

# Probing Hidden Knowledge through Divine Inspiration: Charismatic Authority and Occult Sciences in 17th- and 18th-century Ottoman Conservative Theology

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For centuries, the pursuit of “hidden” knowledge represented a significant and near-ubiquitous ritualistic practice. People endeavored to amass extensive corpora of rituals and techniques designed to penetrate the metaphysical realms and obtain strategic information beyond ordinary perception.<sup>1</sup> In the Arabic language, techniques of contending with and controlling the unseen world (*‘alam al-ghayb*) were termed *al-‘ulūm al-khafīyya*, or *al-‘ulūm al-gharība*. These “hidden” and “strange” sciences delved into the invisible, but not praeternatural in the present-day sense, as the unseen was considered integral to nature.<sup>2</sup> By the thirteenth century, the concept of *al-ghayb* had gained significant currency

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1 P. Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London 2002), 180–191, 216–246.

2 Similar to beliefs of various peoples across the globe. See Boyer, *Religion*, 11–12, and M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion, Introduction by Talcott Parsons with a New Foreword by Ann Swidler* (Boston 1993), 1–4.

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in the territories predominantly populated by the Muslims.<sup>3</sup> It continued to endure well into modern times despite occasional shifts towards stricter and more literalist interpretations of the scriptural sources of religious orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup>

Muslim thaumaturgical (miracle/wonder-working) and occult practices represented a heavily overlapping field, yet they were often technically and anthropologically homologous with various types of magic (*sīhr*), provoking occasional doctrinal attacks. Since the medieval period, perhaps most notably with Ibn Taymīyya (d.1328), various streams of Muslim rigorism developed in parallel with mainstream theological views on Sunni orthodoxy. Rigorists struggled to restrict the power over praeternatural phenomena to Allah and His prophets, denying wondrous faculties and control of the occult to human beings after the *al-salaf* generations.<sup>5</sup>

Rigorist thought during the early modern period, particularly of the Qādīzādali and Wahhābī movements in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, remains a significant subject of academic investigation. During the sixteenth century, a renowned Ḥanafī-Māturīdī scholar, Birgivi Meḥmed Efendi (d.1573), expressed concern regarding what he deemed excesses in Sufi practice of his time, criticizing them as dreaded innovations (*bid'a*). His seminal work, *Muḥammadan Path*, argued for a strict adherence to Scriptural sources and Sunni jurisprudence. The *Path* was widely copied and circulated, and in part came to represent the foundation of Qādīzāde Meḥmed Efendi's (d. 1635) doctrine, yet coupled with a strong Taymīyyan sentiment reflected by many of Qādīzāde's

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3 The terms “Muslim” and “Islam” in this paper correspond to Shahab Ahmed's conceptualization, implying those human and historical phenomena, pertinent to various times and regions, relevant for producing meaning in terms of a hermeneutical engagement with what was presumed to have been the revelation to Muḥammad. See Sh. Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of being Islamic* (Princeton 2016), 404–405, 542.

4 M. Sariyannis, “Studying Ottoman Views of the Supernatural: The State-of-the-Art and a Research Agenda,” *Aca'ib: Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural*, 1 (2020), 5–20 at 9; M. Melvin-Koushki, “Introduction: De-orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism,” *Arabica*, 64/3–4 (2017), 287–297; idem, “Powers of One: The Mathematicalization of the Occult Sciences in the High Persianate Tradition,” *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World*, 5 (2017), 127–199; L. Saif, “Between Medicine and Magic: Spiritual Aetiology and Therapeutics in Medieval Islam,” in S. Bhayro and C. Rider (eds), *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early-Modern Period* (Leiden 2017), 313–339.

