended in an intermediary threshold space between heaven and earth. During burial rites, her body should be oriented towards Mecca, not just on land but even at sea. Likewise, one should not desecrate Mecca by urinating in its direction. A Muslim’s religious orientation should be corporeally visible in both life and death, in earthly time and eschatological time.

Spatially orienting the body in a sacred direction was not only a Muslim matter. In the Near East, different religious communities had long oriented their bodies toward a specific direction during ritual practice. Jews faced Jerusalem during prayer. According to the Torah, Daniel turned toward Jerusalem and got down on his knees three times a day for prayer. Corroborating the Torah, a Quranic verse records a divine mandate for the Children of Israel to pray in a specific direction: “We revealed to Moses and his brother: 'Take some houses for your people in Egypt; and make your houses a direction reciting the Quran. See Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Qurṭubi, Al-Jāmiʿ li-Aḥkām al-Qurʿān, ed. Ahmad ʿAbd al-ʿĀlim al-Burdūnī and Ibrahim Aṭfish, 21 vols. (Riyadh: Dār ʿalam al-kutub 2003; reprint, 1967), 1:27. Cited and quoted in Ahmad b. al-Naqīb al-Misrī and Noah Ha Mim Keller, Reliance of the Traveller: The Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law ‘Umdat al-Sālik, Revised ed. (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1994), 875.

Ghazālī reviews the basic bodily orientations of sleep and their respective social affiliations: “Sleep is of four types: 1) sleeping on one’s back: that is the way of the prophets who contemplate the creation of the heavens and the earth; 2) sleeping on one’s right side: that is the way of the religious scholars and devotees; sleeping on one’s left side: that is the way of the kings in order to digest their food; and 4) sleeping face down: that is the way of Satan.” Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn, 5 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-ʿAṣriyya, 2002), 2:30.

Leor Halevi, Muhammad’s Grave (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 187-91, 320-21 (fn. 93). Recognizing the social significance of burial orientation, Halevi observes, “By burying the dead in low graves facing Mecca, Muslims promoted a sense of belonging to a single community, a community whose members, no matter where in the world they died, would all seem equal to one another – yet manifestly different from outsiders (Halevi, 189).”


“Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.” Daniel 6:10 (King James Version)
According to the hadith literature, the Medinan Jews faced Jerusalem during prayer. Christians in the Near East on the eve of Islam apparently faced the cardinal direction of East. Some scholars argue that during the first Islamic century, Muslims prayed in churches, conformed to Christian ritual practice, and faced east as well. According to other traditions, even the pre-Islamic Arabian monotheists, the Hanifs, faced the holy sanctuary during prayer. Orienting the body in a sacred direction was indigenous to Late Antique Near Eastern religious culture.

The powerful symbolic impact of this event upon the visual landscape of Medina must have spurred several interfaith conversations. The Quran forecasts that opponents would question this new religious policy: “The fools among the people will say: What has turned them from the direction they were facing in their prayer aforetime?” Early Muslim exegetes transmit a variety of responses. They provide us with a glimpse of how different constituencies in Muhammad’s midst might have interpreted the event. They also supply a narrative record of how early Muslim historians memorialized the event for posterity. For our purposes, they illustrate that the range of possible symbolic meanings of the event were far from stable and uniform, but fluid, variable, and even contradictory.

According to the early jurist, historian and exegete Ibn Jarir al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), each of the main religious factions surrounding the Prophet responded differently to the

---

32 Quran 10:87
35 Quran 2:142
dramatic event – none of them positive. They all suggest that the new corporeal orientation was initially politically and religiously disorienting:

The Hypocrites (munafiqūn) said: “What is wrong with them? They faced one direction for a while, then they left it and faced another one?” The Muslims said, “If only we knew about our brothers who died while they prayed towards Jerusalem! Will God accept (these prior acts of devotion) from us and from them, or not?” The Jews said, “Muhammad missed the city of his ancestors - his birthplace; if he would have held firm to our qibla, we would have wished him to be our master for whom we were waiting.” The pagans (mushrikūn) from among the people of Mecca said, “Muhammad is confused about his religion so, through his qibla, he turned himself towards you (Meccans), knowing that you were upon firmer guidance than he was; so, perhaps, he will enter your religion [as well].”

Essentially, the sudden change in direction created an opportunity for the skeptics to criticize Muhammad and his followers for indecisiveness and “flip-flopping” – a critique of political figures still common today. The Hypocrites, a Quranic appellation for a particular group of lukewarm wavering Muslims who joined Muhammad’s community in Medina for political advantage, taunt Muhammad’s core community for their apparent whimsical decision to face Mecca. However, considering the Quranic criticism of their own flip-flopping, their criticisms could not have been taken too seriously. According to Ṭabarī, news of the new qibla reached Mecca itself, inspiring even more taunts from the pagan enemies of Muhammad. The Meccans also criticized Muhammad for flip-flopping, but add the additional suggestion that Muhammad turned back on his heels after having recognized the superiority of his pagan ancestors. Putting their own spin on the

37 The Quran describes the hypocrites: “They swear by God that they belong with you, but they do not. They are cowardly; if they could find a place of refuge, or a cave, or somewhere to crawl into, they would run there with great haste.” Quran 9:56-57 (Abdel Haleem translation). Some commentators likened them to sheep that joined one flock, then another. See “Hypocrites and Hypocrisy,” in the Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān.
symbolic significance of this event, the Meccan pagans suggest that he may eventually embrace their religion as well. Even the Muslims reacted. They wondered about the fate of their relatives who faced the old qibla, but died prior to the introduction of a new qibla. They ask Muhammad: “What shall be the fate of our brothers?” From their perspective, the new direction of prayer was symbolically so potent that its social significance extended to the afterlife; it signaled a believer’s salvific community.

Considering that, as early as the first Islamic century, Muslims were often collectively addressed by the metonym, “The People of the Qibla,” this response is not so outrageous. According to the earliest preserved Quranic exegesis authored by Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 767), the Jews instigated Muslims queries about the salvific consequences of the event. They asked: “And what do you know [concerning the fate] of one of you who died upon our qibla?”

However, the group (besides the Muslims) who was most impacted by this shift was the Jewish community. The responses transmitted by Ṭabarî depict them as scornful of the Muslim decision to turn away from Jerusalem; they perceived it a decision to turn away from them. Their bitter responses reflect the gradually dissipating religious, political, and economic status of Medinan Jews relative to the religious upstart

---


39 In fact, not only did Muslims refer to themselves as the people of the qibla (ahl al-qibla) to differentiate themselves from other religions, but the Khārijī rebels referred to the Muslim masses against whom jihad was lawful as the ahl al-qibla. See: Abû Jaʿfar b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarî, *The History of al-Ṭabarî: Between Civil Wars: The Caliphate of Muʿāwiyyah*, trans. Michael Morony, 40 vols., vol. 18 (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 24.

40 Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) is the first major Quran commentary to have survived until today although later exegetes tended to ignore his work. It privileges narrative interpretations over grammatical approaches. “Muḥāṭīl b. Sulaymān,” *Encyclopedia of Islam, second edition.*

Muhammad. They also illustrate the symbolic power of the new direction to reshape the religio-political imagination. According to Tabari, the Jews echo the genealogical and ethnic criticism of the Meccan pagans: “Muhammad missed the city of his ancestors – his birthplace.”\(^{42}\) This type of speculation attributes to Muhammad the selfish worldly motive of wanting to glorify his tribal ancestry. It undermines Muhammad’s claim that this change was a divine mandate. Their next criticism marks a change in attitude from scorn to despair. Appearing to mourn the loss of religious influence over Medina’s Muslims, they lament: “If he [Muhammad] would have held firm to our qibla, we would have wished him to be our master for whom we were waiting.”\(^{43}\) This response suggests that the Jews would have accepted the prophecy of Muhammad had he continued to face Jerusalem. It aligns religious and political authority with the city of Jerusalem. It also suggests that by turning away from Jerusalem, Muhammad turned away from the Jews and relinquished his claim to be their prophet. Another Jewish response expresses a sense of religious entitlement. According to Ṭabarī, some Jews condescendingly claimed, “Muhammad and his companions did not know where their qibla was until we guided them to it.”\(^{44}\) This response assumes that Muslims originally faced Jerusalem before changing it to Mecca and that there was a time when Muslims were willing to conform to Jewish practice.\(^{45}\) It also suggests that the Medinan Jews perceived themselves as entitled to determine basic Muslim ritual practice – a status that was now lost. Prior to

\(^{42}\) al-Ṭabarī, Tafsir al-Ṭabarī, 2:640-41.  
\(^{43}\) Ibid.  
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 2:658.  
\(^{45}\) See chapter three for in depth discussion of this issue.
the qibla change, Ṭabarī says that the Jews had taunted Muhammad by saying that “he faces our qibla but opposes us in our religion.”

If the Medinan Jews did indeed taunt Muhammad in this way prior to the qibla change, it makes sense that Muhammad – as the Quranic verse indicates - would look earnestly towards heaven for a new direction. This was not a command from God that contradicted the personal inclinations of Muhammad. It seems that Muhammad did prefer to face Mecca instead of Jerusalem in prayer. Perhaps, he had grown tired of trying to appease the Medinan Jews, especially after they seemed averse to his appeals to join him. Maybe he really did want to establish Mecca as the central focal point of Muslim worship to realign both Muslim historical and geographic imaginary with a new religious imaginary.

The varying viewpoints expressed in the exegetical narratives are exacerbated by hadith narratives that present even greater diversity and contradiction. The divergent narratives suggest, that, despite later Muslim consensus over the symbolic meaning of the qibla change, its meanings were still in flux during the first century or so of Islamic history. These narratives disagree over a number of key historical details: the sanctity of Jerusalem; which direction Muslims prayed before being commanded to face Mecca; and the precise date for the qibla change. Muslim estimates of the precise date range from at least sixteen months before the Prophet’s emigration to Medina, to about two years after his emigration.

---

46 al-Ṭabarī, Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī, 2:657.
47 Western scholarship likewise has not come to any concrete conclusions about the original locus of the qibla, whether Jerusalem, Syria, Mecca or some other place.
48 According to a hadith transmitted by Ibn Māja, “We used to pray with the Messenger of God towards Jerusalem eighteen months and (then) the direction of prayer was changed to the ka'ba two months after
Prophet’s migration, this is a very wide range. If the revelation came down sixteen months before the Prophet’s migration, it undermines the narrative that dialogically constructs Muslim communal self-consciousness in opposition to the Jews. Muhammad had little if any interaction with Jews in Mecca. Hadith narratives also present a contradictory picture of the direction of Muslim ritual prayer before facing Mecca. Some hadith portray a shifting qibla. According to this narrative, Muslims first prayed toward Mecca, then Jerusalem, and finally, toward Mecca again.49 Other traditions suggest that the Prophet originally prayed at the ka’ba in Mecca, while facing Syria.50 And yet others indicate that he prayed to different directions simultaneously.51 Traditions also present a contradictory picture of Jerusalem’s sacredness. These competing narratives indicate that both Jerusalem and Mecca vied with one another for prominence in early Muslim historical memory. Some traditions valorize the holiness of Jerusalem. In fact, an entire genre developed around the “religious merits (fadā’il)” of Jerusalem.52 Some historians even suggest that the Umayyad caliph, ʿAbd al-Mālik, built the Dome of the Rock in

---


50 Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al­Mālik Ibn Hishām, Al­Sira al­Nabawiyya li­Ibn Hishām (Beirut: Dār Ibn Hazm, 2001), 160-61; Uri Rubin, "Between Arabia and the Holy Land: A Mecca-Jerusalem Axis of Sanctity," Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 34(2008): 350-51. The second of ʿUmar’s conversion narratives indicates that the Prophet was praying behind the ka’ba while facing north towards Syria prior to his migration to Medina. This anecdote suggests that Muslims directed themselves to Mecca prior to the migration – not just after. After Muslims arrived in Medina they might then have faced Jerusalem in order to assimilate their ritual practice to that of Jews before being ordered to face Mecca once again.


52 An entire literature, which compiled oral traditions pertaining to the religious merits of Jerusalem, also developed. See Suleiman Mourad, "A Note on the Origin Faḍā’il Bayt al­Maqdis Compilations," Al­Abḥāth 44(1996). Of course, the Prophet set out for his famous night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, from where he ascended to heaven. See Quran 17:1, although the toponym of Jerusalem is not given.
Jerusalem to compete with Mecca as a pilgrimage site.\textsuperscript{53} Other traditions suggest the opposite. One anti-Jerusalem narrative claimed that there was nothing sacred about the Rock in Jerusalem to which the Jews prayed. The Jews only prayed in its direction after God became angry with them and removed the ark from its presence; the Rock itself was not a hallowed place.\textsuperscript{54}

However, despite these contradictions, Muslims eventually settled on a dominant narrative that balanced this narrative polarity. Numerous hadith reports attribute the numerical value of 500 prayers at the \textit{al-Aqṣā} mosque in Jerusalem (compared to 100,000 at the \textit{kaʿba}), and list it along with the holy sanctuaries in Mecca and Medina as one of only three mosques that a Muslim should visit.\textsuperscript{55} Whatever anxieties over Jewish influence may have remained, they did not result in the complete denigration of Jerusalem in Muslim imaginations of sacred geography.

For some historians, the archeological evidence also presents a confusing picture. Some say Muslims faced East like Christians, South like Jews, or North toward Syria, before finally settling upon Mecca. Burial sites in Jordan and elsewhere suggest that


Muslims were interred facing both Jerusalem and Mecca.\textsuperscript{56} The historian of early Islam, Robert Hoyland, has argued, however, that these apparent archaeological shifts indicate less Muslim confusion over where to pray than confusion over how to determine the right direction.\textsuperscript{57} In other words, the earliest Muslims did not calculate the direction very precisely. As a result, the Umayyad caliphs, \textdegree{}Abd al-M\textsuperscript{a}l\textsuperscript{a}l (r. 685-705) and Walid (r. 705-715), initiated a campaign to realign mosque qiblas across the empire more accurately.\textsuperscript{58} It took time for Muslims to develop accurate methods to calculate the qibla. It also took time for Muslims to arrive at a consensus over the meaning of the new Meccan qibla. As Muslims settled into a more defined collective identity, they crystallized a master narrative that collectively distinguished themselves in relation to Christians and Jews.

The literal and figurative turning away from Christians and Jews indicate that Muslim religious distinction not only emerged through specific doctrines, but also through embodied practices - styles, postures, gestures, and choreographed performances. It also illustrates that the significance of these embodied practices was magnified by their spatial orientation. Although Muslims initially seemed unsure how to remember the qibla change, the eventual master narrative corresponds to the Quranic narrative, which


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 567-68.
suggests that the new corporeal orientation is also a new religio-political orientation – a conscious, deliberate, and concrete materialization of Muslim collective distinction.

**Sectarian Distinctions: Wiping over leather socks**

One issue caused so much controversy among early Muslims that it became a primary gestural signpost of Sunnī/Shiʿī distinction: wiping over leather socks (*mashʿ alā al-khuffayn*) during ritual ablution. Once again, the feet became an important site of Muslim distinction. What is unique about this practice of religious distinction is that its performance not only became a visible mark of sectarian affiliation in public spaces, but also became a significant point of religious creed. Before facing any direction in prayer, Muslims must first perform ritual ablution during which they either wipe or wash their bare feet. However, Muslims debated over whether it was also permissible to wipe over leather socks instead. This seemingly minor issue had potentially major consequences. To perform the ritual ablution incorrectly meant that one’s ritual prayer was invalid. To disregard ritual prayer – the most significant act of ritual devotion - was equivalent to apostasy for some Muslims.

Here, I highlight how the technique of wiping over leather socks eventually became a corporeal and creedal site of Muslim sectarian distinction between Sunnīs and Shiʿīs.

---

59 See chapters two and five of this study.
60 See for example the following traditions transmitted by Tirmidhī in his *Sunan* collection of hadith: “The difference between faith and infidelity is (leaving) the prayer;” and “The contract between us and them is the ritual prayer (*al-ṣalāt*). So, whoever leaves it has left Islam (*kafara*).” *Sunan al-Tirmidhī, kitāb al-imān, bāb mā jāʾa fī tark al-ṣalāt.*
61 The significance of this practice also indicates how both the senses of touch and sight - public tactuality and visibility - mediate distinction. In the following chapter, I explore the significance of embodied senses to the construction of distinction.
The pivot of this intra-Muslim dispute is a Quranic verse that describes the proper procedure for ablution:

When you rise to pray wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows and wipe your heads and your feet up to the ankles.62

Sunnīs and Shi‘īs debated this verse in great detail.63 Because leather socks are not explicitly mentioned in the scriptural text, the two sects vigorously argued whether the verse authorizes one to wipe over leather socks or not. Whether to wipe over leather socks or wash the feet during ablution became a hermeneutical test case for measuring the authority of the Quran against the hadith. The dispute is a striking instance of how the Quran was insufficient as the sole textual source of religious norms. Both Sunnīs and Shi‘īs supplemented the Quran with oral traditions in order to realize their unique visions of Islam. While Shi‘īs deemed the practice illicit, Sunnīs converged on its permissibility.

However, what is even more significant than the legal hermeneutics surrounding this issue are the intra-Muslim debates about the proper technique of the deceptively simple gesture of wiping.64 Sunnīs disagreed about whether to wipe over the leather sock by swiping the hand across the top of the sock only or underneath the sole only. They

---

62 Quran 5:6
63 Shi‘īs argue that the verb “wipe” not only applies to the head but to the feet as well. Sunnīs disagree and argue that the imperative command to wipe applies to the head only, while the command to “wash” applies not only to the faces and hands, but also to the feet. For a detailed discussion of the debates about the interpretation of the Quran with respect to the ritual ablution in general see, John Burton’s article. It effectively demonstrates how the hermeneutical concerns that an extra-Quranic practice circulating in hadith might trump the Quran spurred debate on this issue. See John Burton, “The Qur’ān and the Islamic Practice of Wuḍū’,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 51, no. 1 (1988).
64 Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad b. Rushd, The Distinguished Jurist’s Primer (Bidāyat al-Mujtahid wa Nihāyat al-Muqtaṣid), 2 vols. (Reading, U.K.: Garnet, 1994), 15-16. Muslims attributed a hadith to none other than ‘Alī who seemed to anticipate eerily later Muslim debates over the appropriate use of analogical reason in the derivation of law. He stated that were analogy to be the dominant mode of deriving law than wiping over boots would be undertaken below the boot, not above. In other words, because boots pick up filth on the bottom, not the top, it would make rational sense to wipe underneath them in order to physically cleanse them.
also entertained the possibility that one must wipe across both the top and bottom of the sock. However, in this last scenario, they had to determine whether one was preferable over another. Shiʿīs, on the other hand, did not require washing the bare feet like Sunnīs, but simply required wiping over them with a wet hand. The question of how to wipe over leather socks was not an issue for Shiʿīs because it was simply not permitted in their theological school. By choreographing its proper technique, the rising community of Sunnī Muslims made wiping leather socks into a publicly meaningful gesture of sectarian distinction.

The controversy over wiping leather socks is one example of how embodied everyday Islam became abstracted into religious dogma. Religious dogma too, despite its transcendental pretentions to the contrary, is a product of history that sheds light on the socially-produced body. Creed was not just about cognitive belief, but also about embodied praxis – sartorial style and corporeal technique.\(^\text{65}\) In their earliest statements of creed, Sunnīs declared that wiping over leather socks during ritual ablution was permissible. This apparently benign and insignificant addition to Sunnī treatises of dogma accompanied major creedal points such as the attributes of God, resurrection of the dead, and the nature of prophecy, as well as minor points such as the permissibility of drinking the potentially-intoxicating drink of nabīḍh.\(^\text{66}\) The earliest surviving work of Sunnī creed, *The Greater Knowledge (al-Fiqh al-Akbar)*, attributed to Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 65

\(^{65}\) For an example of how sartorial practice became a creedal/theological issue see chapter six on the zunnār belt.

\(^{66}\) Ḥanafī jurists debated the permissibility of drinking nabīḍh, a fermented drink usually made from barley, honey, raisins, dates, or grapes, with their Sunnī and Shiʿī co-religionists. Against their rivals, Ḥanafī jurists permitted the drinking of nabīḍh. Its inclusion in Ḥanafī books of creed indicate the degree of controversy this contrarian position provoked. See the entries on “Nabidh” and “Khamr” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition*. For development of Ḥanafī opinion, see Christopher Melchert, *The Formation of the Sunni Schools of Law, 9th-10th Centuries C.E.* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997), 48-51.
states that “wiping over leather socks is sunna.” Later creedal articulations of Ṭaḥāwī (d. 933), and Nasafī (d. 1142) preserved this point as a core Sunnī belief. Both creeds declare: “We approve of wiping over leather socks on a journey or in residence.”

The medieval Persian commentator on Nasafī’s famous creed, Taftazānī (d. 1390), wrote that this practice was purely a marker of distinction: it marks the Sunnis off from the innovators – Twelver and Ismāʿīlī Shiʿīs, as well as Khawārij sects - who deemed wiping over footgear impermissible.

What is remarkable about this creedal point is that wiping over the socks was not even an obligation according to Sunnīs. They simply wanted to make a point that it was permissible, not prohibited as the Shiʿīs claimed. One Hanafī authority even

67 “Al-mash ‘alā al-khuffayn sunna.” Abū al-Muntahā Maghnīsāwī and al-Nuʿmān b. Thābit Abū Hanifa, Imām Abū Ḥanīfa’s Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar Explained, ed. Abdur-Rahman Ibn Yusuf, trans. Abdur-Rahman Ibn Yusuf (California, USA: White Thread Press, 2007), 147,55. Here, fiqh is more appropriately translated according to its lexical meanings of knowledge and understanding instead of its more conventional meaning of jurisprudence. The treatise, after all, is an exposition of creed, not legal opinions. Western scholars have disputed the provenance of Abū Hanifa’s al-Fiqh al-Akbar. In the Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence, Joseph Schacht, following A. J. Wensinck’s assessment in Muslim Creed argues that the creedal point about wiping over footgear was absent from the al-Fiqh al-Akbar. This point is critical to his narrative that wiping over footgear originated as an intra-Sunnī dispute before becoming a Sunnī/Shiʿī creedal dispute. More recently, however, Abdur-Rahman Ibn Yusuf Mangera has disputed this assessment of al-Fiqh al-Akbar’s provenance. First, he debunks Wensinck’s distinction between al-Fiqh al-Akbar I and II. He argues that al-Fiqh al-Akbar II is actually the original al-Fiqh al-Akbar, and what Wensinck called al-Fiqh al-Akbar I is actually al-Fiqh al-Absat, another treatise altogether. Second, he argues that the provenance can effectively be dated to Abū Hanifa based on the assessments of later Muslim scholars, especially Ibn al-Nadīm in his Fihrist collection of early Arabic book titles. Mangera’s reassessment opens up the possibility that the creedal point concerning wiping over footgear was not a later interpolation, but present in the original al-Fiqh al-Akbar. I strengthen this argument below through an examination of biographical dictionaries that show wiping over leather socks mediated distinctions between Sunnī and Shiʿīs in the eighth century. See the “Introduction” in Maghnīsāwī and Abū Hanifa, Imām Abū Ḥanīfa’s Al-Fiqh Al-Akbar Explained, 24-29; Joseph Schacht, The Origins of Muhammad Jurisprudence (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 263-64; A. J. Wensinck, The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1965), 103.


hyperbolically warned: “I fear infidelity for the one who does not believe that wiping over socks is permissible.” The need to simply state that wiping over leather socks was permissible in basic Sunnī statements of creed suggests that its primary significance derived from its socially-charged meaning, not Quranic hermeneutics. Ultimately, what mattered most was that a Sunnī simply believe that it was okay to wipe over his leather socks even if he never actually did it; a Sunnī Muslim could live his entire life never having wiped over his socks and still be Sunnī. However, Muslims still asked: was it better to wash the bare feet as prescribed in the Quran, or to wipe over leather socks in order to be corporeally and visibly Sunnī? Some (Ḥanbalīs) actually said it was better to wipe the socks if coupled with the intention to be different from religious innovators i.e. Shiʿī Muslims. Others argued that it was better to wash the feet, as long as the individual did not do so believing that wiping over footgear was wrong. What mattered most was that Muslims believed wiping over leather socks was permissible. Embodying distinction mattered even if it was only located in the mind.

For Shiʿīs, the issue of wiping over the socks was also a matter of belief. The sixth Shiʿī Imam, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 765) lists not wiping over leather socks among seven criteria for a Muslim to be a true believer (muʿmin). He also lists the practice of wiping

---

73 Maria Massi Dakake, The Charismatic Community: Shiʿite Identity in Early Islam (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 197. In addition to wiping over leather socks, some of the other distinctive characteristics of the Shiʿa mentioned in the tradition include: the disavowal of idols; the permissibility of temporary marriage (mutʿa); and the prohibition of consuming eels.
over leather socks as one of three exceptions to the practice of protective dissimulation, which, otherwise, had become a general principle and practice of Shiʿīsm:

Precautionary dissimulation (taqiyya) is my religion and religion of my fathers, except in three actions: drinking intoxicants; wiping over leather socks; and not pronouncing the basmala loudly [in prayer].

By listing the practice of wiping over leather socks along with drinking alcohol as exceptions to the distinctively Shiʿī embodied practice of precautionary dissimulation, Imam Jaʿfar indicates its religious gravity. The implication is that in all other scenarios, a Shiʿī may practice precautionary dissimulation. However, in this scenario, one must embody Shiʿīsm not by dissimulating, but by wiping over the bare feet, not leather socks. Like dissimulation, wiping over the socks is an embodied performance.

Despite the severity of this tradition, Twelver Shiʿīs granted exceptions by permitting the practice “only under duress and in circumstances where there is a threat to life from an enemy, wild beasts or extreme cold.” The Ismāʿīlī Shiʿīs were less stringent, permitting it with a reasonable excuse. However, the presence of this issue in both Sunnī and Shiʿī creedal statements is a key textual marker of how this gesture became an embodied marker of sectarian distinction. Text didn’t produce practice; practice produced text.


75 Instead of dissimulating in order to resemble Sunnīs, an invisible marker of Shiʿī distinction, Shiʿīs enact a visible marker of Shiʿī distinction – not wiping over leather socks.