5 A. I. Al-Matroudi, *The Ḥanbalī School of Law and Ibn Taymiyyah: Conflict or Conciliation* (London 2006), 16–30; *EI2*, “Ibn Taymiyya” (H. Laoust).

followers.<sup>6</sup> For the better part of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as rigorism gained momentum within imperial socio-political milieus, the Ottoman ‘*ulamā*’ underwent an internal struggle over social, political, and religious authority.<sup>7</sup> Ottoman religious establishments faced historical shifts similar to those caused by Protestant reforms in Europe, further challenged by the Wahhābī doctrines emerging from the eighteenth-century Arabian peninsula. Both the Qādīzādālīs and Wahnābīs had in common the denial of wondrous powers to the Sufis, of *ziyārāt* legitimacy, as well as of any human effort to cause praeternatural effects through devotional, transactional, or mechanical means. Eighteenth-century Wahnābīs remained a distant object of derision for many of the Ottoman ‘*ulamā*’.<sup>8</sup> However, the Qādīzādālī campaigns gained serious momentum in Istanbul and some Ottoman provinces, directly impacting networks of imperial religious professionals, and many other social milieus.<sup>9</sup>

This paper explores the apologetics of the Ottoman Sufi-‘*ulamā*’ in-office, which were crafted in response to rigorist theological movements of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire. These movements were largely influenced by the Qādīzādālīs, and by adherents to Taymīyyan attitudes more broadly, as well as partly by the Wahnābīs. Early modern turbulences forced the conservative ‘*ulamā*’ to venture a degree of conformity with the spirit of the times, while defending their craft through tireless preaching and meticulous writing. The Khalwatīyya Sufi order, along with some others, appeared willing to put up a fiercer resistance to rigorist attacks,<sup>10</sup> while the gradually reforming Naqshbandīyya handled itself more comfortably in the prevalent social and political setting, mostly due to its intensified presentation as an order of strict adherents to the *Sunna*, who took efforts to abstain from possible excesses in their devotional and thaumaturgical practice.<sup>11</sup> Current scholarship

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6 K. A. Ivanyi, *Virtue, Piety and the Law: A Study of Birgivi Meḥmed Efendi’s al-Ṭarīqa al-muḥammadiyya* (Leiden 2020), 1–15, 26–46.

7 M. Zilfi, *The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in the Postclassical Age* (1600–1800) (Minneapolis 1998), 129–226.

8 D. Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London 2006), 1–70, 130–154.

9 M. D. Baer, *Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Empire* (Oxford 2008), 63–138.

10 D. Terzioğlu, “Sufis in the Age of State-Building and Confessionalization,” in Ch. Woodhead (ed.), *The Ottoman World* (London 2012), 86–102.

11 D. Le Gall, *A Culture of Sufism: Naqshbandīs in the Ottoman World*, 1450–1700 (Albany 2005), 1–10, 107–156.

has noted a simultaneous waning of narratives regarding the occult, miraculous, or wondrous, which was recently described as indicative of a particularly Ottoman “disenchantment” process.<sup>12</sup> Reading two famous Syrian Naqshbandī scholars, who in many ways represented the official Ottoman Sunni views, as well as popular beliefs that opposed more “puritan” attitudes among the Muslims, this paper examines the extent to which state-appointed religious professionals contributed to this disenchantment process, paying special attention to their opinions on occult operations.

‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulūsī (1641–1731) was a contemporary of the Qādīzādālī movement, and a critically acclaimed Sufi master who was widely considered an axial saint (*qutb*) of his time in the Ottoman Province of Damascus. There, he operated as a *muftī* and left plentiful works, today described as a lifetime of resistance to rigorist thought.<sup>13</sup> Muḥammad Amīn Ibn ‘Ābidīn (1784–1836) was a Ḥanafī-Māturīdī scholar, until the present widely considered one of the most authoritative interpreters of Ḥanafī *fiqh*, who served as *amīn al-fatwā* in early modern Damascus. At times his works present clear resistance to rigorist thought and carefully address the topics of wonders (*karamāt*), sainthood (*wilāya*), and various occult themes, highlighting conservative ulamaic reactions to remaining Qādīzādālī influences, Taymīyyan skepticism, and the impact of the Wahhābī movement in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>14</sup> Not only were these two figures accomplished scholars and influential lawmakers—they also stood on top of a vast Ottoman corporate establishment of religious professionals, their written works representative of early modern Ottoman Sunni orthodoxy.

12 Sariyannis, “Ottoman Views of the Supernatural,” 1–18; idem, “Ottoman Occultism and its Social Contexts: Preliminary Remarks,” *Aca’ib: Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural*, 3 (2022), 35–66 at 42–43; idem, “Knowledge and Control of the Future in Ottoman Thought,” *Aca’ib: Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural*, 1 (2020), 49–84 at 80–84.

13 D. Le Gall, “Kadizadelis, Nakşbendis, and Intra-Sufi Diatribe in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul,” *TSAJ*, 28, No. 1/2 (2004): 1–28; L. Demiri and S. Pagani, “Introduction: ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulūsī and the Intellectual and Religious History of the 17th-18th-Century World of Islam,” and A. Meier, “Words in Action: ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulūsī as a Jurist,” in L. Demiri and S. Pagani (eds), *Early Modern Trends in Islamic Theology: ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulūsī and His Network of Scholarship (Studies and Texts)* (Tübingen 2019), 1–30, 107–136. Further see S. Akkach, *Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi: Islam and the Enlightenment* (Oxford 2007), 27–30, 123–125.

14 H. Gerber, *Islamic Law and Culture 1600-1840* (Leiden 1999), 1–100.

Analysis of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century apologetic theology indicates that beliefs in occult, wondrous, and miraculous phenomena did not wane among the state-appointed ‘*ulamā*’ at least until the early twentieth century (while many still thrive among the ordinary people). Their attention was primarily focused on defining to *whom* were such phenomena allowed. Primary material indicates a continual representational strategy the Ottoman ‘*ulamā*’ used to justify their monopoly both over the wondrous and the occult. Ulamaic responses to rigorist thought addressed modes of proper belief and orthodox religious practice, establishing rules to be followed both by the ordinary Muslims and religious virtuosi in-office. Doubtlessly in part incited by theological debates in Birgivi’s *Path*, the Sufi-‘*ulamā*’ heightened their emphasis on the importance of the *Sunna* and *shari‘a* for proper orthodox practice.<sup>15</sup> However, they firmly insisted upon the continuity of wonders past *al-salaf* generations, defending the legitimacy of various thaumaturgical operations and the occult sciences related to them, albeit only in the hands of trained professionals from their own ranks. Utilizing the concept of sainthood, which allegedly supplied grace to virtuous believers, early modern conservative theologians were eager to, like Ibn Khaldūn centuries before, confine all licit praeternatural practices to the ‘*ulamā*’ with appropriate Sufi training, justifying their efficacy as revelation through Allah’s *baraka*.<sup>16</sup> Free-lance dabbling in the practice was considered unlawful, and could potentially lead to allegations of magic and witchcraft. Aligning occult sciences to the binary of thaumaturgy-magic, Sufi-ulamaic texts aimed at wider audiences, and narrated amply of widespread beliefs and established orthodox practice, yet seemed to deliberately withhold detail about the diversity and technicalities of Sufi rituals (many of them overlapping with, or incorporating occult operations). Upholding the Sufi vows of silence, and confining details of Sufi occult engagements behind the *zāwiya* doors, the Ottoman ‘*ulamā*’ crafted representational narratives to deflect anti-Sufi skepticism. At the same time, their apologetics strove for clear boundaries between initiated thaumaturgical professionals and the ordinary subjects of the Empire.

Discussing Ottoman ulamaic representational narratives, present-day scien-

15 For instance, Muṣṭafā Ibn Kamāl al-Dīn al-Bakrī, “Al-Manhal al-‘Adhb al-Sā’igh li-warrādihi fi Dhikr Ṣalwāt al-Ṭarīq wa Awrādihi,” MS Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Hs. Or. 14153.