77 Ibid.
Two cases from the early Muslim biographical literature do more to illustrate how gestures of distinction could take precedence over and above creed. Gestural rivalry between (proto) Sunnīs and (proto) Shiʿīs can be traced back to at least the first half of the eighth century. An eighth century traditionist from the Iraqi city of Kūfa, Sālim b. Abī Ḥafṣa (d. 137/755), wiped over his socks, despite adhering to beliefs that denigrated the first three caliphs and allied him with Shiʿī creed. His adherence to this Sunnī gestural marker, however, endeared him to Sunnīs and repulsed Shiʿīs; his conformity to distinctively Sunnī ritual practice trumped his Shiʿī creedal positions. A similar situation applies to another eighth century Kūfan traditionist, Mūsā b. ʿUthmān. This time, however, Sunnīs were the ones who did the disclaiming. According to biographers, Mūsā b. ʿUthmān transmitted the following statement: “The Quran invalidates wiping over the socks (sabaqa al-kitāb masḥ ʿalā al-khuffayn).” This unambiguous rejection of a distinctively Sunnī gesture ensured his infamy in Sunnī posterity.

These two examples suggest that as early as the first half of the eighth century that wiping over the leather socks was a key distinguishing marker between Iraqi proto-Sunnī and proto-Shiʿī

---

78 Although the twentieth century historian of Islamic law, Joseph Schacht, argues that the earliest debates over this issue do not reflect early Sunnī and Shiʿī polemic but intra-Sunnī disagreement, early biographical evidence suggests otherwise. In turn, this strengthens the possibility that Abū Ḥanīfa, who died in the middle of the eighth century (750), had incorporated statements about wiping over leather socks in his treatise on creed, The Greater Knowledge (al-Fiqh al-Akbar), which I examined above.


80 I have been unable to track down his death date in the biographical dictionaries I consulted, both Sunnī and Shiʿī. However, by examining the death dates of transmitters from whom he claimed to have transmitted hadith such as al-Aʿmash (d. 148/765) we can reasonably surmise that Mūsa b. ʿUthmān lived during the eighth century.


82 According to Dhahabī, “He went to extremes in his Shiʿīism (gāla fi al-tashayyuʿ)”
adherents. In tandem with Abū Ḥanīfa’s treatise on creed, the biographical evidence above suggests that Iraq was a particularly charged region for proto-Sunnī/Shi‘a rivalry on this issue. The gestural practice of wiping over leather socks, either through its performance or nonperformance, became religiously charged with symbolic value, both signifying and perpetuating the crystallization of Sunnī and Shi‘ī religious identities into distinct sectarian communities.

Natural Religion: Pecking, Sitting, and Turning Around like Animals

The early Muslim social world encompassed the natural world; they were not partitioned into distinct realms. Early Muslims lived in an agrarian society where interaction with animals was common. In his Lāmiyyat al-ʿArab (the poem rhymed [in the letter] lām of the Arab), the pre-Islamic brigand and poet, Shanfarā, prefers the companionship of desert scavengers to his native tribe:

I have in place of you other kin:  
The wolf, unwearying runner,  
The darting sand leopard,  
The bristle-necked hyena.

These are my clan. They don’t reveal  
A secret given in trust,  
And they don’t abandon a man  
For his crimes.

---

84 John Burton suggests that Iraq may have been the origin for this debate, based primarily on a tradition where the Companion ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar sees another Companion (Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ) wiping over leather socks in Iraq. He then returns to Medina and queries his father, ʿUmar, who asserts that the practice originated with the Prophet himself. Of course, this is very speculative evidence. However, when combined with the evidence presented above, it suggests that early Muslims made this an issue of sectarian distinction in the Iraq region. John Burton, “The Qurʾān and the Islamic Practice of Wuḍū”, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 51, no. 1 (1988): 48-49.
Shanfarā eventually becomes like the beasts that surround him; however, by the poem’s end, he has transformed from predator to prey - a white footed mountain goat. In his monumental encyclopedia, *The Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-Hayawān*), Jāḥiẓ expands on the human capacity for both domestic and bestial mimesis, observing that man:

...displays the fury of the camel, the swiftness of the lion, the treacherousness of the wolf, the cunning of the fox, the cowardice of the nightingale, the parsimony of the ant, the industry of the termite, the generosity of the cock, the sociability of the dog, and the navigational skill of the pigeon.

For this reason, man, according to Jāḥiẓ, is the microcosm.

Even the moral universe of the urbanized scholars of Damascus such as Ibn Taymiyya and Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī included the natural world. For them, “nation (*qawm*)” in the pivotal hadith, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them” includes the nation of animals. Like Jāḥiẓ, they both acknowledge the possibility of social interaction across the species where humans and animals interact and shape one another’s persona. The embodied practice of imitation produces lasting affective, cognitive, and spiritual dispositions – even between humans and animals. According to Ibn Taymiyya, humans can therefore undergo zoological socialization: a camel herder will assimilate the


Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, 1:213. Translation from ———, *The Life and Works of Jāḥiẓ*, 137. Still Jāḥiẓ does not say that he actually becomes these animals: “…he cannot be said to be a camel because he possesses the camel’s skill in navigation, its jealousy, impetuosity, spite or staying-power under load…”


negative attributes of pride and haughtiness characteristic of camels; a sheep-herder will cultivate attributes of humility and humbleness associated with sheep; and a dog owner will assume negative qualities associated with dogs.\(^90\) On the other hand, domesticated animals become more affectionate and amicable, and less prone to conflict and hatred. So while animals can only become morally enriched from interaction with humans, the same does not hold for humans who interact with animals. They will become morally enriched or corrupted, depending on the animal. Based on this natural sociology, an implicit human-animal hierarchy emerges.

Intimacy with the natural world in everyday life therefore gave rise to Muslim anxieties over resembling and imitating animals. As a result they attempted to shape the normative contours of the category of human itself through the medium of hadith:

The Prophet prohibited us from three things: pecking like a rooster, sitting like a dog, and turning around like a fox.\(^91\)

The context of this hadith is ritual prayer. The teaching encourages the proper performance of ritual prayer by prohibiting Muslims from imitating the gestures, postures, and movements of roosters, dogs, and foxes. While prostrating during prayer, a Muslim should not do so too quickly so that he resembles a rooster pecking at the ground.\(^92\) Rather he should be at peace and perform the prayer in a deliberate and disciplined fashion. When sitting, he should not sit like a dog, which places its rear on the ground while extending its paws forward. Rather, the believer should place his rear

\(^90\) According to Muslim tradition, all prophets were trained as shepherds first before being called to be a prophet to his people.
\(^92\) Another tradition stigmatizes the pecking of crows. See Ibid., 24:292, hadith # 15532.
on one or both of his feet when sitting. During the entire prayer, he should not turn to and fro rapidly like a fox, but should keep his eyes downcast, focused on the ground immediately before him.

Other traditions illustrate the proper technique of prostration during prayer by exhorting Muslims not to imitate a camel’s unique manner of sitting down: “When one of you prostrates [in prayer], he should not kneel like a camel, but should place his hands [onto the ground] before his knees.” When a camel kneels onto the ground from a standing position it first places its hind knees onto the ground before the rest of its body. According to this tradition, when prostrating, a Muslim should first place his hands on the ground, then his knees. This tradition stigmatizes the imitation of camels despite the special reverence Arabs had for them. Camels could carry people and cargo over great distances of the desert with minimal water rations. The basic Arabic word for camel, *jamal*, derived from the root word for beauty. If there was an animal for a Muslim to emulate, it would have been the camel. According to one scholar, these and other

---

93 Generally speaking, dogs did not enjoy a very good reputation among Muslims. Some hadith traditions state that angels are barred from entering houses where dogs reside. Others require a person licked by a dog to wash his garment at least seven times in order to cleanse it. Some Muslims (Mālikīs), however, who disregarded these traditions do not attribute impurity to the dog. One hadith tradition even grants paradise to a prostitute who gives drink to a thirsty dog. For a good summary of Muslim perspectives on this issue, see the chapter, “Muslim attitudes towards dogs” in Richard Foltz, “Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures,” (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006). Also see Ibn Taymiyya’s attempt to balance three different legal opinions on the cleanliness of dogs in his fatwa: Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu‘at al-Fatāwa*, 21:349-51.

94 The Ḥanafis and Shāfiʿis state that one should prostrate by first placing the knees on the ground, then the hands - the opposite ruling of this hadith. According to Ibn Taymiyya: “Praying in both ways is permissible, according to the consensus of the scholars. If a person wants to go down knees first or hands first, his prayer is valid in either case, according to the consensus of the scholars. However, they disputed as to which is preferable.” Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu‘at al-Fatāwa*, 22:262.

traditions establish the necessity of “being different from all animals in the techniques of ritual prayer.” 96

Apparently, imitating animals was a pressing issue in Ibn Taymiyya’s day. He authored a fatwa condemning activities such as “barking like a dog” and “braying like an ass.” 97 In it he makes very clear that his objective is to prevent the moral corruption of human nature (fasād al-fiṭra). First, he draws an analogy between the hierarchies that govern human life and those that govern the natural world. He argues that animals are inherently inferior to humans just as non-Arabs, Bedouin Arabs, and the People of the Book are inherently inferior to (Arab) Muslims. 98 Ibn Taymiyya provocatively proposes that if Muslims should not imitate inferior members of their own species, on what grounds should they imitate animals, a species of even lesser ontological value? The hierarchical inferiority of animals makes them an unworthy model of imitation and emulation. Ibn Taymiyya supports this reasoning with textual evidence from the Quran and hadith that criticize cattle, dogs, and donkeys - beasts who epitomize aimlessness and heedlessness: “We have destined to hell many jinn and men; they have hearts, but they do not understand with them; they have eyes, but they do not see with them; and they have ears, but they do not hear with them. They are like cattle. In fact, they are even more

98 In The Necessity of the Straight Path, Ibn Taymiyya distinguishes between animals into those who have positive influences and those who do not. Sheep, for example, exude a temperance that augments the shepherd. Ibn Taymiyya fails to make similar distinctions among non-Muslims. According to Ibn Taymiyya, Muslim interaction with Jews, Christians, pagans and heterodox Muslims are all bad. The only differentiation Ibn Taymiyya makes between them is one of degree; Jews and Christians are more dangerous than pagans, and non-Arabs are not bad in and of themselves like devils. ———, Iqtiḍāʾ al-Širāṭ al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jahīm, 1:487; Memon, Ibn Taimiya’s Struggle against Popular Religion, 216-17.
This Quranic verse criticizes bestial embodiment, especially their dulled senses. Therefore, according to Ibn Taymiyya, imitating the conduct of animals is reprehensible in itself. This reprehensibility only intensifies when the practices being imitated are also reprehensible. Ibn Taymiyya even extends the hadith tradition, “God cursed men who imitate women and women who imitate men,” to illustrate that any kind of hybridity is wrong. This normative appraisal of an animal’s inferior ontological status endures, reasons Ibn Taymiyya, despite an animal’s lack of moral responsibility, and despite the areas of resemblance between humans and animals in primal activities such as eating, drinking, and mating.

II Everyday Practice

Configuring Islam and Empire: Standing up for Elites

During the Prophet Muhammad’s final illness, witness accounts indicate that he was often unable to stand. On occasion, he would therefore remain seated while leading the congregational prayer, which, under normal circumstances requires that a Muslim stand. However, during one of these congregational prayers, some Muslim participants stood while the Prophet remained seated. After completing the prayer, the Prophet instructed those who stood with the following words:

You were at this time about to do an act resembling that of the Persians and Byzantines. They stand before their kings while they sit, so don't do

---

99 Quran 7:179
100 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmuʿat al-Fatāwa, 32:162.
that; follow your imams. If they pray standing, you should also do so, and if they pray sitting, you should also pray sitting.\textsuperscript{101}

The Prophet urges Muslims to simply follow the imam, or prayer leader – to sit when he sits and stand when he stands – in distinction from “Persians and Byzantines” who remain standing before their seated kings.

In this tradition, the Prophet analogizes the posture of sitting and standing at certain times during ritual prayer to a radically different scenario – courtly custom. The apparently benign technique of one’s physical posture during ritual prayer is sufficiently important to distinguish Muslims from “Persians and Byzantines.” This analogy likens leadership in Muslim prayer to leadership in Byzantine and Sasanian politics. The Prophet’s natural oscillation between the ritual practice of prayer to the political practice of courtly custom is another instance that indicates the porous boundaries between politics and religion in the early Muslim social imaginary. Ironically, by distinguishing the Muslim mosque from the non-Muslim court, the Prophet asserts their similarity as spaces for the collective embodiment of power and authority. In this sense, the mosque and the court become doubles.

Yet, the Prophet’s objective is to distinguish between Muslim religious from Byzantine and Sasanian political authority. This tradition highlights a tension between two competing waves of authority in early Muslim society: the authority of Persian and Byzantine-infused imperial custom and the authority of Muslim religious elites. I have already outlined the complex cultural interactions between Arab-Muslims and the Persian and Byzantine civilizations during the early Islamic conquests in the first chapter. Here, I

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Ṣahīḥ Muslim}, kitāb al-ṣalāt, bāb i’timām al-ma’mūn bi-al-imām
will attempt to understand the particular ways that this hadith charges the Muslim body with new cultural meanings as it mediates distinctions between commoners and elites, and religion and politics in early Islam.

The objectification of “Persians and Byzantines” into a singular abstraction constructs a monolithic imaginary of the non-Arab other, a single oppositional religio-political rival. It also constructs the Muslim polity as a rival on par with these great civilizations. This perception might represent Muslim sentiments towards the end of the Prophet’s life, and certainly during the early conquests. This hadith is just one among many traditions that indicates residual anxiety among Arab-Muslims over Byzantine and Iranian influences on Arab-Muslim political culture. Despite its political undertones, the Prophet mobilizes this foreign representation to delimit the proper technique of ritual prayer.

The text also suggests that early Muslim imaginations of ethnic distinction overlapped with political and religious distinctions. Although small numbers of Iranians, Syrians, Palestinians and Egyptians from the former Byzantine and Sasanian territories had begun to convert to Islam after the early Muslim conquests, Arab-Muslims still imagined a corresponding equivalence between Byzantine/Christian and Persian/Zoroastrian identities. The Byzantine/Persian ethno-political other was also a Zoroastrian/Christian other. These political-ethnic-religious equivalences also implicitly highlight the Arab/Muslim equivalence of the first Muslims. This entanglement of religious, political, and ethnic differences into a singular foreign identity amplified native Arab-Muslim imaginations of foreignness. The hadith indicates early intra-Muslim
tensions between Arab and non-Arabs; religious difference was one way of authorizing and reinforcing ethnic distinctions between Arab and non-Arab.

Sitting and standing for elites, whether religious or political, did not occur in a vacuum. Elites sought to configure the Muslim body in specific spaces. Phrased differently, Muslim religious elites produced new Islamic spaces by reconfiguring their corporeal techniques. These new Islamic spaces also produced new memories of Islamic authority, new chronotopes of Muslim distinction, that are qualitatively different from the old memories of Persian and Byzantine imperial authority. The hadith therefore draws an analogy from the space of the mosque to the space of the court. Like the court, the mosque was a space of religio-political power and authority. However, the nature of this power and authority was different. The Prophet therefore suggests that the protocol in these different spaces should not be the same. The contrasting corporeal configurations between mosque and court also represent contrasting configurations of religious and political authority. Standing with the imam in reverence of God at the mosque is not like standing out of respect for the seated king at the court. By contrasting mosque and court, the tradition advances a more egalitarian configuration. So, while Muslims should submit to the authority of the imam in his mosque just as Persian and Byzantine subjects submit to the authority of the king in his court, Muslims should embody their submission differently; they should stand when the imam stands and sit when he sits. Muslim mimesis of the imam should be less conspicuous, less hierarchical, and less discriminatory. Maintaining such a high fidelity to the imam’s corporeal technique symbolizes a more egalitarian authorial structure between commoner and elite in this idealized Islamic social order.
Other hadith traditions, however, communicate a different message. Despite the above tradition, other traditions do not condemn standing while the imam sits or sitting while the imam stands. Many early Muslim jurists encouraged the opposite: to stand if one can stand behind a disabled imam who can only sit. In other words, they permitted a correspondence between mosque and court where commoners stood and their leaders sat in this exceptional situation. Some Muslim jurists like Imam al-Shafi‘i, applied the hermeneutical tool of abrogation to argue Muslims could stand while the imam sat. Others did not. Most jurists preferred to let the common Muslim decide whether or not to sit or stand behind the imam. At first blush, this difference of opinion appears to address an insignificant technique of ritual prayer. However, within the wider landscape of early Muslim history, this debate inflects intra-Muslim disputes about how to configure Islam to empire.

Let us return to the Pact of ʿUmar for a moment and recall the ordinance that requires Christians to stand up and give up their seats for Muslims at social gatherings. The presence of this ordinance suggests that early Muslims eventually adapted this Byzantine-Persian custom of embodying authority – at least when mediating political

---

102 In one tradition, during the Prophet’s last illness, he is said to have joined a congregational prayer led by Abū Bakr. However, he did not take the lead but prayed behind him sitting. This suggests that it was not absolutely necessary for a follower in prayer to emulate exactly the postures and gestures of the imam. This tradition is also one of a number of reports meant to indicate the rightful succession of Abū Bakr to the caliphate, which also contributes to the confusion over this issue. This “pro-Abū Bakr” tradition also happens to be narrated by his daughter, ʿĀʾisha. See Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, kitāb al-jamāʿa wa al-imāma, bāb innamā juʿila al-imām li-yuʾtam bihi; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-ṣalāt, bāb istikhlāf al-imām idhā ʿaraḍa lahu ʿudhr.

103 For a summary of disagreements between the Sunnī schools of law on this topic see Jamīl b. Ḥabīb Luwayhiq, Al-Tashabbuh al-Manhī ʿanhu fī al-Fiqh al-Islāmī (Jiddah: Dār al-Andalus al-Khaḍrā, 1999), 288-96.

104 Ibid., 290-91.

105 Ibid., 292. Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal was among those who did not agree with this perspective and preferred that a follower mimic the posture of the imam who can only sit.

106 “We shall rise from our seats when they wish to sit.” See chapter one.
authority between non-Muslims and Muslims. This momentary gesture is powerful. Its repetition inculcates in non-Muslim subjects a new sensibility; it shifts their reverence from Byzantine-Christian rule to Arab-Muslim rule. The ordinance also expands the application of this custom to new social contexts. It suggests that this gesture of respect should not only occur within the limits of the court, but at all public gatherings; Muslim authority over their non-Muslim subjects should materialize in everyday life.

Historian Milka Levy-Rubin argues that this ordinance echoes gestures of distinction that were common to Sasanian courtly practice.\(^\text{107}\) Although the contradictions among different hadith suggest that standing up for elites was a controversial gesture of distinction among early Muslims, its incorporation into the Pact of ʿUmar suggests that Muslims eventually absorbed these foreign ceremonial practices into their own. It also indicates a convergence – albeit limited - between religious and imperial authority. In the caliphal court, Muslims not only stood before the caliph, but also prostrated before him and kissed the ground and his hand.\(^\text{108}\) Even the quintessential advocate of muscular Islam, Ibn Taymiyya, is said to have kneeled down before Mamluk Sultan al-Nāṣir b. Qalāwūn (3rd r. 1309 – 1341) when petitioning him to retain the sartorial laws of distinction governing Jews and Christians.\(^\text{109}\)

\(^{107}\) Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 146-47. Levy-Rubin, however, downplays the significance of the gestures of rising and standing, and instead focuses on the related issue of sitting. During the Abbasid caliphate of al-Muʿtaṣim (r. 833-842), one’s seating placement in the court corresponded to his social status. For the Pact to command Christians to give up their seat to a Muslim at their social gatherings was clearly an imposition of a new embodiment of their hierarchically inferior social status.


Gestures of Belonging: How to Meet and Greet Someone

Al-salām ʿalaykum, may peace be upon you (plural), became the universal verbal greeting that signified membership in the Muslim community. Ideally, greeting a fellow believer is not an “empty gesture.” It should evoke genuine feelings of friendship, love, solidarity and community. To not respond in kind, wa ʿalaykum al-salām, and may peace be upon you, is perceived by Muslims as an insult. In fact, the Prophet is said to have encouraged Muslims to respond with a better greeting such as, “May peace, mercy and blessings be upon you (wa ʿalaykum al-salām wa raḥmat Allāh wa-barakātuh).” The initiator of the greeting is even credited with more blessings than the respondent. The Muslim canonical greeting is not just a greeting. It is also a supplication invoked by the greeter upon the one being greeted and her guardian angels. This single vocal gesture mediates individual and collective, earthly and divine.

Yet, apparently, this greeting insufficiently distinguished Muslim from non-Muslim in early Egypt. Egyptian Muslims sought to distinguish their mode of greeting through physical gestures as well. According to one tradition attributed to the Prophet:

One who imitates others is not one of us. So do not imitate (lā tashabbahū) Christians and Jews. The Jews greet each other using their fingers and the Christians greet each other using their palms.¹¹⁰

The command for Muslims to be different is unequivocal. “Do not imitate Christians and Jews,” orders the Prophet. The way Muslim distinction should take place is very specific – a physical gesture that does not duplicate those of Christians and Jews. However, if we

¹¹⁰ The first phrase transliterated into Arabic is: “Laysa minnā man tashabbaha bi-ghayrinā.” Sunan al-Tirmidhī, kitāb al-isti’dhān, bāb mā jāʾa fī karāhiyyat ishārat al-yad bi-al-salām. See chapter two about the early circulation of this hadith in Egypt. Al-Tirmidhī, himself, casts doubt on the hadith’s authenticity and grades the chain of transmitters as weak.
momentarily read against the grain of the text, some important insights surface. As I mentioned before, the command “not” to imitate actually suggests that Muslims were greeting each other like Christians and Jews in public life. At the very least, the imperative seeks to deter Muslims from doing something that would have seemed very normal, almost instinctual. It is worth recalling that Egypt was a former Byzantine territory where Muslims were initially a minority; they would have naturally inclined to assimilating Egypt’s local cultural norms. Within this historical context, the prescriptive command asserts a new Islamic norm that contrasts what Muslims might have encountered during their everyday social interactions with Egyptian Christians and Jews. This social context helps explain why the precise technique of how to greet someone mattered to early Egyptian Muslims.

Later Muslim commentators debated the legal application of this hadith, however. The ninth century transmitter of this hadith, Abū ʿIsā al-Tirmidhī (d. 892), deems this hadith weak. Following this assessment, the medieval Andulusian Mālikī commentator, Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī (d. 1148), declared that there is no harm in identifying and greeting a Muslim with a physical gesture. Some modern Indian commentators of this hadith, such as the Ḥanafī commentator, Anwār Shāh Kashmirī (d. 1933) and his contemporary Ahl-i-hadith rival, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Mubarakpurī (d. 1935), argued that Muslims should greet one another by coupling a visible bodily gesture with an audible utterance in order to avoid imitating Jews and Christians who greet one another with a

motion of the hand only. For a Muslim to merely perform a different sort of physical
gesture or to simply utter a greeting is not distinctive enough. Rather, Muslims must
perform the greeting in a particular way that creates a correspondence between two
different gestures. Motion and voice become forged into a single unique performative
gesture that functions to differentiate Muslims from Jews and Christians. At this
moment, Muslim distinction literally becomes an embodied sensation.

Performing Gender: Men and Women imitating each other

In the previous chapter, I highlighted Muslim religious scholars’ disapproval of cross-
dressing, whether in the form of women wearing big turbans or men growing their hair
long. Muslim concerns over gendered imitation, however, encompassed an ensemble of
corporeal techniques – gestures, movements, and sounds - as suggested by the celebrated
Sunnī collector of hadith, Bukhārī (d. 870), who transmits the following tradition:

The messenger of God cursed men who imitate women (mutashabbihīn
bi’l-nisā’) and women who imitate men (mutashabbiḥāt bi’l-rijāl)."113

Hadith collectors and later Muslim jurists applied this dictum to a wide range of
embodied practices encompassing both ritual and everyday life; the tradition does not
identify specific practices or spaces of potential gender insubordination. Bukhārī
classifies this tradition in a general heading titled, “Men imitating women and women

112 Anwar Shah Kashmirī, Al-ʿArf al-Shadhī Sharḥ Sunan al-Tirmidhī, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth
al-ʿArabī, 2004), 4:142; ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Mubārakfūrī (Mubarakpuri), Tahfīz al-Ahwadhī bi-Sharḥ
Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1979?), 7:472-73. For Mubarakpuri, the command to not
imitate Jews and Christians in the hadith means “Everything in all of their actions, especially in these two
habits.” To compensate for the alleged weakness in the chain of transmission, Mubarakpuri provides
supporting evidence from another hadith transmitted by al-Nasāʾī with a stronger chain of transmission:
“Do not greet like the Jews; their greeting is a gesture with their heads and palms.”
113 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-libās, kitāb al-mutashabbiḥūn bi’l-nisā’ wa al-mutashabbiḥāt bi’l-rijāl; Sunan
Abī Dāwūd, kitāb al-libās, bāb al-libās al-nisā’; Sunan al-Tirmidhī, kitāb al-adab, bāb mā jā’ a fī al-
mutashabbiḥāt bi’l-rijāl min al-nisā’; Sunan Ibn Māja, kitāb bāb fī al-mukhannathīn. See chapter two as
well for geographical circulation of this hadith.
imitating men.”\textsuperscript{114} The tradition’s broad scope signals its applicability to a wide range of embodied practices across time and place; imitation comprises an infinite set of corporeal techniques – gestures, postures, movements, and styles. Taken together, this assemblage of practices is a performance that produces a gendered subjectivity. The diversity of Muslim concerns over time and place demonstrates how gender is socially and culturally constructed. The recognition that gender is a mimetic performance evokes Judith Butler’s now iconic observation that, “Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.”\textsuperscript{115} The hadith is certainly not a poststructuralist attack on essences. In fact, it assumes the presence of an original gendered prototype by its very condemnation of imitation. Still, this imagined original remains elusive. This is demonstrated by the changing normative standards among Muslims governing gender in different times and places. Nevertheless, the hadith anticipates Butler’s recognition that gender is constructed through historically-constituted mimetic performances.