16 M. Melvin-Koushki, “In Defense of Geomancy: Ṣaraf al-Dīn Yazdī Rebuts Ibn Ḥaldūn’s Critique of the Occult Sciences,” *Arabica*, 64 (2017), 346–403 at 374, Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, ed. Juma‘a Shaykha (Tunis 1984), 139–165, 584–600, 623–671, 677–689.

tific works noticed how Ibn Khaldūn's scholarship echoed in early modern theology. It was pointed out that, even though he wrote in protest of his own environment, densely pervaded by massive popularity of *al-ghayb*, Ibn Khaldūn's sentiments appeared triumphant during Ottoman early modernity.<sup>17</sup> However, the alignment of Ibn Khaldūn's scholarship to that of Ibn Taymīyya and his disciples in some recent academic works does not seem justified.<sup>18</sup> While the latter were bent to excise many Sufi ecstatic and thaumaturgical practices out of orthodox Sunnism, Ibn Khaldūn seemed intent to confine mystical arts to an exclusive Sufi *awliyā'* monopoly,<sup>19</sup> justifying their wondrous privilege through beliefs in God's *baraka* as the constituent of the charisma<sup>20</sup> of appointed religious professionals. Ottoman Sufi-*'ulamā'* relied on comparable models of conservative theology, preserving this tradition since the medieval period onwards.<sup>21</sup> They were focused on defining who may have justly operated as thaumaturge and occultist, defining the image of the mystic for the public.<sup>22</sup> In most cases assumed to be built through specific training and education, such image most often applied to institutionally trained and appointed Sufi-*'ulamā'*. Theologians' representational methods aimed at strengthening the perceived charisma of the ulamaic office,<sup>23</sup> ensuring its position as a sole spiritual and doctrinal authority within the Ottoman realm. The state-appointed Ottoman Sufi-*'ulamā'*, while perhaps intent to disenchant<sup>24</sup> further the wider population of the uninitiated,

17 Melvin-Koushki, "In Defense of Geomancy," 374–384; Sariyannis, "Esotericism," 8–9.

18 Melvin-Koushki, "Islamicate Occultism," 289; idem, "In Defense of Geomancy," 366

19 Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifā' al-Sā'il wa Tabdhīb al-Masā'il*, ed. Muḥammad Muṭī' al-Ḥāfiẓ (Damascus 1996), 37–166.

20 The relation of *baraka* to charisma as a Weberian sociological concept has already been noted in literature on Islam. For instance, J. E. Brockopp, "Constructing Muslim Charisma," in J. P. Zúquete (ed.), *Routledge International Handbook of Charisma* (London 2021), 163–174; N. Hofer, *The Popularisation of Sufism in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt 1173–1325* (Edinburgh 2015), 95, n.13; J. W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford 2002), 100–116.

21 For instance, Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn al-Ṭayyib Ibn al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb al-Bayān 'an al-Farq bayn al-Mu'jizāt wa al-Karāmāt wa al-Ḥiyāl wa al-Kihāna wa al-Siḥr wa al-Nārinjāt*, ed. R. J. McCarthy (Beirut 1958), 37–108, or Saif, "Ways of Knowing," 317–322.

22 J. Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Oxford 2014), 64–66.

23 M. Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago 1968), 48, 54–58.

24 The context in which this concept was developed by Max Weber, as well as its various mean-



through their teaching and writing re-affirmed their monopoly over any licit and orthodox preternatural effects (*khawāriq al-‘āda*), perpetuating the “enchanted” character of their specialist niche. The process that took place was one of occultating the occult further with aims to strengthen the integrity of the conservative ‘*ulamā’*, while addressing both detractors and the wider population of the faithful.

## I. Grace as Privilege: Charismatic Authority and Occult Power

Drawing upon a centuries-long tradition of beliefs, which in many regions persist even today, Ottoman authors left narratives about “hidden” elements of the universe that could be perceived and influenced by extraordinary people, often through performing specific actions. Replete with unseen angels (*malā’ika*), daemons both neutral (*jinn/jān*) and evil (*shayāṭīn*), spirits (*arwāḥ*) and spiritual essences (*rūḥānīyyāt*) of created things, the universe was believed to represent a system of correspondences between plants, minerals, human beings and celestial bodies, pervaded with Allah’s grace, but also malevolent energies, that all caused preternatural effects on Earth. Since the ninth and tenth centuries, the beliefs in chains of causalities beyond conventional expectations inspired writing in Arabic and Persian languages documenting pragmatic efforts to turn such imaginary phenomena to human advantage.