In its attempt to set normative parameters for gendered behavior, this tradition deploys very severe language. Cursing men who imitate women (\textit{mutashabbihūn bi-l-nisāʾ}) and women who imitate men (\textit{mutashabbihāt bi-l-rijāl}) signals the moral, spiritual, and eschatological seriousness of gendered embodiment.\textsuperscript{116} It warns people not to resemble, imitate or simulate practices associated with the opposite sex. It makes the practice of mingling and blurring the categories of gender morally reprehensible. The hadith is therefore both a declaration and an exhortation, a descriptive and a prescriptive

\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Al-mutashabbihūn bi-l-nisāʾ} wa \textit{al-mutashabbihāt bi-l-rijāl}. See footnote above.


text. As we have already seen, many Muslim scholars would draw upon this text in order to express their anxieties over specific techniques of gender confusion prevalent in their time.

For Muslim religious scholars, gender was an embodied mimetic performance that took place in everyday life. Muslim commentators of this hadith elaborated that distinctions between men and women encompassed the tonality of voice, manner of walking, as well as modes of fashion and dress.\textsuperscript{117} Bukhārī signals the importance of sartorial style as a primary marker distinguishing men from women by classifying this tradition under the subheading of dress (\textit{kitāb al-\textipa{libās}}).\textsuperscript{118} In his extensive section on men imitating women and women imitating men, Ghazzi’s anxieties result in a slippery slope logic that connects dress, embodied practice, and sexual transgression into a seamless chain of events: “If a man wears a pure silk garment, or one that is mostly silk, and styles it according to women’s fashions, then lets his forelocks hang down like a woman, perfumes himself with musk (\textit{gālia}) and is effeminate in the way he speaks, acts, and moves, then those minor transgressions may ultimately lead to [homosexual] abominations.”\textsuperscript{119} Some Quranic exegetes added social practices such as horseback

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 10:409.
\textsuperscript{118} A tradition in the collection of Abū Dāwūd makes this connection explicit: “An effeminate who had dyed his hands and feet with henna, was brought to the Prophet. The Prophet asked, ‘What is the matter with this one?’ He was told, ‘O Messenger of God, he imitates (yatashabbahu) women.’ He ordered him banished to \textit{al-naqi}. They asked, ‘O Messenger of God, shall we not kill him?’ He replied, ‘I have been forbidden to kill those who pray.’” \textit{Sunan Abī Dāwūd, kitāb al-adab, bāb fī al-hukm fī al-mukannathīn}. Dying one’s hands and feet with henna was just one visible marker associated with effeminate. Muslim jurists encouraged believers not to pray behind an effeminate unless absolutely necessary. They even legislated a specific punishment for wrongly calling someone an effeminate (or a Jew for that matter). These rulings testify to the social stigma associated with effeminacy among early Muslim pietists.
\textsuperscript{119} al-Ghazzī, \textit{Husn al-Tanabbuh li-mā warada fī al-Tashabbuh}, 10:154. \textit{Gālia} is a musk-based perfume that may be mixed with ambergris, camphor, and the oil of ben. See the entry in \textit{Lane’s Arabic-English Lexicon}.
riding and archery to a list of distinctively masculine social practices. Although the Andalusian jurist, Ibn Ḥazm, is known for his relatively lenient position on same-sex relations, he argued that this text issued a clear prohibition on same-sex physical contact (mubāshara). Ibn Taymiyya repeats this hadith frequently in multiple contexts; in one instance, he claims that men should not be striking the duff, a drum, or sing because these are practices associated with women. He likens such singers to eunuchs who were famous for being entertainers and musical performers.

Others highlighted gendered distinctions in ritual practice. Ghazzī attempts to explain how the corporeal distinctions between men and women in ritual prayer signal greater ontological and cultural distinctions between men and women. He writes:

A woman brings her limbs together during prostration, tucking her thighs into her stomach; similarly, she brings her limbs together when bowing. By contrast, a man sets his arms apart from his sides and moves his stomach away from his knees during prostration... a woman covers her entire body except for her hands and face; by contrast, a man only covers the area from his belly-button to his knees. In contrast to a man, it is not desired that a woman recite the Quran loudly nor is it prescribed that she make the call to prayer (adḥān)...the best prayer for a woman is in the corner of her home while the best prayer for a man is in the mosque...

Attempting to regulate the spatial organization of prayer, the Ḥanafī jurist, Sarakhsī, stipulates that a male imam should pray in front, not in the middle of a male congregation because when women prayer together, the female leader (imāma) remains behind the

---

120 This interpretation can be found in, al-Kashshāf, the classical philological Quranic exegesis of Zamakshari (d. 1143). For reference, translation and discussion of this passage see Karen Bauer, "Room for Interpretation: Qur’ānic Exegesis and Gender" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2008), 137.
121 ‘Ali ibn Ahmad Ibn Ḥazm, Al-Muḥallā, 11 vols. (Cairo: Idārat al-Ṭibāʻa al-Munīriyya, 1347-1352/1929-1934), 11:392. Against the majority, he classifies same-sex relations under taʿzīr or discretionary punishments, which are considerably less severe than the hadd punishments, which can result in some form of death penalty.
group, not in front. “It is detested,” explains Sarakhsī, “that men imitate and resemble women.”

The medieval Egyptian jurist and hadith commentator, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, recognized that men and women were not always able to control their gendered behavior. He held men and women who blurred the binary classification of gender morally blameworthy only if they were unable to transform their behavior (after much effort) into conventional gendered norms. Perhaps Ibn Ḥajar was referring to eunuchs and effemimates, who had their own unique appellation. A tradition condemning effemimates mimics the literary form of the tradition above:

The Prophet cursed effeminate men (mukhannathīn) and masculine women (mutarajjilāt). He said, "Cast them out of your houses.” The Prophet cast out a man, and ʿUmar cast out a woman.

The mukhannath, effeminate, did more than simply mimic women. He was part of a distinctive publicly recognized social group. The effemimates emerged as a distinct social class of men in early Islam who played multiple social roles as go-betweens, singers, performers, and entertainers. This label was not synonymous with either eunuchs or homosexuals during the earliest periods of Islamic history, although its association changed over time. Effemimates during the first century of Islam were associated with sensuality, self-indulgence, and even debauchery as the early Muslim empire began to

---

124 Al-Sarakhsī, Al-Mabsūṭ, 1:43. It is worth paying close attention to Sarakhsī’s language here. He does not prohibit gendered imitation and resemblance as illicit (ḥarām) but issues the less severe judgment of detested (makrūh).
125 al-ʿAsqalānī, Fatḥ al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 10:409.
126 Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, kitāb al-libās, ikhrāj al-mutashabbihīn biʿl-nisāʾ min al-buyūt
128 Ibid.: 675-76.
indulge itself in the new wealth and luxury that flowed in from their rapid conquests. They eventually became associated with homosexuality, and more specifically, as passive partners in intercourse. As go-betweens, the effeminate served as intermediaries between the separate worlds of males and females; they often helped men select appropriate spouses for marriage. The tenth century hadith collector, Ṭabarānī (d. 971), observes that effeminate often wore henna and spoke softly. Others said that they dyed their clothes and took on eccentric names as well. They were marked by sartorial styles and specific mannerisms.

According to the tradition above, the Prophet takes the aggressive step of actually banishing these people. However, we are not told why. Another cryptic anecdote transmitted by Bukhārī and others suggests that the Prophet cast them out because they transgressed their gendered in-between status. While in the house of Umm Salama, a wife of the prophet, an effeminate urges a potential suitor to marry a specific woman because she had eight stomach folds, making her especially desirable. After hearing of this exposure, the Prophet exclaims, “These [effeminate] should never enter upon you!” This reaction suggests that the effeminate exploited his in-between social status in order to undermine conventionally accepted norms of social distance between men and women. The effeminate’s own excitement and ability to discern features of beauty in a woman also displays potential masculine desire for women. He therefore transgresses his intermediary gender status. The possibility of desire undermines the effeminate’s

129 Ibid.: 675.
130 Ibid.: 678, 80, 87.
131 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-nikāh, bāb mā yunhā min dukhūl al-mutashabbiḥīn biʾl-nīsāʾ ‘alā al-marʾa; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-salām, bāb manʾ min al-dukhūl ‘alā al-nīsāʾ al-ajānīb
“neutral” social status as a go-between, which only becomes possible through the absence of his desire for women.

In some versions of this anecdote, the Prophet orders, “Cast them out from your homes!” Banishment of effeminates was not an uncommon punishment in the early history of Islam. The political practice of banishment deploys coercive state power in order to maintain the existing social order of gender distinctions, which the effeminates’ social in-betweenness threatened to disrupt. Banishment inverts the effeminate’s social status and spatial orientation from that of insider to outsider. Effeminates enjoyed notoriety, and even fame, in certain spaces, such as the harem, the court, and even the Prophet’s tomb. They closed the social distance between the segregated worlds of men and women. The physical in-betweenness of the effeminate body inscribed itself on the social body. Their non-gendered performance was therefore tied to certain spaces. In certain spaces, then, the performance of the effeminates’ gendered in-betweenness was acceptable. Outside these spaces, however, as the punishment of casting out suggests, to be in-between meant to be out of place.

132 Sunan Abī Dāwūd, kitāb al-adab, bābī fī al-hukm fī al-mukhannathīn; Sunan Ibn Māja, kitāb al-ludūd, bāb al-mukhannathīn
133 Rowson, "The Effeminates of Early Medina," 677, 87. The Prophet is said to have banished other effeminates from Medina, and Umayyad and Abbasid government officials were known to have banished some unruly effeminates as well.
134 As cited above, Rowson mentions the role of effeminates in the harem as go-betweens and in the court as entertainers. For descriptions of their role at the tomb of the Prophet (and other figures) see Shaun Elizabeth Marmon, Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
135 In her ethnographic account of a female Muslim healer in South India, Joyce Flueckiger has shown that in specific spaces such as a healing room, gendered distinctions can override religious distinctions and vice versa. See chapter four in Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, In Amma’s Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
The Devil’s Left Hand

“Imitating the devil and infidels is detested (*makrūh*) in matters outside ritual prayer,” stated the medieval Ḥanafī jurist, Abū Bakr al-Kāsānī, (d. 1191). The pairing of the devil with infidels indicates the devilish qualities many Muslims believed infidels to possess. Turning away from the devil therefore meant turning away from infidels; likewise, turning away from infidels meant turning away from the devil.

The Prophet is said to have forbad eating with the left hand because of its satanic association:

> When any of you eat, then let him eat with his right hand and let him drink with his right hand, because Satan eats with his left hand and drinks with his left hand.\(^{137}\)

The Ḥanafī jurist, Muḥammad al-Shaybānī, agreed: “We adhere to this. One ought not to eat with one’s left hand or drink with one’s left hand unless there is good cause.”\(^{138}\)

Commentators debated the literal meaning of this pronouncement: whether the devil could actually eat with his left hand or whether this mode of eating was simply a simulation.

---

\(^{136}\) While imitating the devil and infidels in everyday matters may have only merited the legal ruling of “detested,” it was unlawful in ritual matters, as the prohibition of praying during sunrise and sunset indicates. The point being that in prayer imitating such lowly examples was even worse. However, it sets the default legal ruling of reprehensible imitation as reprehensible and not prohibited: Abū Bakr al-Kāsānī, *Badāʾiʿ wa Ṣanāʾiʿ fī Tartīb al-Sharāʾiʿ*, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1986), 1:215.

\(^{137}\) Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-ashriba, bāb ʿādāb al-ṣaʿām, wa al-sharāb wa aḥkāmihima. Within this section, Muslim provides many other traditions that advocate eating and drinking with the right hand. Bukhārī also has a chapter on “Reciting God’s name over food and eating with the right hand.” Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, kitāb al-ṣaʿāma, bāb al-tasmiyya al-ṣaʿām wa al-akl biʾl-yāmin.

This concern over the precise technique of eating signals the greater social and religious significance of food. How to eat is an embodied practice that religions often seek to regulate. Food is “a powerful medium for the expression and transmission of culture, and more specifically, of communal identity.”

Eating can be a social event that brings people together through the act of sharing food. It can also be an event that keeps people apart by prohibiting certain types of food or certain types of people from partaking of the food. Food marks class, and is a currency of exchange between rich and poor. It can also be a moment for a believer’s expression of gratitude towards God.

In addition to regulating the types of food that could be eaten, Muslims regulated a series of corporeal etiquettes associated with it. I enumerate some of them here. Acknowledging God should not simply be a cognitive fact, but become embodied through a series of postures, gestures, and techniques. Muslim therefore composed manuals of etiquette that articulate the proper way to eat. They specified the mode of sitting, how may fingers one should eat with, when one should drink, where on the plate one should eat food, and the eating utensils themselves. The believer should express gratitude to God by praying before and after eating. Failing to mention God’s name brings the devil into the company who literally partakes in the food. However, if a person remembers to invoke God after he begins eating, Satan vomits the food eaten prior to the divine invocation. Part of the objective of eating was to exclude the devil from the community of believers partaking in the food.

Beyond the domain of food, the hadith’s association of left-handedness with the devil comprises a larger moral and symbolic cosmology that privileges right over left. The Sunnī hadith collector, Imam Muslim (d. 875), adds to the above hadith and extends the prohibition on using the left hand even further: "Do not take up anything with that [left hand] and do not give anything with that."\(^ {141}\) The devil becomes a symbolic representation of the left, all that is wrong and evil. A Muslim ought to embody this moral ontology by privileging the right over the left not only when eating and drinking, but also when doing a whole range of other things as well. “The Prophet used to love to start doing things from the right side whenever possible,” reported his wife, ʿĀʾisha, “in performing ablution, putting on his shoes, and combing his hair.”\(^ {142}\) While supplicating to God, the Prophet would rub his right hand over the afflicted area of the sick in order to heal them.\(^ {143}\)

Not all affairs favor the right side however. Sometimes, the left side is preferred. One should begin with the right foot when putting on shoes, but should begin with the left foot when removing them.\(^ {144}\) One should spit toward the left side, and not the right.\(^ {145}\) One should not touch one’s private parts or cleanse oneself with the right hand, but should do so only with the left hand.\(^ {146}\) These practices all have a negative value attached to them, however.

This right and left cosmology also highlights the role of the body in producing Islamic spaces. As already mentioned, the Prophet encouraged Muslims to sleep and be

\(^ {141}\) Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-asriba, bāb ḏāb ḏāb al-taʾām, wa al-sharāb wa ẓākāmihima
\(^ {142}\) Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, kitāb al-ʿaṭima, bāb al-tayammun fī al-aḍl wa ghayrihi
\(^ {143}\) Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, kitāb al-ṭibb, bāb ruqyat al-nabī
\(^ {144}\) Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, kitāb al-lihās, bāb yanziʿ naʾl al-yusrā
\(^ {145}\) Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, abwāb al-qaʿba, bāb ṭā yabsaʿ ʾan yamīnīhī fī al-ṣalāt
\(^ {146}\) Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, kitāb al-wuḍūʿ, bāb lā yumsik dhikarahu bi-yamīnīhī idhā bāl
buried on their right side facing Mecca.\textsuperscript{147} During prayer, if there are only two people, one should preferably stand to the right of the imam, the one leading prayer, not the left.\textsuperscript{148} The person sitting to the right, not the left, should have first opportunity to share food or drink.\textsuperscript{149} One first steps into a sacred space such as a mosque with the right foot, but steps out with the left foot.\textsuperscript{150} When entering a contaminated space such as a bathroom, one does the opposite: one steps in with the left foot, and steps out with the right foot.\textsuperscript{151}

The social imaginary that orders right and left corresponds to constructions of the sacred and profane. Entering a space with the right foot endows that space with sacredness. The sacredness of that space also endows the right side with sacredness. The reverse also holds true. Entering a space with the left foot endows that space with profanity, and the profanity of that space also endows the left side with profanity. An interactive symbolic relationship between body and space emerges.

The Quran vividly illustrates the moral chasm separating right and left. Salvation and damnation is signified by the arrangement of resurrected bodies on the right and left side of a vast plane on the Day of Judgment. It portrays the ultimate binary opposition:

\[\text{\textsuperscript{147} See section on facing Mecca above, including relevant footnotes.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{148} \textit{Sahih} Bukhari, kitab al-adhân, bâb maymanat al-masjid wa al-imâm}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{149} Anas b. Malik narrated the following anecdote: I saw the Messenger of God drinking milk. He came to my house and I milked a sheep. I then mixed the milk with water from the well for the Messenger of God. He took the bowl and drank. To his left, was Abû Bakr, and to his right, a bedouin. So he gave what remained [of the milk] to the bedouin and said, "The right! The right [first]!" \textit{Sahih} al-Bukhari, kitab al-ashriba, shurb al-laban bi'l-mâ'}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{150} \textit{Sahih} al-Bukhari, Abwâb al-Qibla, bâb al-tayammun fi dukhâl al-masjid wa ghayrihi}\]
Those on the right; what of those on the right?
  Among thornless lotus trees.
  And clustered plantains
  And spreading shade
  And water gushing
  And fruit in plenty
  Neither out of reach nor yet forbidden
  And raised couches…

And those on the left: what of those on the left?
  In scorching wind and scalding water,
  And shadow of black smoke
  Neither cool nor refreshing… 152

The asymmetrical symbolic relationship between right and left was not unique to Islam, but was also a feature of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and classical Greek thought as well. The Bible likewise arranges resurrected bodies on the right and left, marking them as either saved or damned. 153 Jews also preferred putting the right shoe on before the left shoe. 154 The Greek Pythagoras also stated one should enter a sacred place with one’s right foot and leave with one’s left. 155 The corporeal and spatial orientation of left and right helped fashion the Late Antique moral imagination.

The Cosmic Body: Between Darkness and Light

Paradoxically, Muslims strove to achieve moral symmetry by creating corporeal asymmetry between right and left. As we have seen, corporeal asymmetries oriented

---

152 Quran 56:27-34, 41-44
153 “And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world…Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire…” (Matthew 25: 33 – 34, 41; AV)
relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim, Sunnī and Shiʿī, male and female, human and animal, and Arab and non-Arab. Within these formulations, there was little (expressed) tolerance among religious scholars for a middle ground, an in-between.

The following strange anecdote ogres the evil of inbetween-ness:

The Prophet forbade that a person sit in-between sunlight and shade, saying, “It is Satan’s gathering (majlis al-shayṭān).”

The Prophet is describing a transitional moment when a person who has been sitting either under the shade or sunlight suddenly finds that he is bisected by both light and darkness simultaneously. This individual has now entered a hybrid state where he is neither under the sunlight nor shade—a threshold space that blends the two. The symbolic significance of light and dark as visible signifiers of good and evil is widespread across religion and culture, pre-modern and modern. The Quran describes itself as extricating the believer from darkness to light. A believer cannot be content to be both good and evil: she must choose. Within this cosmic symbolic context, we can understand why the Prophet might have deemed this sitting position as the equivalent to partaking in Satan’s gathering. Satan’s objective is to confound the believer by blurring the distinction between true and false, good and evil, light and dark. Satan resides in the unholy in-between. The believer must therefore move his body so that he is either

156 “Al-nabī naha ‘an yajlis bayna al-dah wa al-‘zill wa qāla majlis al-shayṭān.” This particular transmission is contained in the Musnad collection of Ahmad b. Hanbal. The editor of a more recent edition of the Musnad, Shu‘ayb Arnāʿūt, grades this hadith as authentic (ṣaḥīḥ), and this particular transmission as fair (ḥasan). See Ibn Hanbal, Musnad al-Imām Ahmad b. Hanbal, 24:147. A version without the provocative phrase “Satan’s gathering” is transmitted by Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Māja in their collections. They classify it under their chapter on proper etiquette and comportment (adab) under a subsection titled, “Sitting in-between sunlight and shade.” Sunan Abī Dāwūd, kitāb al-adab, bāb fi al-julūs bayna al-shams wa-l-‘zill; Sunan Ibn Māja, kitāb al-adab, bāb al-julūs bayna al-shams wa al-‘zill.

157 See for example, Quran 14:1.
completely under the sunlight or completely under the shade. He cannot remain a body out of place.

This interpretation also personifies this way of sitting as the way of Satan.\(^{158}\) This anthropomorphism enfleshes the devil, who is otherwise portrayed as a non-corporeal spirit-demon (\textit{jinn}).\(^{159}\) Of course, a believer who desires to be saved ought not to embody the ways of the devil. This instance is a clear illustration of how pre-modern Muslims imagined the social body as a cosmic enterprise. The physical body mediated a social body that was simultaneously a cosmic body. The Prophet therefore literally and figuratively urges the believer to align her corporeal orientation with her cosmic orientation by choosing between darkness and light.

One commentator also offers a “scientific” explanation of the anecdote. He argues that a possible reason for this prohibition is that sitting in between sunlight and shade can physically harm the body. The convergence of two opposing influences (\textit{al-muʿathharīn al-muttaḍāddīn}) upon the body at a single instance confounds its temperament (\textit{mizāj}).\(^{160}\) The “scientific” explanation that attributes the simultaneity of oppositions a negative impact on the body is worth examining. Through the convergence of light and darkness - which, not unlike right and left, symbolically signify good and evil


\(^{159}\) While a majority of Muslims consider the devil to be among the jinn, who are made from smokeless fire, a minority consider the devil be a fallen angel, and thus constituted by light. Of course, the devil cannot really be seen. However, in some Muslim narratives he can take human form. Jinn possession is an occurrence that can be traced to hadith texts.

\(^{160}\) Ibid. Pre-Modern Muslims subscribed to an understanding of the body as constituted by four humors: black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood. Avicenna stated that different colors would impact the body. It was possible for color to affect some humors more than others, causing imbalance. The scientific explanation for this hadith given by the commentator expresses this scientific worldview. As the commentator suggests, the hadith itself may convey this view as well. As mentioned earlier, the compilation of hadith corresponded with the translation of Greek texts into Arabic during the Abbasid period. The theory of four humors was conceptualized by the Greek Hypocrites in the fourth century B.C.
– the explanation metaphorically suggests that the admixture of opposing properties, or hybridity, can be bad.

In her famous study of Levitical sumptuary regulations, Mary Douglas highlighted the dangers of hybridity. She observed, “Different classes of things shall not be confused.”161 Put differently, to classify and keep things in their place is a significant discursive practice in itself. Classifications of, and clear boundaries between actions and social groups construct orders of purity, and combat the contamination of hybridity, ambiguity, and the on-the-ground messiness of ordinary contact and encounter in everyday life. Constructing classes or differences becomes a critical discursive and social practice for imagining the holy. For early Muslims, sitting in between light and darkness like the devil, waving like Jews and Christians, standing up like Persians and Byzantines, kneeling like camels, wiping the shoes like Shi‘īs, or walking like women undermined normative classifications and categories.

Ironically, through the construction of such polarities, Muslims styled themselves as the “middle community” that traversed the straight path of moderation between excess or deficiency. The prohibition of one in-between therefore engendered a different in-between. However, as we saw in the previous chapter with the curious case of the odd shoe, in some cases, polarities do not support the cosmic order. Rather, equilibrium is achieved through balance and proportion. The Muslims conception of an ideal order therefore enforced some polarities but resisted others.

CHAPTER SEVEN
SENSES OF DISTINCTION

The senses cross over and translate into each other. You feel redness. You see music…the medley of senses bleeding into each others’ zone of operation.

— Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*

Islamic Sense and Sensibility

Complementing sartorial and gestural regimes, the sensorial regime aesthetically mediates Muslim distinction. The human sensory apparatus is situated within the body, and is therefore embodied. The five senses - sight, sound, touch, taste and smell – mediate the body’s interaction with the world. The sense of sight transforms the body, as well as the gestures, colors, and sartorial styles that mediate it, into a publicly visible site of social and cultural meaning. The sense of touch, on other hand, haptically evokes the intimacy of embodied human interaction.

The sensory regime shifts out perspective beyond the body. Optic and sonic waves can cross over long distances and orient a sensible person to the world around her. Observation or listening are usually prerequisites to imitation.¹ Because of the power of sight and sound over human perception, religious and political elites were particularly keen on regulating the visual and acoustic landscapes of Muslim society. However, they also recognized the power of the “nearer” senses such as smell, touch, and taste. They understood that sensory experiences in their totality are potentially (and dangerously)

¹ Only a Muslim who had actually seen (or heard) the Prophet in person was conferred by Muslim posterity the authoritative status of Companion. Imitating the Prophet began with seeing him.
transformative - the inroads to the heart and mind. Over history, Muslim religious and political elites sought to discipline the senses in order to shape Muslim subjectivity in distinctively Islamic ways.

The capacity for sensory regulation suggests that the senses are culturally conditioned. “Each culture specifies what we should ‘expect to see’ when we see,” Michel De Certeau acutely observed.² Pierre Bourdieu notes that the dual “sense” of taste ought to “remind us that taste in the sense of the faculty of immediately and intuitively judging aesthetic values is inseparable from taste in the sense of the capacity to discern the flavours [sic] of foods which implies a preference for some of them.”³ In other words, culture shapes both our aesthetic and culinary tastes at once. Each culture therefore also teaches us how to see, hear, touch, taste and smell. Just as we can speak of a “cultural body,” we can speak of a culture of senses, or cultural sensibilities. Flipping this observation, accenting how the senses operate in a given historical and cultural context provides windows into a specific culture. According to French historian, Alain Corbin, “The organization of the sensory regime constitutes one of the major elements in the formation of the social imagination.”⁴ Even more, sensory experiences “form the building blocks of cosmologies, class hierarchies and political orders; they can enforce social structures or transgress them.”⁵

Put differently, monitoring changes in the sensory landscape represents one way of indexing social and cultural change. In examining how early Muslims reshaped the

---

sensory landscape of the new polity, we also learn how they changed their socio-cultural landscape as well. More importantly, we learn how specific sensory experiences take on new cultural meanings, exposing both their fluidity and volatility. For example, when the early Muslim polity decides to alter the architectural landscape by prohibiting the residences of non-Muslims from being higher than those of Muslims or banning the public display of crosses, new sociabilities and relations of power between rulers and ruled are produced. These new sensory relationships therefore map new social landscapes.

Some recent studies have challenged the orthodox historical narrative that cleaves modernity and pre-modernity into a visual/literate and oral/aural binary division.\textsuperscript{6} Enlightenment thinking associated vision with reason, and the nonvisual senses with desire. Post-Enlightenment modernity’s emphasis on vision then corresponded to its self-perception as more rational. In this scheme, pre-modernity is perceived as less visual and therefore less rational. Seeking to decenter modernity’s cycloptic eye, some historians have argued that hearing, touch, smell, and taste still remain significant modes of experiencing the modern world, despite the intensification of ocular-centrism. They also suggest that vision was not so alien to pre-modern sensorial regimes, despite a greater emphasis on sensory integration and synchronicity – a key observation that I make in this chapter. This more egalitarian approach to sensory history has important implications for our perceptions of time. At once, this reevaluation of sensory hierarchies suggests that the modern rational gaze was tempered by the affection and sensuality associated with

\textsuperscript{6} This binary vision of sensory history was advocated by Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan. For different approaches to this history see, ———, \textit{Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Martin Jay, \textit{Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
nonvisual senses, while pre-modernity was not so irrational and nonvisual; the Enlightenment was not so rationally inclined, nor was pre-enlightenment history completely enslaved by desire.

However, the insight that the senses are integrated is actually not new. The ninth century Abbasid litterateur, Jāḥiẓ, integrates the discreet senses into a multisensory theory. In his epistle on the virtues and vices of singing girls, Jāḥiẓ observes that the sensual experiences are most potent when discreet senses work in concert. Many sensual experiences, however, are specific to a particular sense such as sight, sound, smell and taste, and lack the capacity to arouse the other senses. He observes:

Food and drink belong to the domain of the sense of taste, and no other sense participates with it therein. If a man were to eat musk, which belongs to the domain of smelling, he would find it disgusting and loathsome, because it was in origin congealed blood. If he were to sniff the odours [sic] of foodstuffs, at a time when he had no appetite, or were to persist in simply gazing at such things, it would turn out to be unprofitable. Or if he were to bring into contact with his hearing any perfume or [other] sweet-scented thing, he would get no pleasure from it.  

Here, Jāḥiẓ is concerned with building up his satirical praise of singing girls and the sensual pleasures they bring to desiring men. In contrast, singing girls appeal to a multitude of senses:

…when one comes to consider singing-girls, three of the senses are involved all together…The eye has the sight of a beautiful or [otherwise] attractive girl…; the hearing has from her its meed of that which is attended by no inconvenience, that which the organ of hearing finds its

---

sole delight; touching her leads to carnal desire and longing for sexual intercourse…

The distinctive appeal of singing girls derives from the fact that a man “has at one and the same time three concurrent pleasures, such as he would not find conjoined in anything else, and the like of which the [individual] senses could never give him.”

The senses, then, work in concert. One need not have the rare neurological disorder of synesthesia, the condition where the incitement of one sense automatically evokes another, for one’s hearing to be impacted by sight, or one’s taste to be impacted by sound. Neurologically, the senses are surprisingly integrated, despite human perception that they work separately. However, this sensory synchronicity is not just biologically determined, but also culturally configured. In this chapter, I build on Jāḥīẓ’s theory to show how “sensory overload” underpinned Muslim anxieties over participation in public ceremonies. I argue that the sensory intensity of these events, their capacity to overwhelm not just one or two but all the physical senses, made them especially dangerous to the guardians of Islam such as Ibn Taymiyya who believed they threatened the religio-political order of Mamluk Damascus.

Jāḥīẓ also alerts the reader to the dual meaning of the word, sense. He argues that through their ability to appeal to multiple senses, singing-girls wield a unique ability to attract the hearts of desirous men. The interaction of the senses with the sensual heart leads Jāḥīẓ to name the heart as a fourth sense that singing-girls appeal to:

---

8 Ibid. It is also not unlikely the singing-girls wore perfume, which would have appealed to a fourth (physical) sense, smell.

9 Ibid.
All these senses are, as it were, scouts for the heart, and witnesses testifying before it. When the girl raises her voice in song, the gaze is riveted on her, the hearing is directed attentively to her, and the heart surrenders itself to her sovereignty. Hearing and sight race each other to see which of the two can transmit its message about her to the heart before the other, and they arrive simultaneously at the heart’s core and pour out what they have observed. From this there arises, together with the feeling of joyous abandon, [an indulgence in] the sense of touch.

Due to their multipronged attack on a man’s heart, Jāḥiẓ argues, “with singing-girls lies the greatest temptation.” Jāḥiẓ’s microanalysis of sensory experience vividly depicts the interaction between sense and affect. The metaphor of the senses as “scouts for the heart” highlights the ability of sight and sound to traverse beyond the immediate space of the body and to transform the agent’s affective sensibilities; they incite a different sense altogether - the more intimate sense of touch.

Sense therefore leads to sensibility, the capacity to feel and perceive. Sense is more than a physical sensation, but an emotional experience that shapes human perception. To sense something is also to have a hunch, a feeling, or an intuitive grasp of a situation that may or may not be connected to the ordinary five senses. Sense encompasses the extrasensory. To have “sense” also means to have “mental faculties in their normal condition of sanity” or “natural understanding and intelligence.” Sense is therefore not just an affective or intuitive attribute, but also a cognitive one. The semantic field of sense therefore ironically oscillates between sensual and nonsensual experience. Within this elastic semantic field of sense, the seemingly distinct fields of human perception - intuition, cognition, and affection - all blend into a single interiority.

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{See “Sensibility,” in The Oxford English Dictionary}\]
\[\text{See entry, “Sense,” in Oxford English Dictionary}\]
This semantic duality also applies to the individual senses as well. A blind person may very well have vision, deep insight into the future horizons of possibility. As mentioned above, a person with taste not only can discern different foods, but is also culturally refined and sophisticated. As Sufis pointed out, each person not only has a corporeal scent but also a spiritual scent, which may be either fragrant or foul. Contact does not just refer to physical touch, but also to social interaction and intimacy. In the Quran, to be deaf does not mean that one can no longer hear; it means that one has become intentionally inattentive to divine guidance. The common usage of sight, sound, hearing, taste, and smell as metaphor illustrates the power of all five senses to profoundly shape human subjectivity.

The semantic plasticity of sense and sensibility therefore highlights what this study of the discourse and practice of Muslim distinction has continued to illustrate: the integrated subject. Just as the physical senses are surprisingly integrated so are the different dimensions of human subjectivity and perception. As Jāḥiẓ illustrates, the dual conception of sense highlights how aesthetically mediated practices draw together the affective and cognitive, sensory and extrasensory into an integrated whole.

The Arabic language corroborates and expands on these observations. The eighteenth century Indian encyclopedist, ʿAbd al-Aʿlā al-Tahānawī, states that the semantic field of the Arabic word, *shuʿūr*, encompasses senses, feelings, perception and

---


15 For example, see Quran 2:18.
This densely layered concept corresponds almost identically to the multiple layers of meaning of the English word, sense. Other Arabic words, derived from its trilateral root, sh-ʿ-r, expand on these meanings. The Arabic plural, mashāʿir (s. mashʿar), signifies the five senses: hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch.

Another derivative of the same trilateral root connects sense to symbol. In tandem with its linguistic relatives, shiʿār evokes the interconnectedness among the concepts of sensation, intuition, affection, cognition and symbol. As discussed earlier, shiʿār became a versatile keyword in the tashabbuh discourse that indicated Muslim recognition of the centrality of symbols to social interaction, aesthetics, and politics. Senses are especially attuned to symbols because they are carriers of meaning, whether cultural, social, political or religious. As Clifford Geertz would have it, symbols mediate culture, remaining to be read and decoded by the sensitive and sensible anthropologist. Yet, although symbols pique the senses, they transcend them. They shape both individual and collective subject, mediating between the two. Symbols signify belonging to those within a group and distinction to those outside; they enforce social boundaries. However, symbols also cross social boundaries, leading to anxieties over cultural contamination. As already seen, Muslim religious scholars were attentive to the dangerous potential of symbols to diffuse across and subvert established boundaries, wreaking havoc, disorder, and novelty. And so, when talking about senses, one almost inevitably ends up talking about sensibilities and symbols as well.

The urban economy of space intensified the impact of sense, sensibility, and symbols upon the collective. Ceremonies - whether festivals, funerals, or pilgrimages - were especially potent spaces for reshaping Muslim sensations. Muslims paid special attention to regulating the urban landscape, seeking to muzzle public expressions that threatened to intrude upon Muslim sense and sensibility, occluding the memory of Muslim imperial sovereignty and erasing the clarity of religious distinction. Muslims efforts to regulate distinction tended to focus on cities, which, as discussed in chapter one, helped anchor and sustain imperial authority.

In what follows, I roughly follow the format of previous chapters in order to foreground the reconfiguration of early Muslim and non-Muslim sense and sensibility to the symbols of Islamic empire and religion. Decentering modern ocular-centrism, I show that pre-modern Muslim elites at the dawn of Islam privileged the elite gaze of religio-political surveillance. Yet, I also show that Muslim elites remained attentive to the disruptive potential of all the senses – sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch – whether operating individually or together. First, I highlight some cases that illustrate how sight, sound, and touch independently mediated Muslim distinction. I foreground Muslim attempts to reconfigure the audiovisual landscape of the city by regulating the visibility of crosses and the audibility of religious noise. I then draw attention to material culture - how religious scholars argued that the consumption of food and drink from gold and silver wares would alter their “taste.” I end this chapter on a sensational note: the possibility of sensory overload at public ceremonies such as festivals, funerals, and pilgrimages – celebrations that threatened to overwhelm all the senses at once.
Imperial senses: The Pact of ʿUmar revisited

The Pact of ʿUmar shows us that the cultural overdetermination of vision is not only a modern phenomenon. Even pre-modern Muslims saw like a modern state, which one author describes as the following:

Certain forms of knowledge and control require a narrowing of vision. The great advantage of such tunnel vision is that it brings into sharp focus certain limited aspects of an otherwise far more complex and unwieldy reality. This very simplification, in turn, makes the phenomenon at the center of the field of vision more legible and hence more susceptible to careful measurement and calculation. Combined with similar observations, an overall, aggregate, synoptic view of a selective reality is achieved, making possible a high degree of schematic knowledge, control, and manipulation.\(^\text{17}\)

In other words, states only see certain things – those features of public life that are significant to their survival. Unregulated, visual images are potentially seductive. “The danger of images is that we become like them—we imitate them, rather than simply the reverse.”\(^\text{18}\) The subversive potential of images helps explain why states place the greatest priority on regulating the visual landscape. Vision can panoptically traverse great distances in a short period of time, absorbing large amounts of information along the way. Of course, as Foucault has suggested, the modern state’s panoptic vision is not only sharper but also wider.\(^\text{19}\) Still, its gaze remains selective so that it can allocate its resources properly.


This observation also holds true for the other senses as well. The state’s ability to hear, touch, taste, and smell was also limited to those practices that most concerned the preservation of its sovereignty, not those of the wider society. It is important to limit the historical significance of the state’s official representation. A state’s sensorial scheme “did not successfully represent the actual activity of the society they depicted nor were they intended to; they represent only that slice of it that interested the official observer.”

While the elite sensibilities of governance emphasized sight and hearing - the primary senses for surveillance of the public order - non-elite sensibilities were closer to the body, balancing the audiovisual with sensitivity to touch, taste and smell. “The decreed hierarchy of the senses both ordered and reflected the hierarchy which functioned within society.” The state had much less incentive to monitor these more immediate senses. As we shall see, this did not mean, however, that they were inattentive to them.

A reclassification of the ordinances of ʿUmar according to a sensorial regime illustrates a politicized hierarchy of senses that privileges visibility. This suggests that pre-Modern Muslim political elites, like their modern counterparts, lived in an ocular-centric world - a world that privileged sight as the primary means of perception. By seeing what early Muslims saw in the Pact of ʿUmar, we gain a better grasp on the early Muslim religio-political imagination. However, by attempting to use other senses as well, this grasp becomes even stronger.

---

20 Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed, 3.
21 Corbin, Time, Desire and Horror: Towards a History Of the Senses, 191.
22 While many of the stipulations necessarily involve the body such as teaching Quran to children or selling alcohol to Muslims, a smaller number foreground the body by specifying the mode of gestural performance, bodily comportment, dress, or alteration to the body itself i.e. hair. I focus on this more restricted definition here.
Vision draws the state’s attention both to and beyond the body. It is important to realize that the Pact’s focus on distinctive non-Muslim sartorial style was not just a function of dress’ relationship to the body. It was also a function of its visibility. Dress possesses the power to visually mark individuals and shape the visual landscape of Muslim society. The Pact regulated certain distinctive markers of non-Muslim dress in order to visually set them apart in public life. Religious scholars also recognized the visual power of a believer’s sartorial choices; they monitored Muslim use of black dye, white turbans, blue Sufi robes, purple silk embroidery, gold signet rings. The Pact’s regulation of the visual landscape of society extended beyong the body as well. The Pact banned the public display of crosses, books, and celebratory lights; it also prohibited the renovation of churches and building of non-Muslim homes that were higher than Muslim ones.

Yet, despite its preeminence, sight was not the only sense that the Pact attempted to regulate. The second sense in the hierarchy was hearing, because, like sight, its reach could span vast distances across the public landscape. The Pact of ʿUmar mandated the inaudibility of particular religious symbols that might rival Islam or offend Muslim sensibilities. Christians were prohibited from publicly banging drums, blaring voices too loudly during ritual worship, and even taking Muslim names. The Pact sought to silence Christian audibility by suppressing church song and the loud striking of knockers - musical instruments used in ritual contexts. It sought to prevent Christian religious noise from crossing the porous boundaries of church walls and windows and entering Muslim ears.
Table 7.1 The Pact of ‘Umar – A Sensory Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Prohibition</th>
<th>Regulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visibility</strong></td>
<td>We shall clip the forelocks of our heads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not attempt to resemble (<em>tashabbuh</em>) Muslims in any way with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>regard to their dress, as for example, with the <em>qalansuwa</em>, the turban,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>footwear, or parting the hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall dress in our traditional fashion wherever we may be and we shall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bind the <em>zunnār</em> around our waists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not ride on saddles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not build new churches, monasteries, monk cells, nor shall we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>repair any of them that have fallen into ruin or that are located in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>quarters of Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not display our crosses or our books anywhere in the roads or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>markets of the Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not display lights in any of the roads of the Muslims or in their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>marketplaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not engrave Arabic inscriptions on our seals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not wear swords or bear weapons of any kind, or even carry them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>on our person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall show deference to Muslims and shall rise from our seats when</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>they wish to sit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audibility</strong></td>
<td>We shall not build our homes higher than theirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall only beat our clappers (drums) in our churches very quietly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not raise our voices in our church services, nor in the presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multiple Senses</strong></td>
<td>We shall not speak as they do, nor shall we adopt their names (<em>kunyas</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not go outside on Palm Sunday or Easter, nor shall we raise our</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>voices in our funeral processions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not hold public religious ceremonies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We shall not come near them during our funeral processions/bury the dead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>amongst the Muslims</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Pact’s emphasis on limiting the sensory intrusion of ceremonies such as festivals and funeral processions underscores their capacity to arouse multiple sensations. As I discuss in the final section of this chapter, they drew together sight, sound, touch, taste and smell into a truly sensational experience that carried the potential to overload the Muslim sensorium and disrupt the social order.
Making Crosses Invisible

The eyes of the early Muslim state gazed over the cityscape. By reshaping the city’s visual landscape, the Pact of ʿUmar represents Muslim attempts to erase Byzantine-Christian imperial memories and fills those urban spaces with a new imperial memory of Muslim sovereignty. Through this reconfiguration of space and time, the Pact transforms the city into a chronotope of Muslim distinction that advances a new Islamic imperial narrative. The Pact prohibited Christians from doing certain activities that would have transformed the visual character of the urban landscape: building homes higher than those of Muslims; building new churches and renovating old ones; and displaying holy books, ceremonial lights, and crosses. These ordinances suppress key features of the architectural and material mediators of Byzantine-Christian power.

The icon of the cross was perhaps the most visible mediator of Byzantine-Christian religio-political memory. Making the cross invisible to the public emptied the urban space of these memories. However, the cross’s visibility was virtually ubiquitous. It could be projected virtually anywhere; it could be printed on books, painted on walls, placed on top of churches, hung around the necks of devotees, nailed onto doors, imprinted on coins, and sewn into clothes. The cross’s simultaneous visibility and mobility, its mediation of the sacred and profane, non-local and local, made it an especially subversive symbol to the nascent Islamic imperial landscape. No other icon posed such a direct challenge to the sovereignty of the Muslim empire, and perhaps no other Byzantine-Christian symbol received as much attention from early Muslims.

23 As discussed in chapter five, a chronotope is a term coined by literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, that literally means “time-space.”
Tracing early Muslim responses therefore gives us insight into the formation of Muslim collective consciousness as a religio-political entity.

Historical records suggest that Muslim antipathy towards the cross began with the first Muslim caliphs. Christian chronicles record that some people brought down crosses during the reigns of the second caliph ʿUmar (r. 634–644), while Syriac chronicles state that a decree issued during the reign of the third caliph, ʿUthmān (r. 644-656) ordered that crosses be removed from public spaces such as walls and streets, and not be displayed during feasts and religious holidays. Even the first Umayyad caliph Muʿāwiya (r. 660–680) sought to efface crosses from coins. In the late seventh century, when the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Mālik (r. 685–705) ordered the removal of crosses from public spaces to accompany his Islamicizing reforms, he had already built upon a tradition of Muslim iconoclasm. However, some like Abbasid caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775–785) seemed to admire them. Despite widespread Muslim anxieties over the cross, it figures as a relatively insignificant topic in the hadith literature. The most widespread tradition on the issue is an apocalyptic tradition, which states that Jesus will return at the end times and “will break the cross and kill the pig.” Other traditions focus on dress: ʿĀʾisha stated that her husband, the Prophet, “never left anything at home that

---

24 In his history of the early Muslim community, Donner suggests otherwise, however. He does not recognize Muslim antipathy towards the cross until the iconoclastic reign of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Mālik. Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 208.


28 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-buyūʿ, bāb qāṭi al-khnīzr; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-imān, bāb nāsīl ʿisā ibn māryam hākimān bi-sharīʿa nabiyyinā Muhammad
formed a cross except that he cut that portion off."

Some traditions even deemed touching the cross impure. In one instance, the fourth caliph, Ali, is said to have preferred performing ritual ablution in order to purify himself from having touched the cross.\(^{30}\)

However, Muslims were not the first to object to the cross. The public display of crosses had become a source of conflict between Christians and Jews during the brief Sasanian occupation of Syria prior to the Muslim conquests. “Polemics between Muslims and Christians seem simply to have sharpened an already existing debate on this issue.”\(^{31}\) Muslim criticism of the cross is said to have spurred a more systematic and widespread Christian iconoclastic movement during the eighth century. In fact, archeological evidence from Jordan even shows that Christians living in Muslim lands carefully attempted to efface images, themselves, before renovating them.\(^{32}\) Yet, as one historian observes, “no long-sustained and total repression of Christian images ever took place in the early Islamic period.”\(^{33}\) We even find instances of Muslim admiration of the icons.\(^{34}\)

The recurrent attempts of Muslim caliphs to efface the cross signal more than their desire for religious legitimacy; they indicate the enduring presence of crosses in public life.


\(^{30}\) See “the chapter on touching the cross (bāb mass al-ṣalīb)” in ʿAbd al-Razzāq b. al-Sanʿānī, Al-Muṣannaf, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-ʿẓamī, 12 vols. (Beirut: Maktab al-Islāmī, 1983-).


\(^{32}\) For additional references see Ibid., 131.


Muslim antipathy toward the cross also seems to have died down after the ninth century, and was replaced by a doctrinal focus on the trinity. This transformation in polemical focus from image to doctrine is an indicator of a gradual abstraction in Muslim imaginations of religion that accompanied both the stabilization of imperial rule, the emergence of literacy, and the gradual sophistication of Islamic discourses. Once Islamic imperial rule was secure, it became less politically important to focus attention on the public display of crosses, despite continued wars with the Byzantine enemy. In future reiterations of the Pact of ʿUmar, some caliphs required that Christians wear crosses in public spaces.\textsuperscript{35} The cross’s suppression in the Pact of ʿUmar represents a transitional moment of initial Muslim political and religious vulnerability that required the temporary invisibility of the cross in the public sphere.

\textit{“Allāh ho Akbar!”: Acoustics of Muslim Distinction}

In the seventeenth century, Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī took offense to the recent European invention of alarm clocks. European ambassadors often gifted the Ottoman court with such clocks, accompanied by a clockmaker to maintain them.\textsuperscript{36} Possessing such clocks had become fashionable among Turkish elites who were prone to imitating European customs.\textsuperscript{37} Ghazzī complains that they had replaced the \textit{adhān}, the distinctively Muslim summons to prayer, as a new mechanical means of timekeeping. However, these clocks not only helped usher in new perceptions of the passage of time, but also acoustically undermined Muslim culture. Ghazzī declared that the alarm clocks produced Christian

\textsuperscript{36} Otto Kurz, \textit{European Clocks and Watches in the near East} (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 47.
sounds, not Muslim sounds. The spread of alarm clocks sonically transmitted Christian sounds across European borders into Muslim lands. In the view of Ghazzī, Muslims were not only importing European objects, they were also assimilating European culture - displacing the key symbols of Islam in the process. Ghazzī’s response illustrates the symbolic role played by the adhān in the Muslim religious imagination. According to one early oral tradition: “The adhān is the marker of faith [in Islam].”

The ability of sound to both demarcate socio-cultural boundaries and cross them was also true in late antiquity. The central role of the Quran in ritual performance directed early Muslim attention to the powerful role of sound in shaping human subjectivities. This acoustic imaginary became linguistically encoded in the Arabic word, al-samʿ, which literally means “hearing,” but which became a metonym for the divine revelation of the Quran itself. As Jāḥiẓ observes in his epistle on singing girls, hearing competes with seeing to affectively, cognitively, and spiritually shape the human subject: “hearing and sight race each other to see which of the two can transmit its message.”

The Pact of ʿUmar illustrated that Muslim political elites sought to regulate the projection of Christian noise in the urban soundscapes. An examination of the dialogical development of the Muslim call to prayer illustrates the role of acoustics in shaping Muslim religious distinction in the public landscape. We shall see that the adhān did not just acoustically signal religious distinction; it signaled political authority as well.

---

38 “Al-adhān shiʿār al-imān.” The Yemeni collector of oral traditions, ʿAbd al-Razzāq, attributes the tradition to the second caliph, Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (d. 634). The presence of this tradition in the earliest collections of traditions suggests that at least from the eighth century, and most certainly earlier, Muslims imbued the adhān with religio-political symbolism. See ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī, Al-Muṣannaf, ed. Ḥabīb al-Rahmān al-Aʿzāmī, 11 vols. (Beirut: Al-Majlis al-ʿIlmī, 1970-), 1:483, hadith # 1858:10:172, hadith # 18716.

Jewish Horns, Christian Knockers, Muslim voices

Like reciting the Quran, announcing the *adhān* became a fundamental aesthetic expression of Islam. Like Ghazzū, early Muslims perceived the *adhān* as a *shiʿār*, or distinctive symbol, of Islam, that sonically projected Islam’s difference from other religions across great distances in public spaces. The *adhān* empowered the human voice to incite docile bodies to remember their most fundamental ritual obligation: prayer. In the imperial context it also functioned as a daily acoustic reminder to non-Muslim subjects of Muslim political dominion.

The call to prayer, or *adhān* (sing. *udhun*) in Arabic, literally means ears. One therefore listens to the *adhān* (call to prayer) with their *adhān* (ears). *Adhān*, then, is a metonym for the call to prayer since one must not merely hear, but listen, and ultimately respond to the call, first by verbally repeating a series of litanies after each statement, and then, physically performing the ritual prayer. Listening to the *adhān* with one’s ears ideally results in a disciplining of the body through regulated ritual performance. The *adhān* consists of a basic formula announced prior to the ritual prayer.\(^{40}\)

---

\(^{40}\) I will discuss Twelver Shi‘ī variances on the Sunnī version above in the following section.
Table 7.2 The Sunnī Adhān

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adhān</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allāh ho Akbar! (x4)</td>
<td>God is Great!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashhadu an Lā ilaha illā Allāh! (x2)</td>
<td>I bear witness that there is no Deity but God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashhadu anna Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh! (x2)</td>
<td>I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ḥayya ʿalā al-Ṣalāt! (x2)</td>
<td>Come to Prayer!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ḥayya ʿalā al-Falāḥ! (x2)</td>
<td>Come to Success!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Ṣalāt khayr min al-nawm! (x2 morning only)</td>
<td>“Prayer is better than sleep!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allāh ho Akbar! (x2)</td>
<td>God is Great!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lā ilaha illā Allāh! (x1)</td>
<td>There is no Deity but God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sunnīs credit the Caliph ʿUmar for inserting the phrase, “‘Prayer is better than sleep!””

They also credit him for helping to structure the format of the adhān:

When the Muslims arrived in Medina, they used to congregate for prayer, but would guess its [proper] time. In those days, the practice of calling the adhān for prayer had not yet been introduced. One day, they discussed the issue of the call to prayer. Some people suggested the use of a knocker (nāqūs) like the Christians, others proposed a trumpet like the horn used by the Jews, but ʿUmar was the first to suggest that a man should call...

---

41 See for example Abū ʿAbd Allāh Mālik b. Anas and Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī, Muwaṭṭaʾ al-Imām Mālik: Riwāyat Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī, ed. Ṭabd al-Wahhāb b. ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, 4 ed. (Cairo: Wizārat al-awqāf al-majlis al-aʿlā lil-shuʾūn al-islāmiyya, 1994), 54. It is worth noting that Maimonides composed a treatise, The Laws of Repentance as part of his Mishneh Torah, which discusses the shofar horn, blown on Rosh Hashanah, which he takes to mean, "Awake, sleepers from your sleep, and slumberers arise from your slumber!" Its resemblance to the phrase in the dawn adhān, “Prayer is better than sleep” is striking. See Moses Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 3:4.

42 The nāqūs is a knocker once used, and in some places still used, by Eastern Christians to publicly call the community to prayer. The F. Buhl describes it as “a board pierced with holes which is beaten with a rod.” Pre-Islamic poets also make reference to it. See the entry “Nāḳūs,” in Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition.