The disciplines relevant to managing and controlling *al-ghayb* were appealing to a variety of groups beyond the emerging Sufi paths.<sup>25</sup> However, since the ninth century, Sufi practices have been closely intertwined with many techniques of *al-ghayb* manipulation. Sufis have shown growing interest in lettrism, talismanics, astrology, and the world of the unseen in general.<sup>26</sup> While Sufism

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ings, perhaps merit some revision, as previously implied. See J. A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago 2017), 1–21, 269–316.

25 Sariyannis, “Occultism,” 35–66.

26 E. Orthmann, “Lettrism and Magic in an Early Mughal Text: Muḥammad Ghawth’s *Kitāb al-Jawābir al-Khams*,” in N. El-Bizri and E. Orthmann (eds), *The Occult Sciences in Pre-modern Islamic Cultures* (Beirut 2018), 223–248 at 229; D. Rašić, “Summoned Letters, the Disjointed Letters and the Talisman of Ibn ‘Arabī,” *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 12/2 (2023), 167–181; A. Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Princeton 2017), 54–58; E. Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam* (Bloomington 2010), 21–22; L. Saif, “From *Gāyat al-ḥakīm* to *Šams al-ma‘rif*: Ways of Knowing and Paths of Power in Medieval Islam,” *Arabica*, 64/3–4 (2017), 297–345; Melvin-Koushki, “In Defense of Geoman-

developed into a fully-fledged, bureaucratized, self-replicating system of institutional learning, based on *tariqas* and rooted in mystical *silsilas* of *baraka*-effluence, its popularity among the 'ulamā' caused the Sufi-ulamaic overlap, instigating the emergence and development of a network of religious professionals who combined jurisprudential, legal, mystagogic, and thaumaturgical functions.<sup>27</sup> This overlap was without precedent during the Ottoman period,<sup>28</sup> so that religious professionals who took interest in occult sciences effectively combined the roles of master thaumaturges, ulamaic erudites, landed aristocracy, and the holders of official state appointments, who were sociologically and anthropologically—if not theologically—comparable to members of priestly establishments in medieval Catholic Christianity.<sup>29</sup> Individuals on high positions within the Sufi-ulamaic networks functioned as authorities over imperial orthodoxy and continuously engaged with identifying improper practices, or practitioners. Beliefs that Sufi-ulamaic thaumaturges could sense *al-ghayb* elements, interact with them, or compel them to perform various actions were widespread, while Sufi lodges bustled with studies of the mystical powers of letters, talismans, and various prognostication techniques.

The rise in currency of Muslim rigorism in seventeenth and eighteenth cen-

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cy," 375–376; N. Gardiner, "Esotericist Reading Communities and the Early Circulation of the Sufi Occultist Aḥmad al-Bunī's Works," *Arabica*, 64/3–4 (2017), 405–441; Sariyannis, "Occultism," 35–38.

27 N. Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Oxford 2012), 15–124; E. Ohlander, *Sufism in an Age of Transition: 'Umar al-Suhrawardī and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhood* (Leiden 2008), 1–14; A. Al-Azmeh, *The Times of History: Universal Topics in Islamic Historiography* (Budapest 2007), 222–223.

28 D. Terzioğlu, "Power, Patronage, and Confessionalism: Ottoman Politics Through the Eyes of a Crimean Sufi, 1580–1593," in M. Sariyannis (ed.), *Political Thought and Practice in the Ottoman Empire* (Rethymno 2019), 149–186; eadem, "How to Conceptualize Ottoman Sunnization: A Historiographical Discussion," *Turcica*, 44 (2012–2013), 301–338; eadem, "Sunna-Minded Sufi Preachers in Service of the Ottoman State: the *Naṣīḥatnāme* of Hasan Addressed to Murad IV," *Archivum Ottomanicum*, 27 (2010), 241–312; H. Yılmaz, *Caliphate Redefined: The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought* (Princeton 2018), 1–20; R. Chih, *Sufism in Ottoman Egypt: Circulation, Renewal and Authority in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century* (London 2019), 7–11; D. D. Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (Oxford 1990), 7–20.