43 It is unclear which instrument is being referred to here. The shofar, or a ram’s horn, is blown on different celebratory dates during the Jewish calendar, but is associated especially with Rosh Hashanah. It dates to biblical times, and may very well have been among the instruments used by Arab Jews. There is another instrument, a trumpet, that is also blown on significant dates of the Jewish calendar.
[the people] for the prayer; so the Messenger of God ordered Bilāl to get up and call the adhān for prayer.\textsuperscript{44}

Another hadith tradition suggests that using fire to call people to prayer was associated with Jews and the knocker with Christians.\textsuperscript{45} It is unlikely Jews had anything to do with fire, although substantial numbers of Jews resided within the Sasanian Empire, where Zoroastrians used fire in their religious rituals. The medieval Egyptian commentator, Ibn Hājur al-ʿAsqalānī, reconciles these divergent traditions by claiming that each religious community had their own distinctive way of publicly announcing their ritual worship: Christians used knockers, Jews used horns, and Zoroastrians used fire.\textsuperscript{46} Western historians have suggested that the adhān developed gradually, and had multiple forms over both time and place, which helps explain the variations among the schools of law.\textsuperscript{47}

Some early twentieth century Orientalists have suggested that the adhān actually derived from Christian mass or Jewish Tephillā.\textsuperscript{48}

It is unclear whether the call to prayer had much religious meaning in the beginning. If we assume that it did not, and was initially merely a logistical matter without any religious significance, that would explain why Muslims were initially willing

\textsuperscript{44} Šāhīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-adhān, bāb badʿ al-adhān. This tradition is transmitted by Ibn ʿUmar who gives credit to his father. In a different version of the story, another Companion, ʿAbd Allāh b. Zayd is credited with having a dream. ʿUmar is not the first to inform the Prophet to call the adhān, and is said to have kept his dream a secret for nearly three weeks. See Sunan Abī Dāwūd, kitāb al-ṣalāt, bāb al-adhān.

\textsuperscript{45} “[When deciding how to publicly announce the ritual prayer] they suggested using fire or a bell, referring to the Jewish and Christian practice respectively. However, Bilāl was ordered to call [vocally] the adhān twice and the iqāma once.” Šāhīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-anbiyāʾ, bāb al-adhān, bāb al-ṣalāt bāb al-adhān.


\textsuperscript{48} For the argument that the adhān developed out of Christian mass see C.H. Becker, "Zur Geschichte Des Islamischen Gebet," Der Islam 3(1912): 387; For the argument it was based on Jewish ritual see E. Mittwoch, Zur Entstehungsgeschichte Des Islamischen Gebets Und Kultus (Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1913), 25; Both references cited in Howard, "The Development of the Adhān and Iqāma of the Salāt in Early Islam," 228.
to copy Jewish or Christian practice. It was only after they decided to enact a distinct Muslim call to prayer that it began to carry symbolic religious value. In other words, collective distinction eventually produced religious symbolism. However, if we assume that the call to prayer had religious meaning from the very beginning – a more likely scenario given the significance of Muslim ritual prayer - but that Muslims were initially still willing to imitate Christians and Jews, then this anecdote may represent one of those pivotal moments in early Muslim history that helped turn the religious tide from Muslim imitation to distinction. Regardless of the interpretation, the anecdote indicates the debates and disagreements early Muslims must have had in attempting to carve out a unique monotheistic space among existing Near Eastern religious communities. In this case, Muslims created a new religious aesthetic that sonically projected across the public landscape.

I will briefly address Muslim discussions of bells because they became a central religious symbol to Christianity, East and West. Ibn Ḥajar condemns the use of bells because they resemble the knockers that Christians use during church worship. He notes that Christians living in Muslim lands eventually used the bell to publicly call the community to prayer. This helps contextualize hadith traditions that condemn bells as “musical instruments of the devil.” Another equally pejorative tradition warns, “The

49 The adhān’s religious value and symbolism only intensified through the reference to ʿUmar’s divinely-inspired dream. It suggests that God was the true source of this new ritual.
50 The reference to ʿUmar, the namesake of the Pact of ʿUmar, further imbues the adhān with religious symbolism.
51 al-ʿAsqalānī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-libās wa al-zīna, bāb kirāhat al-kalb wa al-jaras fī al-safar.
angels do not accompany any group with whom there is a dog or a bell.” According to commentators the context for these condemnations are not because Arab Christians contemporary to the Prophet used them in churches. Church bells, which had originated in the Europe, are not mentioned in the East until the ninth century. Pre-Islamic Arabs hung bells around animals in order to defend against the evil eye, which sonically undermined God’s omnipotence over human destiny. This superstition offended Muslim pious sensibilities. However, with the appearance of church bells in the East, these traditions – and the bell itself - took on new meanings, as bells became a primary marker of Christianity in public life. It is even said, that as a token of peace and goodwill, the Abbasid caliph, Harūn al-Rashīd (r. 786 – 809) presented Charlemagne with an organ, used in churches since the age of Constantine. Religion, culture, and politics accompanied the acoustic projection of religious noise in early Muslim history.

53 Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-libās wa al-zīna, bāb kirāhat al-kalb wa al-jaras fi al-safar.
55 al-ʿAsqalānī, Fath al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 6:170-72. Ibn Ḥajar indicates that Muslims had different opinions on the permissibility of bells; some tended towards prohibition while others did not. According to the latter, it was permissible if there was a genuine need. For some, the intention of the person also played a role. One who intended to hang a bell upon the neck of an animal in order to defend against the evil eye was sinful for doing so, while one who had no such intention was not. These debates and disagreements indicate the variety of contexts for ringing the bell and the different meanings it carried as a result.
56 Although the historicity of the following anecdote is disputed, it is worth mentioning simply because of its role in perpetuating a romantic Western imagination of Islam. In the eighth century, the chief judge Abū Yūsuf urged the Caliph Harūn al-Rashīd to suppress the public display of non-Muslim religious symbols. However, the caliph apparently felt that as long the Muslim soundscape was protected from Christian noise, it did not matter what sonically transpired in Christian lands. Philip Khuri Hitti, The Arabs: A Short History (Washington, D.C.; Lanham, MD: Regnery Publications, 1996), 110.
“Ḥayya ʿalā khayr al-ʿamal!”: Sunnī and Shiʿī Soundscapes

The adhān not only became an audible marker of Muslim religious distinction, but also of Sunnī and Shiʿī sectarian distinction. Each sect crafted a unique historical narrative to authorize their own acoustic version of the adhān. Twelver Shiʿīs argued that the Angel Gabriel revealed the adhān directly to the Prophet with heavenly authorization from the divine, without the human interference of any companion. This version is a conscious and explicit attempt to undermine the Sunni version of events above. In the Twelver Shiʿī version, ʿUmar is also a central figure, this time as the antagonist, not the hero. Shiʿīs blame ʿUmar for altering the adhān from its divinely sanctioned original. They claim that ʿUmar arrogated himself to ordering that the phrase, Ḥayya ʿalā khayr al-ʿamal (“Come to the best deed!”), be omitted from the formula because he believed it would inspire Muslims to leave the public duty of jihad and absorb themselves in private prayer instead. Giving credence to Shiʿī version of events, the earliest Sunnī legal texts also mention this phrase, suggesting that this issue was debated among Sunnīs themselves. None other than ʿUmar’s son, Ibn ʿUmar, is said to have sometimes recited
Ḥayya ‘alā khayr al-ʿamal! as part of the adhān.\textsuperscript{57} Shiʿīs also rejected the addition of “Prayer is better than sleep” as an innovation of ʿUmar.\textsuperscript{58}

Shiʿīs added “ʿAlī is the friend of God” to their version of the adhān in order to audibly declare their distinction from Sunnīs and allegiance to ʿAlī, the rightful successor of the Prophet. Although Twelver Shiʿī jurists did not officially authorize this addition to the adhān, they were unable to denounce its practice, fearing they might be condemned for harboring Sunnī sympathies. One Shiʿī jurist, Ibn Babawayh al-Qummī (d. 991-92) was bold enough to condemn the additions, “ʿAlī is the friend of God,” and “Muhammad and ʿAlī are the best of mankind and their offspring are the best of offsprings.”\textsuperscript{59}

The fact that these intra-Muslim debates over the adhān eventually crystallized into sectarian distinctions suggests the significance of audibly projecting one’s communal difference across vast distances in public spaces. In later Muslim history, the distinctive association of Ḥayya ‘alā khayr al-ʿamal with Shiʿīs was so piercing that when first publicly called in lands ruled by Sunnīs, the residents knew that a new Shiʿī government had taken power. Examples include the Buyids in Baghdad; the Fatimids in Cairo in

\textsuperscript{57} Mālik b. Anas and al-Shaybānī, Muwaṭṭaʿ al-Imām Mālik: Riwāyat Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī, 54. In his recension of Mālik’s Muwaṭṭa’, the eighth century Iraqi Ḥanafī jurist, Muhammad al-Shaybānī, roundly rejects the authenticity of this tradition, although the chain of transmission is among the most respected. Its absence from Yaḥya b. Layth’s recension of the Muwaṭṭa is noticeable. According to Howard, the absence of this text from other contemporary Sunnī collections of hadith suggests Sunnī suppression, which indicates the possibility that such a debate may have occurred during ʿUmar’s caliphate, as claimed by Shiʿīs. Howard, "The Development of the Adhān and Iqāma of the Salāt in Early Islam."; Arzina R. Lalani, Early Shi`I Thought: The Teachings of Imām Mohammad al-Bāqir (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 123-24.


Likewise, when it was removed from the adhān, the people knew the reverse had occurred such as in 1055–56 when the Sunnī Seljuks expelled the Shiʿī Buyids from Baghdad; in 1078, when the Seljuks took over Damascus; and in 1171, when the champion of Sunnism, Saladin, conquered the Shiʿī Fatimids and established the Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt. In describing Saladin’s triumph and his restoration of the Sunnī version of the adhān, the pre-eminent medieval historian of Egypt, al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442), states that he “erased the distinguishing marker (shiʿār) of the [Fatimid] Dynasty.”

The Taste of Gold and Silver

Forbidding the consumption of wine, pork, and meat not slaughtered in God’s name were easy ways to construct unique Muslim forms of sociability and distinguish Muslims from Christians, Jews, and other religious communities. However, Muslims not only distinguished themselves through what they ate and drank, but also through the material wares from which they ate and drank. The Prophet is said to have warned: “Whoever drinks from gold and silver vessels fills his belly with hell-fire.” Based on this tradition,
the jurist, Shāfiʿī argues that not only should a Muslim not drink from silver and gold vessels, but he should not even wash his limbs from them during ritual ablution. The Quran also corroborates this negative appraisal of gold and silver in the context of hoarding wealth:

Those who hoard up gold and silver and do not spend it in the way of God, give them the good tidings of a painful doom. On the day when it will be heated in the fire of hell, and therewith their foreheads and their sides and their backs will be branded: ‘This is what you hoarded for yourselves. Now taste of what you hoarded.’

In this context, gold and silver signify objects of worldly desire. The economic overconsumption of luxury goods is likened to the gluttonous consumption of food, a mortal sin. Signifying this overconsumption, the sense of taste takes on a painfully new meaning in the afterlife.

Other Quranic verses, however, convey a different attitude. They endow silver and gold with positive value:

Gardens of Eden they shall enter; therein they shall be adorned with bracelets of gold and with pearls, and their apparel there shall be of silk.

...they are adorned with bracelets of silver, and their Lord shall give them to drink a pure drink.

Silver and gold are not just tolerated but are valorized as sensual signs of heavenly distinction for a spiritual elect. However, a tension surfaces between the ascetic ideals suggested in the earlier texts and the Quranic ideals of sensual indulgence mentioned here.

---

66 Quran 9:34-35.
67 Quran 35:33
68 Quran 76:21
This interpretive tension is resolved by the Prophet in the following tradition: "...do not drink in silver or gold utensils, and do not eat in plates of such metals, for such things are for them in this worldly life and for you in the Hereafter." The anecdote also represents an early Muslim ascetic impulse. Only one who abstains from consuming silver and gold wares in this world will enjoy them in the next. The tradition’s literary form resembles a different one about wine: "Whoever drinks wine in this life and does not repent, will be deprived of it in the next life." Like gold and silver, wine is only fit for consumption in heaven, suggesting that heavenly and earthly embodied subjectivity are not the same. As discussed earlier, hadith do not just descriptively narrate anecdotes, but encode discursive modes of reasoning as well.

The Prophet’s reconciliation, however, turns the logic of imitation and distinction upside down. Usually, Muslims are discouraged from imitating carriers of negative and inferior status such as Christians, Jews or non-Arabs. In this case, however, the Prophet encourages the obverse. Muslims are discouraged from imitating carriers of a positive and superior status, the saved believers in heaven. This apparent contradiction reveals how early Muslims struggled to balance their aversion and attraction to the sensual indulgences of silver, gold, and wine. At the same time, materializing distinctions

---

69 Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, kitāb al-ḥālāt wa al-ṣīnā, bāb tāhir rīt mūlīn inā’ al-dhāhāb wa al-nisā’… Muslim transmits the hadith as follows: "...Hudhayfa asked for water and a Magian gave him water in a silver vessel, whereupon he said: I heard the Messenger of God saying: ‘Do not wear silk or brocade; do not drink from gold and silver vessels; and do not eat in the wares manufactured from these materials, for these are for them in this world.’” A noticeable feature of the text is the juxtaposition of three different but related categories of materials: gold, silver, and silk. Each material had its own unique ethical, legal and aesthetic discourse among early Muslims, suggesting that each precious good carried its own unique symbolic value. That a single text joins them all together into a single prohibition, however, suggests that some unifying themes string them together.

70 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-ashriba, bāb qawl Allāh ta‘āla, “innamā al-khamr wa al-maysar...” (Quran 5:90). The commentator, Ibn Ḥajar, likens the wine hadith to the one above. He discusses its different interpretations. Some interpreters say that the one who drinks wine will not be allowed to enter heaven. Others say that these sinners will be able to enter heaven, but be unable to drink wine there. See al-ʿAsqalānī, Fath al-Bārī Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 10:39-43.
between believers on earth and believers in heaven follows a logic of delayed
gratification that functions to intensify anticipation for the afterlife and a desire to be
among the saved. As a reward for a believer’s labor, God is said to have prepared
“things, which the eye has never seen, the ear has never heard, and a human has never
imagined.”

However, gold and silver also materialize a different sort of Muslim distinction.
According to one widely circulated anecdote, the Companion of the Prophet, Ḥudhayfa b.
al-Yamān is said to have been served by a Magian aristocrat (dihqān) who gave him
drink in a silver vessel. Ḥudhayfa, dramatically flings the cup away, hits the server on
the face, and breaks it. He justifies this angry gesture by stating that he had repeatedly
told the chief not to do this. He then quotes the Prophet: “these are for them in this
world” but does not indicate who he is talking about. Although this event is set in Iran,
Muslims religious scholars expanded the significance of this event to encompass
distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims generally.

This anecdote also embeds the added dimension of class hierarchy and power,
signaling the change of fortune for the first Muslims. Ḥudhayfa, who served as a
governor of Iraq for the caliphs ʿUmar (r. 634 – 644) and ʿUthmān (r. 644- 656), now
claimed a social status above the dihqān, a Persian loanword meaning landed aristocrat.
A dihqān was a noble in the formalized hierarchy of the Sasanian empire. Ironically,
although Ḥudhayfa verbally disapproves of the main symbols of this newfound Muslim
superiority, he ironically enacts this very status by flinging the silver vessel at the dihqān.

71 Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb badʾ al-khalq, bāb mā jaʿa fi ṣiffat al-janna wa annahā makhluqa
An historical anecdote describing the Muslim conquest of Persia in 637 during the reign of the second caliph ʿUmar illustrates how the cultural context of Late Antiquity shaped the early Muslim social imaginary. During the conquest of the cities of al-Madāʾin, Ctesiphon, the imperial capital of the Sasanian empire, Muslim conquering armies discovered a windfall: enormous riches of gold and silver, including gold and silver vessels, as well as “a golden horse with a silver saddle, its crupper and breast girth studded with rubies and emeralds set in silver, and silver figure of a she-camel, with saddlecloth, halter and bridle of gold, complete with figures of riders” attached to Kisrā’s crown. The first Arab-Muslims had never encountered such wealth before. The accumulation of wealth, property, and opulence that accompanied the rise of empire forced Muslims to evaluate the symbolic value of these precious materials in social relations and spiritual life. Not all reactions were the same. Muslim rulers gradually adorned themselves in these trappings of luxury in order to signify the glory of their rule. As indicated above, they eventually played a crucial role in shaping the early Muslim empire. The Umayyad caliph, ʿAbd al-Mālik struck his new Islamic coinage using gold

---

73. Muslim consumption of gold and silver built on the symbolic value that they had accumulated in Late Antiquity. In Late Antiquity, gold and silver functioned as materials of economic value, social prestige, and aesthetic beauty, as well as symbols of political power and religious truth. Their colorful luminescence and lustrous shine attracted covetous gazes from their beholders. Through this capacity to mesmerize their viewers, these materials were especially prone to symbolic appropriation for ideological objectives, religious and political. Symbols, after all, must appeal to the senses. Their durability and rarity also contributed to their value. The luster of gold and silver was said to reflect the light of Christ, while gold and silk comprised the typical dress both kings and their gods. Christians decorated churches and other monuments with gold and silver, and used silver vessels in mass. Gold and silver were at once the material and symbol of wealth, power, and religion. Not surprisingly, pre-Islamic Arabs also held gold and silver in high esteem, especially Byzantine gold coins. Dominic Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 20.


75. Gold and silver mines were present in Arabia, although later they were imported, and accumulated in large amounts as a result of Muslim conquests. See Ibid., 107.

76. In some matters Muslims differentiated the use of gold and silver according to gender. Muslim jurists eventually concluded that while both men and women should not drink from silver and gold wears and were permitted to wear silver jewelry, only females could wear gold jewelry. See for example Mālik b. Anas and al-Shaybānī, *Muwaṭṭa’ al-Imām Mālik: Riwāyat Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī*, 284.
and silver in the late seventh century, among the most prominent material symbols of the new religion. The historian al-Masʿūdī (d. 956) informs us that the Abbasid caliph, al-Muʿtazz (r. 866 – 869) “was the first caliph to send out riding beasts with a royal insignia made of gold.”\textsuperscript{77} Previous caliphs used only silver. Men of religion, however, drew upon Ḥudhayfa’s response to fashion a Muslim ascetic impulse that was critical of such overconsumption of luxury and material affluence in this world, fearing that its taste would be especially painful in the afterlife.

**Sensory Overload: Ceremony**

Jāḥiz’s multisensory theory proposes that if an experience arouses multiple senses at once, its power over the subject is greater than one that only arouses a single sense. Having already examined practices of Muslim distinction in which one primary sense is evoked, I now highlight an event that incites all of the senses: ceremony (ʿīds). I show how Jāḥiz’s theory helps us to understand why Muslim jurists over the course of Islamic history perceived ceremony in its various forms as so dangerous and subversive to the ideal Islamic religio-political order.\textsuperscript{78} Ibn Taymiyya’s extensive theorization of ceremony highlights connections among time, space, body, senses, and symbol. We can better understand why ceremony held such power over participants. As discussed earlier, ceremonies, whether holiday celebrations, pilgrimage rites, or funeral processions were events where corporeal and noncorporeal “contact” between Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women, Sunnīs and Shiʿīs, Arabs and non-Arabs, adults and children,


\textsuperscript{78}I will not review medieval Muslim debates over its permissibility, which I have briefly reviewed in chapter three. For example, in the context of pilgrimage see chapter three in Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
freepersons and slaves, living and dead became possible from the “communitas” that emerges.\(^79\) In the social imaginary of the guardians of Islam – the religious scholars - ceremony threatened to blur a wide range of social distinctions.\(^80\) They often highlighted the reprehensibility of ceremonial imitation and innovation. As the Pact of ʿUmar illustrates, political elites also perceived them as threats to the social order.

However, festivals not only dissolve distinctions and hierarchies into relations of equivalence, but can erect new distinctions and hierarchies into relations of precedence.\(^81\) The boundary crossing and blurring that occur in these spaces do not result in an undifferentiated egalitarian mass, but “creates new boundaries and distinctions.”\(^82\) The potential, then, for new hierarchies to emerge in these threshold spaces is what makes ceremonies dangerous.

Yet, ceremonies were more than just opportunities for social upheaval. It was the embodied, sensational, and symbolic nature of this social space that made ceremony especially dangerous to the established socio-symbolic order of Muslim distinction. Ceremony comprised assemblages of ritual and cultural practices that spanned all five physical senses. Ibn Taymiyya and his contemporaries concentrated on the Christian holiday of Maundy Thursday, named “Rice Thursday” in Syria and “Lentil Thursday” in

---

\(^79\) Victor Turner’s concepts of structure, anti-structure and communitas for describing the “ritual process” help explain similar processes at work during festivals. However, the dialectical logic of anti-structure is too conceptually confining. The observation, however, of a different sense of community that emerges from a softening of boundaries and hierarchies through the concept of communitas articulates what Muslim jurists like Ibn Taymiyya seem to fear from Muslim participation in unsanctioned ceremonies.

\(^80\) See chapters two and three of this study.

\(^81\) The potential for new hierarchical structures to emerge does not necessarily validate Turner’s dialectical process of structure and anti-structure. What Turner describes as anti-structure without hierarchies or boundaries may simply be a different structure, or as some have suggested, a “hyper-structure.”

\(^82\) See D. Eickelman’s entry, “Pilgrimage,” in The Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology.”
Tied to the agricultural calendar and change of seasons, it signified a time of rebirth. It coincided with the end of the Lent fast that culminated with Easter. In addition to eating lentils or rice with milk and clarified butter, Muslim participants, male and female, might light incense, dye clothes, paint eggs, draw images of snakes and scorpions, display crosses and banners, strike their mini copper drums, bathe in olive water, and come into physical and social contact with non-Muslims and members of the opposite sex. In other words, the entire sensorium was excited during this special day. For purists like Ibn Taymiyya, this holiday was nothing less than “despicable.”

On this day, “A man cannot walk in the markets without difficulty because of the crowds of women,” observes the Egyptian jurist, Ibn al-Hājj. Fearing the spiritual contamination resulting from this physical contact, he moralizes, “There is no good for a man who crowds along with them.”

This potential for sensory overload was possible at other ceremonies as well. The Nawrūz festival in Egypt brought out miscreants who sprayed unsuspecting victims with water-bottles. The piercing screams of wailers, sobbing mourners, the scent of incense or the stench of a corpse, the spectacle of a crowded procession in the night guided by fire and light made funerals a solemn but sensational public event that brought the living...
in contact with the dead. At a saint’s tomb, on the other hand, a pilgrim may encounter sweets, perfumed pillars, chants of supplication and religious song, as well as crowds circumambulating the grave, which they also kissed and rubbed for spiritual blessings. Despite the privileged position of sight and sound for state surveillance, the popular cultural events dominated by the common people expanded the Muslim sensorial regime to value gustatory, olfactory, and haptic senses, which shaped a distinctive Muslim aesthetic sensibility.

These sensory assemblages intensified the affective experience of ceremonies as well. For this reason, as Jāḥiẓ observes, they can overwhelm the sense and sensibility of participants. As already mentioned, religious scholars blamed women for imploring their helpless husbands to attend these ceremonies, suggesting that women were emotionally vulnerable by nature. Ultimately, however, it was the potential for these sensations to contaminate the spiritual heart that bothered pietists. Despite the seemingly benign nature of some sensational practices, other common customs had undertones of debauchery, such as singing, dancing, and gambling with eggs. When a singing-girl encounters a man, according to Jāḥiẓ, she “presents him at Nawrūz with an embroidered belt and some sugar; at Mihrajān with a signet ring and an apple.”87 In the case of tomb visitations in particular, critics like Ibn Taymiyya, who aspired to maintain strict boundaries between human and divine sovereignty, were especially aggravated by the prospect of a supplicant beseeching a dead corpse for assistance - another reason to avoid such ceremonial spaces altogether.

Ceremonies not only overflowed with sensations, but also with symbolism. Ibn Taymiyya is especially sensitive to this dimension of ceremony, explaining that “The real reason why a Muslim is forbidden to participate with the non-believers in their festivities is that such practices are markers, distinctive symbols (shiʿār) of the non-believers...”

Despite permitting Muslims to conduct business on the days of these ceremonies, he forbids Muslims from selling symbolic objects such as drums, flags and banners onsite.

As already discussed, these symbols not only marked specific groups but also signified power and influence. For this reason the Prophet is reported to have said, “Every nation has its own unique festival.”

A political thinker, Ibn Taymiyya was averse to strengthening the symbols of these communities and debasing Muslims in the process. The symbolic dimension of these ceremonies helps us to understand the tradition attributed to ʿUmar that chastised participation in non-Muslim ceremonies as a form of reprehensible imitation:

Whoever settles in foreign lands, celebrates their holidays - Nawrūz and Mihrajān - and imitates them (yatashabbahu) until he dies, will be resurrected with them on the Day of Judgment.

To celebrate the Persian festivals of Nawrūz and Mihrajān was the equivalent to becoming one of them. In a similar vein, Ibn Taymiyya writes, “A Muslim must refrain from riding in the same boat that Christians had boarded en route to their festival sites, lest he too may become the recipient of divine wrath befalling the Christians on account of their imitation.”