29 N. Pantić, *Sufism in Ottoman Damascus: Religion, Magic, and the Eighteenth-Century Networks of the Holy* (London 2023), 16–18; Weber, *Sociology*, 28–31, 115–120; P. Bourdieu, "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field," *Comparative Social Research*, 13 (1991), 1–44 at 10.



turies motivated the conservative ‘*ulamā*’ to, in a “Khalidūnian” fashion, once more underline that the alleged effects of various branches of *al-‘ulūm al-gharība* were supposed to be aligned with the straightforward *karāma-siḥr* binary, through the concept of sainthood.<sup>30</sup> The strategies of doing so were available since the early medieval period. The concept of *wilāya*, which emerged from early proto-Sufi writing, intertwined with various beliefs in knowledgeable religious masters whose alleged closeness to the divine supplied them with sufficient *baraka* to alter or break the commonly perceived reality and cause praeternatural effects, jointly referred to as wonders (*karāmāt*).<sup>31</sup> As occult sciences and thaumaturgy were often anthropologically and technically homologous to various types of magic (*siḥr*), concerns about permitted practices arose early in Sufi history.<sup>32</sup> Theologians busied with creating distinctions between licit and illicit practice in their struggle to control the spread of *al-‘ulūm al-gharība*. Ibn Khaldūn pointed out that *al-ghayb* could be accessed either by magicians who reveled in daemonic energy, or by pure and chaste individuals of unshakeable faith whom God rewarded with His grace, most often after years of appropriate training in a lodge.<sup>33</sup> Medieval Sufis who dabbled in the occult—as practitioners or theoreticians—occasionally emphasized that the knowledge of *al-ghayb* should be confined to the initiated.<sup>34</sup> It was common among theologians to assume that Allah represented the sole cause of licit wonders,<sup>35</sup> including any permissible probes into the unseen, which were allowed only to the institutionally trained disciples. This argument was heavily used in later centuries to justify the socio-political and mystical roles of the Ottoman ‘*ulamā*’.<sup>36</sup>

By limiting popular access to *al-ghayb*, the state-appointed Sufi-‘*ulamā*’ guarded their position against what they saw as upstarts, sorcerers, or outright infidels, while justifying their own practices as divinely graced. Maintaining

30 See Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifāʾ*, 100–121.

31 Green, *Sufism*, 33–47, 71–124; B. Radtke, “The Concept of *Wilāya* in Early Sufism,” in L. Lewisohn (ed.), *The Heritage of Sufism Volume I: Classical Persian Sufism from its Origins to Rumi (700–1300)* (Oxford 1999), 483–496.

32 Geoffroy, *Sufism*, 21–22.

33 Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, 139–165, 584–601.

34 Saif, “Ways of Knowing,” 334; Gardiner, “Circulation,” 440–441; Knysh, *Sufism*, 145–149.

35 Saif, “Ways of Knowing,” 297–345; D. M. Varisco, “Illuminating the Lunar Mansions (*manāzil al-qamar*) in *Šams al-ma‘ārif*,” *Arabica*, 64/3–4 (2017), 487–530 at 490; Orthmann, “Lettrism,” 223.

36 Sariyannis, “Ottoman Views of the Supernatural,” 7–9.

such theological argumentation throughout the early modern period, they espoused true arrogance and power in the wake of Qādīzādālī decline,<sup>37</sup> perceived from another angle through the analysis of the status of occult sciences for Ottoman religious orthodoxy.

## II. Sciences of the Hidden, or Hidden Sciences? Representational Strategies of Ottoman 'Ulamā'

During Ottoman early modernity, the officially-appointed 'ulamā' continually emphasized that licit access to *al-ghayb* represented a wonder, restricted only to individuals with proper learning (*ta'līm*) and satisfactory etiquette (*adab*). In addition, traits of piety, virtue, chastity, and true faith comprised the cherished *ṣalāḥ*, which was believed to have been the primary condition for *baraka*-emission. Theologians narrated of saintly wonders, from centuries long gone to contemporary times, using them to justify the Sufi practice as that of the *ṣāliḥūn*, while drawing legitimacy from *Ḥadīth* compilations and conclusions made upon the material produced by the many generations of Sunni *fuqahā'*.

Since his earliest authoring days, 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī engaged in providing theological and jurisprudential rationale for beliefs in continual thaumaturgical power of the saints and Sufi *shaykhs*. This famous commentator and adherent to Ibn 'Arabī's teachings left numerous *riḥlas* to map the topography of saintly shrines in the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula,<sup>38</sup> works replete with homage to thaumaturgical prowess of the saints that defended *ziyāra* to hallowed graves,<sup>39</sup> and theological discussions which addressed the distinction of orthodox practice from *sīḥr*.<sup>40</sup> Some of his texts explored certain occult practices, such as oneiromancy, which had a long tradition and great currency for Sufi ranks in various lodges across the Ottoman Empire.<sup>41</sup>

37 Zilfi, *Politics*, 38–40.

38 Online portals at times still use al-Nābulī's texts for identifying certain *maqāms*. For instance, <https://english.palinfo.com/news/2018/04/28/The-Old-Town-of-Awarta> (accessed November 2023).

39 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī, "Kashf al-Nūr 'an Aṣḥāb al-Qubūr," in "Wasā'il al-Taḥqīq wa Rasā'il al-Tawfīq," MS Princeton University Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Manuscript Collection, Islamic Manuscripts, New Series no. 1113 Princeton, 162A–174A.

40 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī, *Asrār al-Shar'īyya: Aw al-Faḥ al-Rabbānī wa al-Fayḍ al-Raḥmānī*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir 'Aṭā (Beirut 1985), 136–137.

41 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī, *Ta'ṭīr al-Anām fī Ta'bīr al-Manām*, (Cairo: s.n., 1859). Further

Among his important commentaries, al-Nābulṣī left a detailed work committed to Birgivi's *Muḥammadan Path*, its extreme popularity promoting it as one of the fundamental early modern texts for (re-)establishing the Ottoman Sunni creed. The *Path* reaffirmed the centrality of *shari'a* for all manners of religious belief and practice, and the importance of *al-salaf* model in defining behavioral and social norms for all Muslims. Al-Nābulṣī wrote a detailed *Explanation (Sharḥ)* of the *Path*, which he used for addressing rigorists described as "fanatical ignoramuses" who diminished the work's benefits. As in his other texts, al-Nābulṣī wrote cautiously and subtly, backing his arguments with *silsilas* of previous religious and jurisprudential authorities. He agreed that the strict adherence to *shari'a* represented the primary requirement for every Muslim, and a fundamental criterion for identifying proper Sufi or saintly practice.<sup>42</sup> Provided that *shari'a* and the *tawḥīd* principle were honored,<sup>43</sup> wonders were available to the *awliyā'* and had continuity in the contemporary world, while the saints would, alongside other righteous (*ṣāliḥūn*) and the Sufi-*'ulamā'*, intercede on behalf of the faithful, both on Earth and everafter.<sup>44</sup> Al-Nābulṣī understood that beliefs in the thaumaturgical prowess of the *awliyā'*, as well as practices of saints' and saintly graves' veneration may very well have represented innovations past the *al-salaf* age, yet held that most such practices were good innovations (*bid'a ḥasana*), that were permissible, insofar as they properly honored hallowed individuals and were performed in God's, and not the saints' independent honor.<sup>45</sup>

Al-Nābulṣī defined the outpour of God's grace as the sole legitimate source

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see Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, 597–601; Chih, *Sufism*, 68; D. Sajdi, *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-century Ottoman Levant* (Stanford 2013), 54, 131.

42 J.P. Allen, "Reading Mehmed Birgivi with 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulṣī: Contested Interpretations of Birgivi's *al-Ṭarīqa al-muḥammadiyya* in the 17th–18th-Century Ottoman Empire," and K. Ivanyi, "'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulṣī's Commentary on Birgivi Mehmed Efendi's *al-Ṭarīqa al-muḥammadiyya*: Early Modern Ottoman Debates on *Bid'a fi l-ūda*," in Demiri and Pagani (eds), *Early Modern Trends*, 153–170, 137–152.