---

of their polytheistic behavior (*shirk*)."⁹² For Ibn Taymiyya, such carnivalesque
disruption of political and divine sovereignty constitutes an excess that threatens to spill
over the defined times and spaces of the ceremony into the undefined spaces and times of
ordinary life in fourteenth century Damascus. Ibn Taymiyya’s theories help us to see that
ceremonies are not just assemblages of symbolic practices but symbolic markers in
themselves.⁹³

Ibn Taymiyya draws important connections between ceremontial practice and the
dimensions of space and time. Early Muslim religious scholars were usually only happy
with the two official Islamic religious holidays of ʿĪd al-fiṭr and ʿĪd al-adḥa. For Ibn
Taymiyya, unsanctioned festivals comprise profane spaces, times, and practices that
simulate sacred spaces, times, and practices.⁹⁴ According to Ibn Taymiyya when any one
of these three dimensions – space, time and social practice – is delimited and specified, it
becomes a ceremony. To elaborate, this means that practices repeated over time become
a ceremony. Practices undertaken at a particular place become a ceremony. Even
practices disconnected from a specific time or place become a ceremony when they

⁹³ While I am certainly indebted to the use of the term from the brilliant insights of the French social theorists, Deleuze and Gauttari, as well as Bruno Latour, I do not deploy the term here with the philosophical precision that they do, but in its more conventional sense of bringing together a collection of practices whose interconnection lacks an ontological logic but embed particular (and arbitrary) social logics. Different festivals are characterized by unique assemblages of practices. The unique interconnectedness of these practices during the festival helps constitute the symbolic meanings these practices assume as discrete entities.
⁹⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Iqtiḍāʾ al-Ṣiraṭ al­Mustaqīm li­Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al­Jaḥīm*, 2:617; Memon, *Ibn Taimiya’s Struggle against Popular Religion*, 11­22, 241. In Arabic, ʿīd (pl. aʿyād) is a period of gathering. Other derivatives of the shared root mean to return or repeat. The term for custom also derives from this root, and became an integral part of Islamic law. See chapter three of this study.
involve a group who choreographs a unique performance. For example, if Muslims pray together but delimit the number of cycles to pray or which chapters of the Quran to recite, this event still becomes a (reprehensible) ceremony although its place or time has not been specified. For Ibn Taymiyya such a practice still has the potential to rival and displace Islamic ritual norms and undermine the unique legislative capacity of the divine sovereign to regulate religious ritual. Through such subtle means, the profane masks as the sacred.

For Ibn Taymiyya, ceremonies are more dangerous when they are associated with specific places and times such as a saint’s tomb, Maundy Thursday or the Prophet’s birthday. Space, however, is more dangerous than time. Therefore, ceremonies associated with a specific place (makān) are more dangerous than those associated with a specific time (zamān). Festivals, funerals, shrines were part of Muslim urban culture. Shrines, however, “graced city gates, mosques, tomb complexes, citadels, caves, mountains.” Ibn Taymiyya recognizes that in the Muslim social imagination, place was the most significant factor in anchoring a specific ritual. Perhaps he recognized the phenomenological difference between place and time. A particular place often yields a unique sense-based aesthetic experience, evoking specific sights, sounds, and smells. Time, on the other hand, tends to be abstracted from such sensory associations. However, Ibn Taymiyya issues a superficial legal rationale in order to explain his distinction: animal sacrifice is never permitted at the sacred precinct in Mecca, but is

---

permitted in the Muslim lunar calendar except during the “holy months.” To establish a specific ritual or ceremony at a specific place is therefore more reprehensible that to do so during a specific time. Spatialized practices pose a greater potential to rival normative Islamic ritual practice.

Ibn Taymiyya’s list of problematic ceremonies is therefore quite long. He criticizes the festivals associated with a wide range of communities – religious, sectarian, and ethnic - living in Damascus: Jewish and Christians holidays such as Palm Sunday, Easter Sunday, Holy Saturday, Good Friday, Maundy Thursday, Christmas; Persian holidays such as Nawrūz and Mihrajān; Shiʿī Muslim holidays of Ghadīr Khumm and ʿĀshūrā; Bedouin Muslim holidays and celebrations; and celebrations associated with the general Muslim populace, including visitations to tombs and saint shrines, pilgrimages to the Farthest mosque in Jerusalem and the Prophet’s mosque in Medina, as well as celebrations of Muhammad’s birthday (mawlid). This impressive list reveals that ceremonies in their various forms were a constituent part of Damascene everyday popular cultural practice.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Muslim distinction was sensual, which at once centers and decenters the body as a site of Muslim distinction. This sensational emphasis not only accents a different dimension of Muslim distinction but also broadens its landscape to encompass cityscape, soundscape, and material culture. As a result, a study of the Muslim sensorial regime opens up new perspectives on how early Muslims shaped public

98 The four holy months are Rajab, Dhū al-Qaʿda, Dhū al-Hijja, and Muḥurram in the Muslim lunar calendar. Memon, Ibn Taimiya’s Struggle against Popular Religion, 144.
life, and more broadly, how culture, religion, and power were transmitted across time and place by means of the senses - that senses are also the conduits of culture.

Like modern states, pre-modern Muslim states were ocular-centric. Yet, both political and religious elites were attentive to how invisible senses such as hearing and touch shaped Muslim distinction. Building on Jāḥiz’s multisensory theory, I argued that the senses impacted individual and collective sensibility most when they worked in concert. Working together, senses carried the greatest potential to disrupt Muslim distinction. This insight helps explain the acute anxieties of Muslim religious and political elites over different forms of ceremony, which threatened to overload Muslim sense and sensibility with a constellation of symbols. And so, Muslim distinction highlights the persistent interconnectedness of sense, sensibility, and symbol in shaping Muslim individual and collective subjectivity.
CONCLUSION

Once upon a time, not so very long ago yet not so recently, everything imitated everything else, and thus, if not for aging and death, man would’ve never been the wiser about the passage of time. Yes, when the worldly realm was repeatedly presented through the same stories and pictures, as if time did not flow.

— Orhan Pamuk, My Name is Red

Mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metanomycally…in order to be effective, mimicry must constantly produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.

— Homi Babha, “Of Mimicry and Man”

The Times of Imitation

In the historical novel, My Name is Red, Turkish Nobel prize winning novelist, Orhan Pamuk tells a story of how a renegade group of Turkish miniature painters sought to imitate the new Venetian style of painting instead of the old Persian style they had always followed. Turkish painters had traditionally imitated their Persian masters by depicting figural images as general archetypes, unworthy of retaining a distinct identity. Venetian painters, however, portray these images in fine detail, bringing out their uniqueness and individuality. In his fictional account, Pamuk depicts a moment in Ottoman history when this Venetian approach to art was still foreign to Muslims who perceived it as religious blasphemy and cultural borrowing. According to Pamuk, the problem with this new practice was that it changed the viewer’s focus from the transcendent perspective of God to the immanent perspective of created things. The ideological conflict between
“Traditionalists” who wanted to adhere to the old ways and “Modernists” who wanted to experiment with the new turns violent with the murder of one of the painters.

The story takes place in 1591 in the capital city of Istanbul during the reign of Sultan Murad III. The Sultan is said to have been very fond of miniature paintings. Coincidentally, the plotline of the story occurs at the moment when a young Najm al-Dīn Ghazzī was just beginning his scholarly career in Ottoman-ruled Damascus. Many of Ghazzī’s anxieties over social change and cross-cultural encounter are echoed in Pamuk’s narrative. Pamuk’s depiction of Ottoman mimicry of Venetian styles of painting underscores the tensions of pre-Enlightenment cross-cultural encounters between the Ottomans and Europeans – a preview of the cultural dynamics that would shape their interactions in modernity. This apparently superficial difference over artistic style brings into sharp relief fundamental differences across the fields of aesthetics, culture, politics, philosophy and religion.

Pamuk’s story also highlights ways in which innovation and imitation conceptually overlap, despite being in tension with one another. The Turkish miniature painters had traditionally imitated the early Persian masters as closely as possible. Now, in order to present the Sultan with a true artistic innovation, they attempt a radical new style that departs from their artistic and aesthetic tradition. However, in another sense, they are not actually innovating. They are simply imitating the ways of a different tradition – the style of the Venetian masters. Put differently, whether they imitate Venetians or Persians, the Turkish painters are still imitating. They are simply perceived by their contemporaries as innovating when they imitate the Venetian artistic style because the Venetians are geographically, culturally, religiously and politically different.
Because of all these overlapping differences, the origin of their new style is perceived as foreign, and imitating the Venetians is perceived as a cultural innovation. It is difficult not to see parallels between this Ottoman perception of Venetian cultural forms and Ibn Taymiyya’s perception of unsanctioned public festivals in Mamluk Damascus.

In another passage, Pamuk complicates the relationship between innovation and imitation by complicating the notion of imitation itself. Pamuk’s character, Master Osman, the visionary behind this adaptation of Venetian practices, describes how he wished to imitate and innovate simultaneously:

I wanted the things I depicted to represent Our Sultan’s entire world, just as in the paintings of the Venetian masters. But unlike the Venetians, my work would not merely depict material objects, but naturally the inner riches, the joys and fears of the realm over which Our Sultan rules.¹

Master Osman wants to imitate differently. This difference, or remainder between his imitation and the Venetian original, is what constitutes his innovation. From this perspective, innovation is a product of mimesis, not its antithesis. As Homi Babha indicates in the second epigraph, there is no perfect imitation. Every imitation contains within it the seeds of its own unraveling, its difference, its innovation. Imitation is nothing more than a perception, a persisting emphasis on the same, and a blindness to the difference, the innovation, that constitutes every mimetic practice. This is implied by Pamuk when he eloquently describes how the ubiquitous imitation of everything made it seem like time did not pass, “…everything imitated everything else, and thus, if not for aging and death, man would’ve never been the wiser about the passage of time.”²

² Ibid., 70.
other hand, innovation signals change, which speeds up time. The perception of imitation slows time while the perception of innovation quickens the pace of time.

If we extend this line of reasoning to traditionalist Muslim perceptions of the past, we see that Muslim resistance to innovation is an attempt to freeze time in a distant past, to stop the inevitable degeneration of time (fasād al-zamān). Yet to stress the importance of imitating the first generations of Muslims, the salaf, is to make it seem like the “worldly realm was repeatedly presented through the same stories and pictures, as if time did not flow.” All time should mimic and resemble the paradigmatic moment of the Quranic revelation to the Prophet. According, to a prophetic tradition, the quickening pace of time is one of the signs of the Day of Judgment, a truly inauspicious time. In this scheme, innovation, which speeds up time, contains the seeds of its own apocalyptic end.

However, despite a prevailing perception among Muslim traditionalists that imitation preserves time, it is now well recognized that imitation also destroys time. Imitation can also become a practice of forgetting the origins of a practice. Origins fade away into the past and become lost as an imitated practice diffuses across time, space, and culture through repetition and imitation. As the origins of a mimetic practice are gradually forgotten, its meaning may also mutate, rendering its original meaning obsolete as well. The process of forgetting that accompanies cross-cultural and trans-historical imitation muddles memory and destroys time. As discussed throughout this study, many practices that became symbols of Muslim distinction had a foreign origin. The diffusion

---

3 Ibid.
4 According to one tradition, one of the signs of the End Times will be that “Time will pass quickly (yataqārib al-zamān).” Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, kitāb al-īstīṣqāʾ, bāb mā qīla fī al-zalāzil wa al-āyāt.
of the practice of wearing the *qabāʾ* cloak among Muslims discussed in chapter five illustrates how a foreign style became indigenized by Muslims who imbued it with new significations. Taking shoes off during prayer may have been a uniquely Arab Jewish practice that was originally shunned by the earliest Muslims. However, as Muslims moved eastward and westward, such parochial associations with Judaism lost their meaning, and Muslims, themselves, adopted the practice of removing footwear before entering the sacred space of the mosque. The origins of using signet rings may have originated with Byzantine and Persian kings, but the Prophet Muhammad was happy to appropriate this practice in order to spread the message of Islam. Origins do not always contain the secret to the pure identity or the transcendental meaning of an object or practice.

However, the eventual irrelevance of origins did not stop the guardians of Islam from stigmatizing practices because of their ignoble origins as a reprehensible type of imitation. As this study has shown, they often stigmatized the origins of a practice that they perceived as dangerous and disruptive to the imagined Muslim community. The eternal challenge they continued to face, however, was that new cultural meanings proliferated despite attempts to fix a cultural practice’s essential meaning at the point of its historical origin. The transformations in Muslim acts of distinction over history were accompanied by the gradual Muslim accommodation of numerous foreign practices that illustrate the perpetual fluidity of their cultural meanings.
The Times of Distinction

In this study, I have attempted to highlight the many dimensions of Muslim distinction across the first millennium of Muslim history. Although the historical and conceptual scope of this study is vast, I have highlighted those historical moments, texts, and practices that were most crucial to shaping Muslim imaginations of distinction. Along the way, we have crossed the landscapes of culture and politics, discourse, and semiotics in order to arrive at a robust understanding of how Muslims attempted to shape themselves in relation to others even when representation did not always conform to reality. We have seen that the field of religion was always configured in relation to the fields of politics and culture. Inevitably, Muslim imaginations of distinction were built upon a continuously changing mimetic landscape of desire; distinctions between Muslims and Jews, men and women, Arabs and Turks, young and old, rich and poor, free persons and slaves, humans and animals comprised an ideal social imaginary that was regularly transgressed in everyday life.

This transgression was captured in the negatively-charged usage of the linguistic term that signaled the necessity of Muslim distinction – *tashabbuh*, or imitation gone wrong. The term, as it were, carried the weight of these transgressions, turning black from sinful repetition over the course of Muslim history. The repetition (or imitation) of sinful imitation by Muslims over history eventually transformed the concept into a boundary-regulating religious discourse deployed by religious elites. Yet, *tashabbuh*’s semantic slippage into positively-valued imitation in Sufi discourses paradoxically produced its difference. The possibility of mimetic redemption from sinful imitation was
always possible through the purifying possibilities of tashabbuh as Muslim becoming – a possibility articulated most clearly by the Sufis. The historical transformations in tashabbuh’s semantic usage illustrate how discourse, itself, is constituted by history.

The ordinariness of Muslim distinction as a regular feature of everyday life explains why its mediation was not abstract. It was aesthetically mediated through body, sense, and symbol. The body functioned as the wobbling pivot of distinction, its parts, movements, and styles carrying a constellation of meanings that shifted with time and place. However, the body had to be seen, felt, heard or smelt in order to carry these meanings of distinction. Although the senses enabled the signification of the body as a site of distinction, they also enabled the signification of the public landscape that contained the body. Sight and hearing, especially, connected a person to the larger world around him and transformed the entire public landscape into a possible site for Muslim distinction. But, as Ibn Taymiyya’s anxieties over festivals and Ghazzī’s anxieties over coffeehouses suggest, the necessity of Muslim distinction was greatest when all the senses were overloaded, and threatened to result in the disruption of individual piety and collective order. It was in such zones of indistinction that Muslim jurists feared that distinctions between religious, ethnic, gendered and other identities might reach a vanishing point and there would no longer be any way to differentiate one collectivity from another.

Distinction therefore linked Muslim belonging and becoming into a single imperative, gluing together Shari‘a and Sufism, exteriority (zāhir) and interiority (bāṭin). Ghazzī seamlessly built his Shari‘a discourse of collective belonging upon a Sufi poetics of becoming. In Ghazzī’s robust affective imagination, both Muslim belonging and
becoming were pivoted by love: love of one’s spiritual master and love of one’s spiritual community. Ultimately it was love that defined true imitation, true belonging, and true becoming. Alterity, then, in the sense of either spiritually or socially becoming the other, was ultimately rooted in affect. Of course, even affection interacted with cognition, intuition, and the body in the integrated Muslim subject.

**Aping the West**

Building on his first engagement with imitation in 1933, in an April 1947 article, “That Business of Imitation,” Muhammad Asad rhetorically asked, “why this seeming exaggerated anxiety when viewing our (Muslim) present position with regard to Western civilization?” Asad recognized how Muslim distinction had adopted a new modern vernacular that was especially attuned to the rise of Western geopolitical power, and its cultural mediation through colonialism, media, and technology across the globe. Modern Muslims from the Arab Middle East to North Africa, from Iran to South Asia, from Europe to North America, have felt pressure to imitate “the West,” understood today as a conglomerate of Europe and America. Asad observes that this trend had become so widespread by his time that Muslims were now “confusing ‘modernity’ with an aping of Western customs.” Asad had drawn attention to the fact that modern Muslim vocabularies of distinction now focused on the imagined geographical entity of the West – a space of distinction underwritten by religious, racial, ethnic, political, economic and cultural distinctions as well. This trend is still visible today. The degree to which both non-Muslims and Muslims living in Europe, America, and elsewhere frequently deploy

---

6 Ibid., 2:894.
the essentialized polarity, “Islam and the West” despite the conceptual asymmetry of comparing a geographic location to a religion reflects how culturally (and historically) entrenched this imagined rivalry has become.

Yet even Asad, an inveterate foe of aping the West, still had to admit that Islamic civilization had successfully incorporated foreign cultural forms in the past. What was so different about the Western challenge? Asad answered his own question by arguing that Western civilization posed a unique challenge to Muslims in their history because Islamic civilization was no longer in a position to imitate and refashion foreign cultural forms into its own. In the past, Islamic civilization was strong, self-confident, and vigorous. Modern Islamic civilization no longer possessed these characteristics; Muslims were now in a precarious position of weakness, subservience, and inferiority relative to a Western civilization that possessed far greater power, vigor, and self-confidence. Because of this modern inability to imitate and infuse foreign cultural practices with new Islamic meanings, Asad suggests that Muslims could only imitate badly, that *tashabbuh* was a pedagogy of the weak and dispossessed. Demonstrating René Girard’s concept of mimetic doubling where the mimic becomes just like his mimetic rival, Asad observes: “we (Muslims) have become as materialistic as our Western preceptors.”  

Asad therefore argued that Muslim cultural transformation should “come from within.”  

Imitating the West “killed all pride and self-confidence,” and stripped Muslims of their “cultural autonomy,” making them into “poor asses” in a “lion’s skin.”  

Above all, Asad wanted modern Muslims to retain their collective agency and to determine their own

---

7 Ibid., 2:886.
8 Ibid., 2:906.
9 Ibid., 2:900-01.
civilizational destiny. The only way that Muslim civilization should imitate the West is by not imitating a foreign civilization.

Even in 1980, nearly fifty years after his first appeal, Asad’s continued his call for Muslims to be different from the West. By this time, the United States had become the world’s dominant power. This did not mean that Asad, himself, did not undergo a transformation, however. One indicator of his own intellectual transformation is his new gloss on the imitation hadith, which he expressed for the first time in 1947. As discussed in the preface to this study, in 1933, his initial interpretation pessimistically forecasted the inevitability of a reprehensible and undesirable Muslim imitation of the West. In his revised gloss, however, he tempers this pessimism and acknowledges that the hadith’s prescription is not just negative, but positive too: “This admonition cuts both ways,” he said. “It implies not only a condemnation of a Muslim imitating a non-Muslim people but also a recommendation of our imitating those whom we believe to be on the Right Way.”

Asad then creatively glosses the hadith with the introductory supplication of the Quran in order to clarify the bipolarity of imitation – that it can also be a force for good: “Guide us on the straight path, those whom you have favored.” Asad subsequently identified this Quranic exhortation as first and foremost, a moral imperative. Asad’s recognition of new interpretive possibilities of the imitation hadith not only signaled his own personal spiritual and intellectual transformations, but also hinted at the new possibilities of Muslim distinction in the future. After all, Muslim history, itself, has always been in a state of becoming.

\[10\] Ibid., 2:899.
As we look to the future of Muslim distinction, we must therefore appreciate the ways in which Muslim imaginations of distinction have changed over history. The present and future are always built upon a mimetic relationship to the past – a process of repetition and imitation. However, this process of historical mimesis also produces difference and innovation. Even imitation is a creative act that contains within itself new possibilities for the future.

These possible futures opened up by the simultaneously mimetic and creative processes of history create space to pose the following questions: What might Muslim distinction look like when it is denuded of the hierarchical imprint of empire, and infused by an egalitarian ethos that permeates the social categories of religion, ethnicity, gender, and the human? What new possibilities for authentic Muslim subjectivity and agency emerge if Muslim distinction is mediated through a greater emphasis on interior becoming and less emphasis on exterior belonging? What if Muslim distinction is perceived as a spectrum of multiplicity rather than a binary polarity that opposes self and other? What new possibilities for Muslim distinction emerge if imitation is attached to a positive perception of the “other” whether it is the religious, ethnic, gendered or non-human other? With such questions still remaining to be answered, the future of Muslim distinction is wide open.
APPENDIX ONE

“WHOEVER IMITATES A NATION IS ONE OF THEM”:
TRANSMISSION, AUTHENTICITY, AND CLASSIFICATION

Complementing this study’s focus on the interpretation of the imitation hadith across Muslim history, this appendix examines its transmission, authenticity, and classification in Sunnī hadith collections. The first part of this appendix examines the transmission and authenticity of the imitation hadith; the second part examines its classification.

I begin part one by reviewing the two basic textual variants of the imitation hadith: its “short form” and “long form.” Next, I list the different Sunnī collections that contain this hadith in its different forms. I then summarize Muslim assessments of the authenticity of its chains of transmission, which range from weak (daʿīf) to authentic (ṣaḥīḥ). I highlight the Companions and key transmitters responsible for its circulation during the first four centuries of Islamic history. Drawing upon a map of the entire transmission network found in Sunnī hadith collections (sunan, musnad, muṣannaf, muʿjam), I demonstrate that the imitation hadith in its various forms was a widely circulated tradition among Muslim pietists; I also highlight eighth century Damascus as the geographical center of its circulation during the earliest phases of Muslim history. I want to clarify that I do not attempt to determine the authenticity of this hadith using


2 To clarify, I am not attempting to determine the “origin” of the hadith tradition. I assume that Muslims attempted to accurately transmit the tradition over time. I am more interested in identifying who was most responsible for circulating the tradition (in its various narrations).
modern historical methods such as the *isnād-cum matn* analysis developed by Harald Motzski. I am only interested in documenting its transmission in Sunnī collections of hadith and summarizing Muslim assessments of its authenticity. Muslim debates over its authenticity, the hadith took on a life of its own, becoming one of the most “famous hadith (*al-ahādīth al-mushtahara*)” circulated in the Muslim world.³

In part two, I examine the classification practices of hadith collectors in order to show that their subjective interpretation played an active role in shaping the meaning of *tashabbuh*. The hadith partisans had a distinct normative vision of Islam that they wished to project onto the public sphere. As the classical sociologists Mauss and Durkheim suggested, practices of classification are windows into a culture, or the social imaginary of a given epoch.⁴ They echo the existing classifications of society itself.⁵

**Part One: Transmission and Authenticity**

**Versions of the Imitation Hadith**

As discussed in chapter two, two basic versions of the imitation hadith were put into circulation, what I have called the short form and long form. Both forms, however, share a portion of the same transmission network that begins with the Companion, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar (d. 73/692).⁶ However, Ibn ʿUmar was not the only Companion who is reported to have transmitted this hadith. The Companions, Anas b. Mālik (d. 91/709) and

---


⁴ According to Durkheim and Mauss, “Now the classification of things reproduces this classification of men.” Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim, *Primitive Classification* (Taylor & Francis, 2009), 7.

⁵ “Society was not simply a model which classificatory thought followed; it was its own divisions which served as divisions for the system of classification.” Ibid., 48.

⁶ On the significance and persona of Ibn ʿUmar see chapter one along with footnotes to bibliographical references.
Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678), are said to have only transmitted the long form, while, the Companion, Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān (d. 36/656), is only said to have transmitted the short form.

**Short Form:**

Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.\(^7\)

This version is the more famous of the two. It has the form of a slogan or epigram. This version, not the long version, is also contained in one of the six most authentic collections of Sunnī hadith (*Sunan Abī Dāwūd*).

**Long Form:**

I was raised on the eve of the Hour with the sword until God is worshipped alone without any other partner ascribed to him. My provision has been placed under the shadow of my spear, and abasement and contempt have been placed on the one who disobeys my command. Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.\(^8\)

The “long form” actually has many different textual variants. For example, some omit the phrase, “until God is worshipped alone without any other partner ascribed to him.”\(^9\)

However, it is not my objective, to review every variance among the different narrations. What is important is that they contain the statement, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.”

\(^7\) “*Man tashabbaha bi-qawmin fa-huwa min-hum.*”

\(^8\) “*Bu‘īthtu bayna yaday al-sā‘a bi l-sayf ḥaṭā yu‘bad Allāh wahdaḥu lā sharīka lahu wa ju‘ila rizqī taḥta ẓill rumhī wa ju‘ila al-dhillatu wa al-saghāru ‘alā man khālaqa amrī wa man tashabbaha bi-qawmin fa huwa min-hum.*”

them.” The version above, contained in the Musnad of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, is the most famous variant of the long form.

**Sunnī Collections of Hadith**

I now list the Sunnī collections of hadith according to the form of the imitation hadith they contain. I also list the chapter and section heading, if any, along with the Companion or Successor transmitter(s) associated with the narration(s) that they transmit.

**Short Form**

1. *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (d. 275/889) [Chapter on dress (kitāb al-libās), section on clothes that attract publicity (bāb libs al-shuhra)]¹² – Companion: ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar


6. *Muṣannaf ʿAbd al-Razzāq* (d. 211/827) [Chapter on cutting hair from the nape of the neck and asceticism (Bāb ḥalq al-qafā wa al-zuhd)]¹⁷ – Companion: ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb

---

¹⁰ The exception is the transmission of Bukhārī discussed in chapter two, who omits the first and last portion of the long version because he was only interested in the portion relating to spears. I therefore do not include Bukhārī among the list of collectors for this hadith.

¹¹ The *Musnad al-Shāmiyyīn* contains both forms. I have therefore mentioned this title in both groups, and footnoted the reference to each form separately.

¹² *Sunan Abī Dāwūd, kitāb al-libās, bāb libs al-shuhra*


Long Form

1. *Muṣannaf Ibn Abī Shayba* (d. 235/849) [Chapter on jihad (kitāb al-jihād)]18 – Companion: ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar; Successor: Ṭāwūs


5. *Sunan Saʿīd b. Manṣūr*-of Khurasan (d.227/841) [Section: One who says that the time for jihad continues (bāb man qāla al-jihād māḍin)]22 – Successor: Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī


---


20 Abū al-ʿAbbās Shihāb al-Dīn Al-Buṣayrī, *Itḥāf Al-Khayra Al-Mahara*, 9 vols. (Riyadh: Dār al-wata’t li’l-nashr, 1999), 4:484; 5:203. In the printed edition of the *Musnad Abī Yaʿlā* I was unable to find the imitation hadith. This does not mean that Abū Yaʿlā did not transmit it however. In what was available to Buṣayrī, he found two different narrations in the *Musnad* that I have included in my analysis here.


433
The Authenticity Question

Gradings of the imitation hadith among Muslim hadith critics have ranged from authentic (ṣaḥīḥ) to weak (daʿīf). When they issue a judgment on its authenticity they are generally grading the most authoritative chain of transmission (isnād) originating with the Companion, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar. The other chains are relatively obscure and therefore less authoritative. Although he included the long form of the hadith in his collection, the founding jurist, Aḥmad b. Hanbal graded the isnād as weak (daʿīf). The contemporary editor of the Musnad of Ibn Ḥanbal, Shuʿayb al-Arnāʾūṭ, agreed with Imam Aḥmad’s skeptical assessment. Other scholars had a more positive view, however. Ibn Taymiyya graded the hadith’s isnād as good (jayyid). 27 Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī agreed with this basic viewpoint, and declared it fair (ḥasan); he also mentioned, however, that the hadith master, Al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī (d. 405/1014) graded it as authentic (ṣaḥīḥ). 28 Egyptian hadith master, Ibn Ḥajr al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449) also deems the hadith fair (ḥasan) while acknowledging deficiencies in its transmission. 29 Many modern commentators have also graded the hadith as fair. 30 The itinerant Salafī hadith master, Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999), declared it fair as well. 31

However, other modern critics have taken into consideration the hadith’s other chains of transmission as corroborating evidence of its widespread circulation and

---

acceptance. Scholars such as the contemporary Syrian hadith master, Nūr al-Dīn ʿĪṭr, judged the hadith authentic (ṣaḥīḥ li-ghayrīhi) because of the presence of so many different corroborating chains of transmission that compensate for the deficiencies in the isnād originating with Ibn ʿUmar. The former secretary to the Ottoman Shaykh al-Islām, Muhammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1952), disagrees with the claim of pre-modern hadith critic, Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497) that Sunnī scholars had come to a general agreement upon the weakness of this hadith’s transmission. Kawtharī sides with pre-modern critics who grade this hadith’s isnād as fair (ḥasan). However, he suggests that due to the multiple chains of transmission and the Muslim community’s embodiment of this hadith’s message, the hadith becomes even more authoritative.

In the following section, based on information provided by biographers and hadith critics in primary and secondary sources, I examine the different chains of transmission according to the transmission network (isnād) maps below (figures 1 – 8), which are grouped according the first Companion or Successor transmitter. I highlight noteworthy transmitters in the different chains, either because some Muslim hadith critics impugned their veracity, or because of their prominent role in circulating the hadith.

33 Based on personal discussion in Damascus, February, 2010.
The Social Network

Figure 1: The Imitation Hadith Transmission network. When examining the imitation hadith transmission network, it becomes apparent that the imitation hadith enjoyed wide circulation among Muslim traditionists; it is contained in both early and late collections of oral traditions. What also becomes apparent is that Damascus was the central geographic site of its circulation. The Syrian Musnad of Ṭabarānī (Musnad al-Shāmiyyīn) includes several isnāds with Syrian transmitters of the imitation hadith in both short and long forms. Additionally, two Damascenes, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Thābit b. Thawbān (d. 165/782) and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Amr al-Awzāʿī (d. 157/774) appear to have been most responsible for circulating the hadith in Syria during the first half of the eighth century. As I mentioned in chapter two, these contemporaries knew one another.36 Although none are said to have transmitted the imitation hadith to the same student, they are said to have been both taught the tradition by the Damascene, Ḥassān b. ʿAṭiyya, a highly respected traditionist in his own right. However, although Ibn Thawbān seems to have been the most active of all the transmitters in circulating the hadith, and is the most likely candidate for being the “common link,” his status as an upright transmitter of hadith was disputed.37 Ibn Ḥanbal judged this hadith as weak because of Ibn Thawbān’s reputation for incorrectly transmitting hadith. Other pre-modern and modern scholars tended to grade this hadith as fair, and not sound (ṣaḥīḥ), primarily because of Ibn Thawbān’s ambiguous status. It is also noteworthy that, with the exception of the Muṣannaf of ʿAbd al-Razzāq, which contains narrations of the imitation hadith

36 For biographical references on these two figures please see footnotes 48 and 49 in chapter two.
37 Hadith critics such as Naṣīʾī and Sakhāwī also impugned his reliability while others like Yahyā b. Maʿin did not take issue with him. See footnote 48 in chapter two for references.
transmitted by both Ibn Thawbān and Awzāʾī, collections that included Awzāʾī as a transmitter are later collections. Additionally, Awzāʾī narrations were considered to be less authentic by hadith critics than those of Ibn Thawbān; the two most authoritative collections, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* and *Musnad Ibn Hanbal*, only contain narrations of the imitation hadith transmitted from Ibn Thawbān, not Awzāʾī. This was also the narration associated with the Companion, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar.

Figure 2: Ibn ʿUmar (d. 73/692). This map shows how collections attributed to Ibn ʿUmar both contain the short form and the long form of the imitation hadith. The authoritative collections of Abū Dāwūd and Aḥmad b. ʿHanbal transmit their narration from Ibn ʿUmar, although they each transmit a different version. Later collections of Harawī and Ṭabarānī also contain Ibn ʿUmar narrations. At least eight hadith collections in all attribute their narration to Ibn ʿUmar, making his narrations the most widespread and authoritative. Most of the Ibn ʿUmar narrations are said to have been circulated by the common link, Ibn Thawbān (d. 165/782); only one narration is said to have been circulated by Awzāʾī (d. 157/774). Ibn Thawbān was not the only “weak link” in the *isnāds* beginning with Ibn ʿUmar, however. Ibn ʿUmar is said to have transmitted the hadith only to one individual, the first Damascene in the chain, Abū al-Munīb al-Jurashi. Ibn Ḥajar mentions that he was unknown according to some early hadith critics. Of the sound six (*ṣiḥāḥ sitta*), the *Sunan* of Abū Dāwūd is the only one that includes Jurashi as a

---

38 See part two below for more detail how Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Ḥanbal transmitted different forms of the imitation hadith despite sharing most of the transmitters in their respective *isnāds*.

39 Below, I argue that Abū Dāwūd truncated the long form of the hadith in order to fit his rhetorical purposes, while Ibn Ḥanbal preserved the long version.

40 In this *isnād* contained in the *Mushkil al-Āthār* of Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭaḥāwī, Abū Umayya, appears to be a weak link.
transmitter; in fact, Abū Dāwūd transmits only one tradition from him - the imitation hadith. Despite these criticisms, Ibn Taymiyya illustrates that other hadith critics thought positively of both Ibn Thawbān and Jurashī. Moreover, Ibn Taymiyya argues that other key transmitters in the Ibn ʿUmar transmission network, such as Abū al-Naḍr, Ibn Abī Shayba, and Ḥassān b. ʿAṭiyya had impeccable reputations, which strengthens the case for the hadith’s veracity. When combined with all the chains of transmission below, the Ibn ʿUmar isnād therefore attained the status of ṣaḥīḥ for some hadith scholars.

**Figure 3: Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678).** ʿṢadaqa b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Samīn claims to have transmitted from Awzāʿī according to the isnāds contained in the later collection of Al-Harawī, *Dhamm al-Kalām*. Critics, however, impugned Ṣadaqa’s credibility, thereby casting doubt on the Abū Hurayra isnāds. The Abū Hurayra narration only appears in *Dhamm al-Kalām* of Al-Harawī.

**Figure 4: Ṭāwūs (d. 110/728).** Transmissions from this famous Persian-Yemeni Successor have little authority in themselves because the chains of transmission are not continuous (mursal) – they lack a Companion link that connects Ṭāwūs b. Kaysān to the Prophet. Moreover, in the isnād contained in the *Musnad al-Shihāb*, the Egyptian transmitter, Al-Miqdām (Miqdām b. Dāwūd), is also considered weak by critics such as Dāraquṭnī.

**Figure 5: Anas b. Mālik (d. 91/709).** Bishr b. al-Ḥusayn of Iṣfahān is a key transmitter of the Anas b. Mālik isnād network. Numerous critics, however, believed that Bishr b. al-Ḥusayn was a liar who fabricated transmissions from his associate, Al-Zubayr b. ʿAdī. Therefore, Bishr b. al-Ḥusayn, and isnāds that include him, are disclaimed as unreliable.
This includes the Anas b. Mālik transmission of the imitation hadith. It is also noticeable that the Anas b. Mālik narrations only appear in the later collections of Al-Harawī (Dhamm al-Kalām) and Abū Nu‘aym (Akhbār Aṣbahān).

**Figure 6: Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān (d. 36/656).** Only the short form of the imitation hadith is transmitted in this isnād network, which distinguishes it from the other Companion transmission networks. However, the Iraqi Kūfan ʿAlī b. Ghurāb had mixed reviews among hadith critics; while some praised his uprightness others wondered if he might be a closet Shi‘a. Doubt over his status weakened one narration in the Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān isnād network. Ṭabarānī transmits one all-Syrian isnād from Hudhayfa.

**Figure 7: Al-Ḥasan (d. 110/728).** Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī was a famous Iraqi Successor, who gained a reputation for his piety, knowledge, and asceticism. He was not a Companion, however, and never met the Prophet personally. Yet, like Ṭāwūs, he claimed to speak on behalf of the Prophet in his transmission. Despite the small number of transmitters separating the collector of this particular narration, Sa‘īd b. Manṣūr, from the Prophet, Ḥasan’s omission of the Companion from whom he learned this hadith weakens its claim to authenticity since the isnād is discontinuous (mursal).

**Figure 8: ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644).** This narration is the only one that is not attributed to Muhammad. Rather, it is attributed to a Companion – a mawqīf tradition in Muslim hadith terminology. It is attributed to ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, the father of Ibn ʿUmar and the one held responsible for the Pact that sought to normalize social distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim in the public sphere. For ʿUmar to have enunciated, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them,” was perfectly consistent with the
Muslim collective memory of ʿUmar. However, within traditional Muslim hadith criticism, even this narration is suspect. The isnād is not a continuous transmission from ʿUmar. The blind traditionist, Qatāda b. Diʿāma (d. 117/735) claims to have transmitted the tradition from ʿUmar himself although he could not have heard him say it directly due to the span of time separating the two. From a Schactian perspective, this chain would be the most “authentic” since it makes no attempt to attribute the saying to the Prophet. It would therefore represent an earlier stage in the development of religious authority where it was not incumbent for Muslims to attribute a tradition to the Prophet. Within the traditional framework of Muslim hadith criticism, however, it would retain authority only inasmuch as it corroborates other isnāds that actually claim to have originated with the Prophet. This particular narration is rarely mentioned among critics of this hadith, who focus their attention on Prophetic narrations (marfūʿ) only. From their perspective, however, the ʿUmar narration of the imitation hadith suggests that the Prophetic dictum was so widespread that it had diffused into the everyday usage of the Companions. Like the other discontinuous narrations of Ṭāwūs and Ḥasan, the ʿUmar narration is contained in an early hadith collection (Muṣannaf ʿAbd al-Razzāq).

Conclusion

To summarize the main conclusions of this examination of the imitation hadith transmission network. First, it was a widely-known tradition, contained in both early and late collections, including one member of the “sound six.” However, during the first century or so of Muslim history, the tradition circulated most frequently in Damascus; the Damascene Ibn Thawbān appears to have been especially enthusiastic about teaching this tradition to students. Yet, none of the isnāds were faultless. Critics impugned even the
most authoritative of isnāds - those beginning with the Companion Ibn ʿUmar. As a result, judgments of the hadith’s authenticity varied from weak (daʿīf) to authentic (ṣaḥīḥ). A majority of those who judged the hadith authentic only did so because of the numerous transmission paths of the hadith. Ultimately, the rhetorical power of the hadith outweighed any doubts that might have lingered over its authenticity. Hadith scholars over Islamic history were therefore anxious to include the imitation hadith in their collections.
Key to Isnad Maps

Collection containing the short form of the imitation hadith is designated by a shaded box

Collection containing the short form of the imitation hadith is designated by an empty box

An important common link (transmitter)

Transmitters connected by a continuous link

Transmitters connected by a discontinuous link
Figure 2: ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar Transmission Network
Figure 3: Abū Hurayra Transmission Network

Al-Harawī
(Dhamm al-Kalām)

Saʿīd b. Hāshim
b. Mazīd

Muhammad b.
Muhammad b.
Yaʿqūb al-Ḥimāṣ

Muhammad b. Ahmad
b. Muhammad
al-Ḥāfīż

Duḥaym

ʿAmr b. Abī Salama

Ṣadaqa b. ʿAbd Allāh
al-Samīn

Al-Awzāʿī

Yahyā b. Abī Kathīr

Abū Salama ʿAbd
al-Raḥmān b. ʿAwf

Abū Hurayra

The Prophet
Figure 4: Ṭawūs Transmission Network (Discontinuous)

Musnad al-Shihāb

Al-Miqdām

Fatḥiṣ b. Yūnus

Al-Miqdām

Ṣaʿīd b. al-Jabala

Muṣannaf Ibn Abī Shayba

Ṣaʿīd b. Mubārak

Ṣāḥib b. Yūnus

Ṣaʿīd b. al-Mubārak

Ṣaʿīd b. Yūnus

Ṣaʿīd b. al-Mubārak

Ṣāḥib b. Yūnus

The Prophet
Figure 5: Anas b. Mālik Transmission Network

Al-Harawī
(Dhamm al-Kalām)

Abū Nuʿaym
(Akhbār Aṣbahān)

ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad

Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar b. Yūsuf

Abū al-ʿAbbās Ahmād b. Maḥmūd b. ʿAbbās

Al-Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad b. ʿUfayr

Abū al-ʿAbbās Ahmād b. Maḥmūd b. ʿAbbās

Al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf b. Qutayba

Bishr b. al-Ḥusayn al-Aṣbāḥānī

Al-Zubayr b. ʿAdī

Anas b. Mālik

The Prophet
Figure 6: Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān Transmission Network

The Prophet

Al-Ṭabarānī (Musnad al-Shāmiyyīn)

Muḥammad b. Marzūq

ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. al-Khaṭṭāb

ʿAbd Allāh b. Sālim

Hishām b. Hassān

Al-Zubaydī

Ibn Sīrīn

Numayr b. Aws

Abū ʿUbayda b. Ḥudhayfa

Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān

Mūsā b. Zakariyyā

Al-Ṭabarānī (Al-Awsat)

Musnad al-Bazzār

ʿAmr b. Ishāq

Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm

ʿAmr b. al-Ḥārith

ʿAmr b. Isḥāq
Figure 7: Al-Ḥasan Transmission Network (Discontinuous)
Figure 8: ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb Transmission Network (Discontinuous)
Part Two Classification: Framing the Interpretation of the Imitation Hadith

Hadith collection was not a value-free process. Scholars of hadith interpreted and shaped the meanings of hadith through their practices of classification. The construction of categories to organize fragmentary hadith reports and anecdotes into discrete subjects provides insights into their social imaginary. The hadith collection’s classification scheme illuminates the intentions of its author. It provides insight into how authors interpreted the content of a hadith, and how they wanted the reader to understand it. The pioneers whose hadith collections have survived such as Mālik b. Anas of Medina, ʿAbd al-Razzāq of Yemen, and Ibn Abī Shayba of Iraq, classified hadith topically according to normative legal categories (muṣannaf). Not all hadith collections categorized hadith into subject matter, however. Other collections were organized by their transmitters, not their contents (musnad). And yet, others, which became the most popular, combined both approaches (sunan). For this latter group, it was not uncommon for a collector to repeat a hadith multiple times with different transmitters, in different linguistic forms, and even under different chapters to highlight a range of possible meanings. Each chapter, then, advanced a unique interpretation of these recurring hadith, highlighting their semantic multivocality.

This insight is linguistically encoded in the Arabic term, tarjumān (tarājim), which literally means interpretation. The famed companion and cousin of the Prophet,

Ibn ʿAbbās was attributed with the honorific, *Tarjumān al-Quran*, the Interpreter of the Quran. The word, *tarjumān*, resonates with even deeper meaning. In other contexts, it refers to the practice of translation, which is also widely understood as a form of interpretation. Arabic lexicographers literally define the practice of translation through the metaphor of “crossing” (ʿibra). *Tarjumān*, in the context of classification then, enables the reader to mentally cross over and understand the meanings of hadith.

Examining the meanings and significance of hadith classification became a separate subject of study in pre-modern Muslim religious thought.  

In this section, I show that hadith collectors not only attempted to shape the meanings of hadith through their methods of classification, but also took the bold step of altering the hadith text itself to fit their classification *cum* interpretation. I focus on the case of the imitation hadith because its semantic polyvalence and ambiguity provided hadith collectors with an opportunity to shape its meaning in accordance with their personal interpretation. This examination illuminates the beginning of a complex discursive process: the transformation of hadith classification into normative religious interpretation. While dominant interpretations of specific hadith emerged, they were far from monolithic. Not all hadith scholars viewed a particular hadith in the same way. They often had divergent rhetorical objectives and ideological perspectives.

As we shall see, different taxonomies reflect different interpretations of the imitation hadith. They highlight the polyvalence of *tashabbuh*’s semantic field. These

---

42 For a study of the collection of Bukhārī, see Muḥammad Zakariyya al-Kandlawī, *al-Abwāb wa al-Tarājim li’l-Bukhārī*, 2 vols. (Sahāranpur: Yuṭlab min al-Maktabat al-Yahyawiyya, Mazāhir al-ʿUlūm 1971). Explanations of chapter headings can also be found in hadith commentaries such as *Fatḥ al-Bārī* by Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī. See reference to Muhammad Fadel’s article on Bukhārī above. I have been unable to find a separate study of the chapter headings of Abū Dāwūd’s *Sunan* hadith collection.
taxonomies anticipate dominant interpretations of later Muslim religious scholars and corroborate the aesthetic emphasis of both the Pact of ʿUmar and other *tashabbuh*-related hadith mentioned above. However, these hadith taxonomies also open up new perspectives that foreground its political function.

The highly regarded collection of Abū Dāwūd (d. 889) is the only one of “the sound six” (*al-ṣiḥāḥ al-sitta*), the six most authentic collections of Sunnī hadith, to transmit the imitation hadith. Abū Dāwūd was quite the cosmopolitan of his time. Although he originated from Sistān, in the border region of modern day eastern Iran and Southwestern Afghanistan, he also traveled in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and the Hijaz in search of knowledge. He studied with some of the most prestigious scholars of his day including the Syrian jurist, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Awzāʿī (d. 774), and the cornerstone of formative Sunnism, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 855). The breadth of his collection reflects his wide travels. It is also distinguish by its jurisprudential content. Like the paragon of Sunnī hadith collection, Muhammad al-Bukhārī (d. 870), Abū Dāwūd actively sought to structure his collection of hadith in accordance with his particular theological and legal positions – those of the Partisans of Hadith (*aṣḥāb al-hadīth*). He therefore provides traditions that advance his dogmatic positions over controversial topics such as predestination, intercession, the piety of the first four caliphs, and the createdness of the Quran. Abū Dāwūd’s classification of hadith reflects his polemical and sectarian milieu.

---

We should therefore expect his taxonomy to reflect his personal interpretations of hadith as well.

Abū Dāwūd classifies the imitation hadith under the chapter on dress (kitāb al-libās) under the subsection “Dress that Attracts Publicity” (bāb libs al-shuhra). In this chapter, he includes an assortment of related reports, including those that add a moral dimension to fashion: “If anyone puts on dress that attracts publicity (libās al-shuhra), God will clothe him in a similar garment on the Day of Judgment.” The tradition suggests that there will be eschatological repercussions for a person’s sartorial choices. Just as dress sets one apart in this life, it sets one apart in the next life as well. However, the tradition implicitly suggests that the type of notoriety that one gains on the Day of Judgment will be negative, not positive. This hadith imbues an apparently insignificant practice with religious importance. The upshot is that a person should not intentionally draw unnecessary attention to himself by radically differing from a given society’s accepted fashion styles; he should conform to its cultural norms.

Abū Dāwūd places the imitation hadith just after the above hadith. The interpretive gloss that Abū Dāwūd casts upon the imitation hadith is thus far from neutral. It spins the meaning of “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them” into a suggestion that one who purposely distinguishes himself through dress socially alienates himself. An individual becomes “one of them” - part of a collectivity - by dressing like them. There are of course broader implications of religious belonging that transcend dress. In the

---

44 Sunan Abī Dāwūd, kitāb al-libās, bāb libs al-shuhra
45 Ibid.
context of Abū Dāwūd’s taxonomy, however, the conceptual relationship of imitation to social belonging is confined to the aesthetic matter of dress.

Yet, Abū Dāwūd was neither the first nor the last to gloss the imitation hadith with an emphasis on fashion and style. ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 826) from Sanʿā’, Yemen, himself a pioneer of hadith collection, preceded Abū Dāwūd. His topically arranged collection of hadith (muṣannaf) is among the earliest to have survived. Since he preceded the sunan movement, which restricted hadith to prophetic origin, ʿAbd al-Razzāq collects traditions from a wide range of authorities, including the Prophet’s Companions, their Successors, and the Prophet himself. ʿAbd al-Razzāq also does not adhere to the strict standards of transmitter criticism applied by Abū Dāwūd and other members of the sunan movement. ʿAbd al-Razzāq does not attribute the imitation hadith to the Prophet with a continuous and unbroken chain of transmission, which for later Muslims became a minimum standard for the authenticity of a hadith. Instead, he transmits the imitation hadith with a broken chain of transmitters (mursal) that he attributes to none other than the second caliph, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. Accordingly, this transmission lacks the credentials for authenticity that later Muslims valued. However, for our purposes, ʿAbd al-Razzāq’s classification of the imitation hadith provides a valuable alternative perspective on its relationship to early Muslim conceptions of social and religious belonging.

---


47 The chain itself though is not a muttaṣil, or a continuous transmission, from ʿUmar but rather a narration of Qatāda who could not have reported directly from him because of the span of time separating their lives. Still from a Schactian perspective ʿAbd al-Razzāq’s chain back to ʿUmar may in fact be the most reliable since ʿAbd al-Razzāq does not claim that the tradition is a statement of the Prophet himself. From the perspective of traditional Muslim hadith criticism, the tradition from ʿUmar functions as corroborating evidence of the tradition’s authenticity.
ʿAbd al-Razzāq classifies the imitation hadith in “The Chapter on Cutting Hair from the Nape of the Neck and Asceticism (Bāb Halq al-Qafā wa al-Zuhd).” At first blush, the title seems arbitrary, even whimsical. A modern reader naturally wonders: what is the connection between asceticism and cutting neck hair? The transmitted narrative offers some clues to help solve the puzzle. According to ʿAbd al-Razzāq, ʿUmar sees a man wearing silk who had shaven the nape of his neck. Seeing this ostentatious display of extravagance, ʿUmar, who was never known to shy away from an opportunity to command right and forbid wrong, warns him: “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.” Coincidentally, the jurist, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, is also said to have been queried about a man who shaves his nape. He appropriately imitates ʿUmar’s response by quoting the imitation hadith. The context of both narratives once again draws our attention to aesthetics; and dress and hairstyle in particular. Silk was a controversial topic among early Muslims, who debated not only its permissibility, but which gender could wear it, and how much. In this scene, ʿUmar expresses his disapproval at such an ostentatious act by obliquely quoting the imitation hadith. Although most renowned for orchestrating the vast expansion of Muslim rule across Syria, Egypt and Mesopotamia, ʿUmar also gained notoriety in Muslim posterity for his asceticism. A number of widely circulated anecdotes inform us that he wore tattered clothes; shunned meat and other rich foods during famine; and avoided the pomp and luxury that characterized courtly life of the rival Byzantine and Sasanian kingdoms while administering justice as the Muslim caliph, the Prince of the Believers (Amīr al-muʾminīn). ʿUmar was therefore

49 al-Marwadhi, Kitāb al-Waraʿ, 176-77.
well-placed to enforce an ethic of renunciation and self-denial. As the namesake of the Pact of ʿUmar, which sought to regulate dress, hairstyle, and other aesthetically mediated markers of religious distinction, ʿUmar was also well-qualified to condemn the practice of shaving the nape of the neck. Ahmad b. Ḥanbal likewise maintained an impeccable reputation for asceticism. As archetypes of renunciation, both figures articulate an ascetic impulse that had sought to counter the vast spread of wealth and luxury that resulted from the early conquests. According to Muslim lore, shaving the nape of the neck was a distinctively Zoroastrian fashion, which Muslims should not imitate. Silk in copious amounts encoded ostentation and luxury, and was unlawful for Muslim men, but not Muslim women. The narrative’s association of the imitation hadith with these stigmatized social practices evokes a negatively charged interpretation – a rhetorical strategy echoed by Abū Dāwūd. Its aesthetic associations reverberate in both collections as well. Both ʿAbd al-Razzāq and Abū Dāwūd advocate social conformity through dress. Each collector, however, evokes a slightly different register of the imitation hadith’s meanings and moral implications.

Other classification schemes illustrate that the scope of imitation exceeded style and dress. As mentioned above, the Iraqi jurist, Muhammad al-Shaybānī, transmits an expanded version of the imitation hadith (“long version”) that registers a very different meaning:

I was raised on the eve of the Hour with the sword until God is worshipped alone without any other partner ascribed to him. My provision has been placed under the shadow of my spear, and abasement

and contempt have been placed on the one who disobeys my command. Whoever imitates a nation is one of them.\footnote{52}{The Arabic transliteration is as follows: \textit{Bu’ihtu bayna yaday al-sā’a bi’l-sayf hatā ya’bad Allāh waḏāhu lā sharīka lahu wa ju’ila rizqī taḥta ūill rumhī wa ju’ila al-dhillatu wa al-ṣaghārū ‘alā man khālafa amri wa man tashabbaha bi-qawmin fa huwa min-hum.}}

This long version places the phrase, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them” in the radically different context of conquest and empire. Echoing this context, hadith collectors classified this long version in the context of jihad. Saʿīd b. Manṣūr (d. 841), a teacher of both Abū Dāwūd and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal who originated from the Central Asian city of Merv but moved to Mecca, classifies the long version under the following heading: “Those who said that jihad is a constant state of affairs” (bāb man qāla al-jihād māḍin).\footnote{53}{See bāb man qāla al-jihād māḍin in Saʿīd Ibn Manṣūr, \textit{Sunan Saʿīd b. Manṣūr}, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-Aʿẓamī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1405/1985), 2:143-44.}
The long version of the imitation hadith seems to convey this message. The Iraqi hadith collector, Ibn Abī Shayba, also one of Abū Dāwūd’s teachers, classifies two different narrations of the long version in his chapter on jihad.\footnote{54}{Ibn Abī Shayba, \textit{Al-Muṣannaf}, 7:29, 38.(#'s 19629, 19665)} In his collection of difficult traditions (\textit{Mushkil al-Āthār}), the tenth century Egyptian Sunnī theologian and Ḥanafī jurist, Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 933), classifies this long version under his chapter on maintaining abasement (al-dhul) of subjects by extracting the land tax (kharāj) through the proper harvesting of arable land.\footnote{55}{Abū Jaʿfar Ahmad al-Ṭaḥāwī, \textit{Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār}, ed. Shuʿayb Arnāʿūt, 16 vols., vol. 1 (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Risāla, 1415/1994), 212-13.}

Like Abū Yūsuf’s \textit{Book of Taxation}, Ṭaḥāwī infuses the imitation hadith with an imperial political-economic logic.

So far we have seen two strikingly different classifications of the imitation hadith: jihad and dress. These divergent taxonomies, however, each, corresponded to different versions of the imitation hadith. Collectors categorized the abbreviated form under sections on dress and the long form in sections on jihad. However, some collectors did
not bend their taxonomies to fit the content of the hadith. They altered the content of the hadith to fit their taxonomies. This deliberate alteration of “transmitted” texts indicates the degree to which the subjective biases of collectors could enter into the practice of classifying hadith.

The most celebrated of all Sunnī hadith collectors, Bukhārī, produced what many Sunnīs believe to be the most authentic book after the Quran. However, it is also one of the most polemical collections of hadith ever produced. In his “Chapter on Jihad”, under the subheading, “What is said concerning spears,” he transmits some familiar words:

My provision has been placed under the shadow of my spear, and abasement and contempt have been placed on the one who disobeys my command.

Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that Bukhārī is transmitting excerpts from the long version of the imitation hadith. However, he takes the liberty to truncate both the first and last parts (“I was raised on the eve of the Hour…” and “Whoever imitates a people is one of them”) because these parts have nothing to do with spears. The fifteenth century Egyptian commentator, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449) explains that Bukhārī’s willingness to alter the text of this tradition indicates his low opinion of its authenticity; two of the chain’s Damascene transmitters are suspect. Bukhārī does not even bother to name them. He names the companion transmitter of this prophetic tradition, Ibn ʿUmar, but omits everyone else. Technically, this hadith is not part of Bukhārī’s collection,

56 On how not all Sunnī Muslims have believed this over history see Jonathan Brown, The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunnī Hadith Canon, Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 278-80, especially.
57 See Sahīh al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-jihād, bāb mā ṣallā fi al-rimāḥ
which requires a complete chain of trustworthy transmitters leading back to the Prophet. Bukhārī’s alteration was not an exceptional practice, however. He intermittently appends chainless, broken-chained reports, or unattributed reports to his chapter-titles and certain narrations to advance a particular interpretation or perspective.

Finally, I circle back to the collection of Abū Dāwūd. Upon examining Abū Dāwūd’s chain of transmitters for the imitation hadith, some interesting insights emerge. Both Abū Dāwūd and his teacher, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, received the imitation hadith from the same source: the Baghdadi transmitter ʿUthmān b. Abī Shayba, brother of hadith collector, Abū Bakr b. Abī Shayba.59 What is striking about this mutual connection is that although Abū Dāwūd and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal learned the imitation hadith from the same source, they each record two different versions of it in their respective collections. Abū Dāwūd transmits the short version of the imitation hadith, “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them,” and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal transmits the long version.60 Why the distinction?

There are two possible explanations. In the first possible scenario, both Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Ḥanbal receive the short version, but Ibn Ḥanbal alters the original text by combining it with other narrations to make the long version and Abū Dāwūd transmits the short version without alteration. In the second scenario, Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Ḥanbal

59 For a variation of the long form of the imitation hadith see the kitāb al-jihād in Ibn Abī Shayba, Al-Muṣannaf, 7:29.
60 Ibn Hanbal, Musnad al-Imām Ahmad b. Hanbal, 9:123-126; 9:478 (Nos. 5114, 5115, 5667). Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal considered this transmission path to be weak, although he included this hadith in his collection. Ibn Ḥanbal believed that many of the hadith transmitted by the Damascene common link, Ibn Thawbān, are to be disclaimed. Hadith critics such as Nasāʾi also impugned his reliability while others like Yahya b. Maʿin did not take issue with him. In Fatḥ al-Bārī, the Egyptian commentator, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAaqālānī, explains that hadith critics differ about the reliability of Ibn Thawbān. Many of them also declared that the first Damascene transmitter, Abū al-Munīb al-Jurashī, who is said to have learned the hadith from Ibn ʿUmar, is unknown. The only one of the sound six (siḥāḥ sitta) that includes Abū Munīb al-Jurashī as a transmitter is the Sunan of Abū Dāwūd. In fact, the imitation hadith is the lone hadith that Abū Dāwūd transmits from him. For additional discussion of the authenticity of this isnād see Appendix One of this study.
both receive the long version, but Abū Dāwūd truncates everything except “Whoever imitates a nation is one of them” and Ibn Ḥanbal faithfully transmits the long version in its entirety. Of these two possible explanations, the second is more likely for two reasons. First, the long version appears in many different collections, apart from, and chronologically prior to Ahmad b. Ḥanbal. Had he whimsically added to the original text, it would have been specific to his collection. This, however, is not the case.

Second, in an epistle that he wrote to the scholars of Medina, Abū Dāwūd, admits that he would occasionally truncate a tradition to fit the rhetorical purposes of his collection. “Perhaps I abbreviated a long hadith because if I wrote it out in full, some of those who hear it would neither know nor understand its legal subject matter,” he writes. It seems that he does so here. This instance suggests that Abū Dāwūd was willing to alter the original text that he was “transmitting” in order to advance his personal normative vision of Islam.

What these cases suggest is that, although veiled by an aura of objectivity, hadith collection was actually a subjective process of religious interpretation. More specifically, we observe differentiation amidst continuities of interpretation. This textual dynamic corresponds to the social dynamics of hadith scholars who were embedded in an

---

61 It comprises what G.H.A. Juynboll would label a composite: parts of different hadith jumbled together into a single narration. Juynboll would date such composite hadith traditions chronologically later than its component. The assumption of this rationale is that the process of synthesis takes additional time. According to this rationale, the long version of the imitation hadith would have originated after the short version. Above, I argue why I do not believe this to be true in this specific case. See the general introduction in G.H.A. Juynboll, Encyclopedia of Canonical Hadith (Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 2007), xxviii.


63 This opinion does not suggest that Abū Dāwūd was necessarily being disingenuous. It is likely that he had heard the imitation hadith in its short form as a separate text. His wide travels across the Muslim world would have made such an encounter not unlikely during the middle of the ninth century when the regional schools of law and hadith began to spread beyond their geographic origins.
extensive social network. Four of Abū Dāwūd’s colleagues also transmitted the imitation hadith in different forms. Through these taxonomies we can discern the process by which ninth century hadith scholars across the Muslim world sought to shape Islam in accordance with a common religious vision.
APPENDIX TWO:
THE TREATISES AGAINST IMITATION: A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

In this appendix, I catalog all the pre-modern and modern treatises against imitation that I have been able to find (see the introduction to this study for an overview of the genre). In addition to the title and author, I have provided a brief summary of the contents of each treatise. The majority of treatises were originally written in Arabic. Two of those (the treatises of Ibn Taymiyya and Dhahabī) have been translated into English. A brief Arabic treatise has been translated into Indonesian (see below). However, in the past century, key treatises against imitation have been authored in English, Turkish, Urdu, and Persian. Additional treatises may also exist in other Islamicate languages such as Swahili, Indonesian, and Malay that I have been unable to track down. Published editions of all treatises listed are footnoted.

The Treatises Against Imitation

1. **Title:** *Iqtida al-Siraṭ al-Mustaqīm Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-Jahīm* (The Necessity of the Straight Path in order to be different from the Inhabitants of Hell)

   **Author:** Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymiyya (d. 1328)

   **Language:** Arabic

   **Madhhab:** Ḥanbalī

   **Location:** Damascus, Syria

   **Summary:** Ibn Taymiyya, the controversial jurist who was reputed to have a “screw loose,” wrote the first and most influential treatise against imitation in

---

Muslim history. He assembles religious texts (Quranic verses, hadith, the opinions of Muslim jurists) and gives the concept a theoretical foundation. He also highlights the mutual relationship between innovation and imitation as social processes that could disrupt normative Islam. As he does with bidʿa, Ibn Taymiyya deploys tashabbuh as a boundary-regulating discourse. However, he stresses the reprehensibility of imitation (tashabbuh) far more than he does innovation (bidʿa). In sum, he attempts to demonstrate that Muslim distinction is a universal principle of Islam in order to dissuade Muslims from participating in unsanctioned festivals. Significant portions of Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise have been translated into English. However, Memon’s introductory essay marginalizes the significance of Ibn Taymiyya’s theorization of reprehensible imitation to his treatise.

2. **Title:** Tashabbuḥ al-Khāṣīs bi-Ahl al-Khāmis fī radd al-tashabbuḥ bi-l-Mushrikiin (The Despicable Imitation of the People of Thursday, Rejecting the Imitation of Polytheists)

**Author:** Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 1348)

**Language:** Arabic

**Madhhab:** Ḥanbalī

**Location:** Damascus, Syria

**Summary:** Dhahabī was a student of Ibn Taymiyya. Most famous for his works on history, hadith and biography, he penned a brief treatise on imitating non-Muslims. Like his teacher, his primary concern was Muslim participation in seemingly benign non-Muslim ritual celebrations. Thursday appears to refer to Maundy or Lentil Thursday, which Christians celebrated as part of the last days of the Lent holiday leading up to Easter. Dhahabī’s disgust for these festivities mimics that of Ibn Taymiyya. He criticizes Muslim imitation of mundane activities such as baking flat loaves of bread, painting eggs, dyeing hair, wearing special attire, burning incense, and hanging crosses made of tar. Dhahabī castigates the rituals associated with Good Friday, Christmas, and Nawrūz as well. In contrast to Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise, Dhahabī’s digest is brief and simple in order to appeal to the common Muslim. An English translation of this treatise, titled *Imitating the Disbelievers*, has been published

---

in England by a non-academic press. The translator adds an appendix devoted to explaining the imitation hadith.

3. **Title:** Ḥusn al-Tanabbuh limā warada fī al-Tashabbuh (*The Beauty of Awakening to what has been transmitted regarding Imitation*)

**Author:** Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzi (d. 1651)

**Madhhab:** Shafiʿī

**Location:** Damascus, Syria

**Summary:** Although Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise is the most widely referenced pre-modern work on this topic among modern Muslims, it is neither the most comprehensive nor the most imaginative. That honorific goes to *The Beauty of Awakening to what has been transmitted regarding Imitation (Ḥusn al-Tanabbuh limā warada fī al-Tashabbuh)*, authored by the mystic-jurist from Damascus, Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzi (d. 1651). Several features distinguish this work from its predecessors. First, this treatise is really an encyclopedia; it took Ghazzi nearly forty years to complete this project. He develops a mimetic theory of the human self that he applies to social relationships across the cosmos. Ghazzi therefore does not limit himself to emphasizing the difference between Muslims and non-Muslims. He applies his mimetic theory to relations between men and women, Arabs and non-Arabs, free persons and slaves, scholars and commoners, and humans and non-humans (angels, devils, and animals). Most importantly, however, unlike any other treatise written against *tashabbuh* in Muslim history, Ghazzi stresses the positive possibilities of *tashabbuh* as well. Inspired by his Sufi sympathies, hedevotes nearly half of his encyclopedia to good *tashabbuh*. Ghazzi’s encyclopedia of imitation *cum distinction marks the culmination of the tashabbuh discourse in Islamic thought to date. It is remarkable how this truly magisterial work has been ignored by Euro-American and traditional Muslim scholarship alike. This treatise was recently published in twelve volumes.

---

Title: Ḥusn al-sayr fī Bayān Aḥkām Anwāʿ min al-Tashabbuh biʾl-Ghayr (The Beautiful Journey in Clarifying the Rulings concerning the different types of Imitation of the Other)

Author: Muḥammad b. ṣAwad al-Dimyāṭī (d. 1912)

Language: Arabic

Madhab: Shafiʿī

Location: Egypt

Summary: This brief treatise offers a glimpse at the cultural changes taking place in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century. Dimyāṭī’s anxieties concentrate on the corruption resulting from the spread of foreign cultural practices among Egyptian Muslims. They focus on the growing resemblance between men and women, and Muslim and non-Muslim, collective identities that should remain distinct. Dimyāṭī divides the treatise into four main sections: 1) Men imitating women - Dimyāṭī decries the growing prevalence of Egyptian men dying their hands with henna, arguing that it is essentially distinctive marker of women; 2) Women imitating men - he declares that it is categorically forbidden for women to imitate and resemble men; 3) Muslims imitating non-believers - like Ibn Taymiyya and Dhahabī, Dimyāṭī perceives Muslim participation in unsanctioned festivals as a great danger. In this section, he highlights the pivotal role of an individual believer’s intention and desire in determining the Islamic theological and legal implications of imitation. He notes that that Egyptians are particularly vulnerable to this temptation; 4) Dress - Dimyāṭī, counter-intuitively, argues that a common Muslim should not wear the unique dress of religious scholars or Sufīs in order to resemble them. Maintaining these hierarchical social distinctions was part of his vision of an ideal Islamic social order. He concludes the treatise with a section on the “diseases of the heart,” signaling the relevance of tashabbuh as a discourse for spiritual becoming.

---

4 Muḥammad b. ṣAwad al-Dimyāṭī, Ḥusn al-Sayr fī Bayān Aḥkām anwāʿ min al-Tashabbuh biʾl-Ghayr (Cairo: Matbaʿat al-saʿāda, 1912).
5. **Title:** Al-Istinfār li-Ghazwi al-Tashabbuh bi’l-Kuffār (The Invitation to War against Imitating the Infidels)⁵

**Author:** Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī (d. 1960)

**Language:** Arabic

**Madhhāb:** None

**Location:** Morocco/Egypt

**Summary:** In this treatise, Ghumārī, the Moroccan hadith master who fought jihad against the Spanish, fumes over the persisting cultural impact of European colonization and military occupation of Muslim lands. Ghumārī highlights the infidelity of the People of the Book – Jews and Christians – and the corrupting effects of Western institutions, especially schools, upon Muslim youth identity. According to Ghumārī, schools are the primary means through which corrupt Western values and ways diffuse throughout Muslim society. Muslim imitation of European dress and style marks the tipping point of more significant social, cultural, and spiritual transformations. He repeats Ibn Taymiyya’s position that opposition to non-Muslims is a positive value in itself. Stylistically, he employs Quranic verses, before topically categorizing relevant hadith in order to provide textual support for his arguments.

6. **Title:** Najāt al-Muʾminīn biʿadm al-Tashabbuh bi’l-Kāfirīn (Successes of the Believers by not Imitating the Infidels)⁶

**Author:** Sulaymān b. Khalīl al-Ghāwjī al-Albānī (d. 1958)

**Language:** Arabic

**Madhhāb:** Ḥanafī

**Location:** Damascus, Syria

**Summary:** Ghāwjī was among a group of Albanian immigrants who pursued religious scholarship in Damascus. Published in 1949, the brief treatise (59 pages) highlights five problematic cultural trends that accompanied the French mandate of Syria since World War I: 1) Wearing foreign headgear (al-

---

qubʿa); 2) The increasing presence of women in public life (al-tabarruj); 3) Muslims (men and women) marrying non-Muslims; 4) The spread of photography; and 5) the abrogation of Islamic inheritance laws. What is theoretically unique about this treatise is how he integrates Shafiʿī legal hermeneutical concepts (istiṣḥāb) into his arguments.

7. **Title:** *Man Tashabbaha bi-qawmin fa-huwa min-hum* (Whoever imitates a nation is one of them)

**Author:** Nāṣir al-ʿAql

**Language:** Arabic (translated into Indonesian)

**Madhhab:** none

**Location:** Saudi Arabia

**Summary:** The author has edited Ibn Taymiyya’s, *The Necessity of the Straight Path*, and authored works on heresiography. Following this trend, in the early 1990’s, ʿAql wrote a booklet designed to warn every Muslim about the dangers of imitating non-Muslims. He states imitation has never been more dangerous than it is today. Tashabbuh can occur in creed, ritual, and customary practices. However, imitation only becomes reprehensible when it encompasses the distinctive markers of a collectivity; imitating unmarked practices is permissible. Next, he explains why imitating stigmatized collectivities such as polytheists, Zoroastrians, Romans, non-Arabs and devils is bad. In the last portion of the book, he classifies different acts of reprehensible imitation based upon hadith traditions. In a footnote, he issues the opinion that Muslim men should not wear pants in Muslim majority countries because this fashion is a distinctive marker of Western civilization. This work has been translated into Indonesian.

8. **Title:** *Al-Sunan wa al-Āthār fī al-nahy ʿan Tashabbuh biʾl-Kuffār* (Prophetic and Non-Prophetic Traditions regarding the Imitation of Infidels)

---


Author: Suhayl ʿAbd al-Ghaffār

Language: Arabic

Madhhab: none

Location: Saudi Arabia

Summary: ʿAbd al-Ghaffār devotes this treatise (formerly a university thesis) to reprehensible imitation of non-believers. He acknowledges the earlier contributions of both Ibn Taymiyya and Ghazzī. His style is simple, documentary, and devoid of legal jargon. His main interest is compiling relevant hadith reports, even those not contained in the six authentic collections of Sunnī hadith (ṣiḥaḥ sitta). He arranges them into topical categories such as ritual, dogma, and dress. For each hadith, ʿAbd al-Ghaffār furnishes the collection(s), transmitter criticism, grading of authenticity, explanation of contextual indicators, and a brief discussion of its legal application.

9. Title: Al-Tashabbuh al-Manhi ʿanhu fī al-Fiqh al-Islāmī, (Prohibited Imitation in Islamic Jurisprudence) ¹⁰

Author: Jamīl b. Ḥabīb al-Luwayḥiq

Language: Arabic

Madhhab: None

Location: Saudi Arabia

Summary: This is another university treatise that has been published as a book. Luwayḥiq declares that he depended upon two main pre-modern works: the treatises of Ibn Taymiyya and Ghazzī. Luwayḥiq’s examination is quite exhaustive compared to his modern predecessors and contemporaries. Although he focuses his treatise on negative tashabbuh, he extends his analysis beyond religious difference. He analyzes tashabbuh as an Islamic discursive means of mediating relations between men and women, Arab and non-Arab, human and non-human (devil, animal). Although he attempts to give theoretical explanations for why these social distinctions are religiously mandated, he devotes the majority of his treatise to the legal implications and

rulings derived from the hadith traditions. He summarizes the differences of opinions among the four Sunnī schools of law and then offers his own opinion on whether a specific mimetic practice is permissible, detested, or forbidden. He categorizes the traditions according to ritual (prayer, fasting etc.) and customary practices (festivals, dress).

10. **Title:** Al-Tadābīr al-Wāqiya min al-Tashabbuh bi’l-Kuffār (Precautionary [Islamic] Regulations concerning the Imitation of non-Believers)\(^{11}\)

**Author:** ʿUthmān Dūkūrī

**Language:** Arabic

**Madhhab:** None

**Location:** Saudi Arabia

**Summary:** The two volume work is distinguished from the previous ones due to its general treatment of Muslim relations with non-Muslims – Christians, Jews and Polytheists. It is not a specific treatment tashabbuh as a religious discourse in itself. Rather tashabbuh functions a heuristic lens through which Dūkūrī discusses how Muslims should interact with non-Muslims. Chapters focus on how Muslim propagandists and government officials (muḥtasib) should address several inter-related issues including the virtues of worship, Free Masons and non-Muslims living in Muslim lands (dār al-islām). The work is rife with antagonistic remarks about Jews and the machinations of the West (but not the Saudi Regime) as well as praise for Ibn Taymiyya.

11. **Title:** Iẓhār al-Adilla fī ḥukm al-tashabbuh bi’l-kuffār al-adhilla (Demonstrating the Proofs concerning the Judgment on Imitating the Debased Non-Believers)\(^{12}\)

**Author:** ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Shumayrī

**Language:** Arabic

**Madhhab:** None

---

\(^{11}\) ʿUthmān Dūkūrī, Al-Tadābīr al-Wāqiya min al-Tashabbuh bi’l-Kuffār (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2000).

**Location:** Egypt

**Summary:** The Salafi Egyptian author of this recently published treatise invokes the inspiration of Ibn Taymiyya in his attempt to remind modern Muslims of the dangers and harms of imitating non-believers. Like Ibn Taymiyya, he attempts to assemble a range of prophetic and non-prophetic traditions in order to make his case. He mentions many of the same texts that have been invoked in others treatises. Like others many others, when attempting to explain why imitating non-believers has become so harmful yet widespread among Muslims, he suggests that Muslim spiritual and political weakness is the primary cause.

12. **Title:** Islami Tehzīb-o-Tamaddun (Islamic Culture and Civilization) or Al-Tashabbuh fi al-Islām

**Author:** Qari Muḥammad Tayyab (d. 1983)

**Language:** Urdu

**Location:** North India

**Madhhab:** Ḥanafī (Deobandi)

**Summary:** Writing when India was still a British colony, religious scholar and former principle of the famed Deoband seminary, Qari Muḥammad Tayyab, authored a comprehensive monograph addressing Muslim imitation of non-Muslims. Written in Urdu, it is a comprehensive and scholarly work that examines the many discursive dimensions of *tashabbuh*: key religious source texts; Shariʿa applications; attitudes and practices of the first Muslims (ʿUmar I and ʿUmar II); the stress on aesthetically mediated distinction through dress and hair-dye; as well as the interactive relationship between the interior (*bāṭin*) and exterior (*dhāhir*) dimensions of the Muslim self.

---

13. **Title:** Frenk mukallitligi ve şapka (European Imitation and the Hat)/ Frenk mukallitliği ve İslâm (European Imitation and Islam) ¹⁴

**Author:** Iskilipli Aţîf Hoca (d. 1926) ¹⁵

**Language:** Turkish

**Location:** Turkey

**Summary:** Iskilipli Aţîf Hoca, a Turkish religious scholar, authored a short booklet that condemned the wearing of the European hat in 1924. In 1925, the Turkish Republic put hat law into effect, which mandated that men must wear the European-inspired hat and prohibited them from wearing the traditional fez cap, a visual symbol of Islam. ¹⁶ The hat law was one of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s reforms meant to indicate the new Turkish republic’s incorporation into modern civilization—understood to mean Westernization. Riots across Turkey ensued; the government responded by executing rebels. Iskilipli Aţîf was subsequently arrested and ultimately executed for violating the law in 1926, despite publishing his booklet before it was even enacted. In the booklet, Iskilipli Aţîf condemns the blind imitation of European civilization, including its fashions. However, he also argues that Muslims should import those features of European civilization that will enable Islamic civilization to be independent and self-sufficient.

14. **Title:** Islam at the Crossroads ¹⁷

**Author:** Muhammad Asad (d. 1992)

**Location:** Austria (origin)

**Language:** English

**Summary:** This was Muhammad Asad’s first published monograph, whose objective was to urge Muslims to be self-reliant and not dependent upon Western civilization aesthetically, morally, materially, politically, and spiritually. Asad identifies the importance of aesthetically mediated practices such as dress to the moral foundations of a civilization. He therefore urges

---


¹⁵ His life was made into a movie in 1993, *İskilipli Aţif Hoca / Kelebekler Sonsuza Uçar*.

¹⁶ See “ʻAmāma” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*

Muslims to not imitate Western fashions in order to preserve the moral and spiritual foundations of Muslim civilization. He also defends the enduring relevance of the Prophetic sunna despite the attacks of Orientalists and Muslim reformers alike. The work was originally written in 1933 when much of the Muslim world was still under colonial rule. However, in his 1981 foreword to the new edition, Asad continues to stand by his original arguments.

15. **Title:** *Gharbzadegi (Westoxification)*

**Author:** Jalāl Āl Aḥmad (d. 1969)

**Location:** Iran

**Language:** Persian

**Summary:** This work does not really belong among the “Treatises against imitation.” Unlike the other authors mentioned in this list, Jalāl Āl Ahmad was not a religious scholar, nor was he even a Sunni. Therefore, his arguments against imitation are not rooted in hadith-based Sunni discourses. However, his work shares with the other modern works a deep frustration, sadness, and anxiety over widespread Muslim imitation of Western civilization. After passing through Marxist and progressive nationalist phases, Jalāl Āl Ahmad eventually drew from his Shiʿī Muslim roots to critique Iranian imitation of the West. Ahmad makes an appeal for Muslims to return to their essential Islamic civilizational identity. In his famous work, he popularized the term, *Gharbzadegi*, which has been rendered in English as Westoxification, Occidentosis, and Euro-mania. He analogized the cultural phenomenon of Muslim infatuation with the West to a biological plague that had insidiously spread throughout Muslim lands. Originally written in the 1960’s, his sharp criticism of the Westernization of the Muslim world was published in its final form posthumously in 1978.

---


19 Jalāl Āl Ahmad did hail from a family of Shiʿī scholars that traced its lineage to Imam Muhammad al-Baqir. However, at an early age, Ahmad turned away from religion, only to come back to his religious heritage later in his life. Even then, he did not represent orthodox notions of Shiʿī Islam, however.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


476


———. "Of Other Spaces." Diacritics 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986).


496


Youshaa Patel was born in Edinburgh, Scotland on June 14, 1976. The auspicious date of his birth on America’s Flag Day anticipated his family’s subsequent emigration to New Jersey in 1982. He graduated from the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor in 1998, with a Bachelors degree in Economics. After working in management consulting, he transitioned to the academy, completing his Doctorate in Religion at Duke University, Durham, NC in 2012. His primary research field crosses the intersection of Islam, ethics, and public life, with special interests in cross-cultural and inter-religious encounter in the Middle East and South Asia. Both Youshaa’s teaching and research draw upon sustained engagement with multiple areas of the Muslim world; it includes research stays in India, Qatar, Yemen, Jordan, and a Fulbright-Hays international dissertation research fellowship in Syria (2009). The completion of this dissertation was facilitated by a generous grant from the Mellon Foundation, which funded his fellowship at the Center for Global Islamic Studies at Lehigh University (2011-2012).