43 Identical sentiments echoed in many Sufi manuals of the early modern period. See, for instance, a Qādiriyya instruction text, Muḥammad Ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Kilānī, "al-Durra al-Bahīyya fi Ṣūrat al-Ijāza al-Qādiriyya," MS Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Sprenger 819 p.1, Berlin, 1B–2B.

44 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulṣī, *al-Ḥadiqa al-Nadiyya: Sharḥ al-Ṭarīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*, 2 vols. (Miṣr 1860), 1: 183, 199–200.

45 For instance, al-Nābulṣī, "Kashf," 168B–170B, and Meier, "Words in Action," 127–128.

of praeternatural potency. He attributed the entire domain of licit powers over *al-ghayb* to inspiration dependent on divine will, believed to reach Allah's "friends" to reward their impeccably virtuous lives.<sup>46</sup> Praeternatural effects caused by others, especially those aimed to harm or manipulate human beings, were understood as magic (*sibr*). While it was beneficial to acquire knowledge about magic for the sake of protecting oneself and others, its practice was generally forbidden—it led to *shirk* due to beliefs in the power of objects, people, or symbols, independent from God.<sup>47</sup> The Damascene axial saint categorized various prognostication techniques, such as the use of *al-mandal*, under the joint rubric of soothsaying (*al-kihāna*), without a much better disposition than towards *sibr*. He discussed astrology (*al-tanjīm*) under the same rubric. Al-Nābulī explained that divination was a craft through which practitioners hoped to obtain knowledge that only Allah possessed (and at His discretion shared with His "friends"),<sup>48</sup> therefore committing unbelief (*kufr*) and posing a risk to society, as they may have misled people to believe theirs, and not Allah's power. Sorcerers and soothsayers who truly believed, or incited others to believe in the power of their craft, their implements, or the power of created things over godly potency, were accused of adjoining idols to Allah (*shirk*), which was infidelity.<sup>49</sup>

Discussing spiritual healing and exorcism (*al-ruqyā*), al-Nābulī conceded to their permissibility, yet indicated mandatory rules for the practice. Usage of divine names in *dhikrs* represented an important feature of *al-ruqyā* techniques. The *qutb* saw the divine names and the *dhikr* as a power dominant over evil.<sup>50</sup> Whatever words were pronounced or written in the course of a ritual needed to be in Arabic language, and fully understandable, as other inscriptions may have been blasphemous or infernal. The mystical potency of the Qur'an and its *ayāts* were considered ultimate. Scriptural chapters and excerpts were allowed for recitation and use during *ruqyā*, and were generally often involved in the creation of various kinds of, according to beliefs, healing elixirs and charms,

46 Al-Nābulī, "Kashf," 162A–174A, al-Nābulī, *Sharḥ*, 1: 108–132, 199–200.

47 Al-Nābulī, *Sharḥ*, 1: 232, 2: 390.

48 See Akkach, *al-Nabulusi*, 54–59.

49 Al-Nābulī, *Sharḥ*, 2: 389–391; Akkach, *al-Nabulusi*, 86–88.

50 S. Akkach, *Letters of a Sufi Scholar: The Correspondence of 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī* (1641–1731) (Leiden 2010), 99–104.

along with a wide range of presumably blessed items, such as saintly shrine collectibles and other materials.<sup>51</sup>

Amulets (*tamā'im*) or talismans rested on a thin line between orthodoxy and *shirk*. Unlike, for instance, Ibn Khaldūn, who seemed disdainful towards talismanics,<sup>52</sup> for al-Nābulṣī the use of charismatic objects<sup>53</sup> was permissible if they were crafted while observing the monotheistic principle, ensuring the flow of *baraka* and not another type of energy. The axial saint encouraged such items to sport Qur'anic chapters or excerpts, perhaps including various Sunni supplications and the *dhikr*. The *quṭb* insisted that the production of *baraka*-endowed objects needed to be fully aligned with the principles of Sunni doctrine, avoiding any potential *shirk*, such as using extra-orthodox, foreign, or possibly pre-Islamic elements.<sup>54</sup>

This categorization of occult operations put forth by al-Nābulṣī appears to be lacking, raising questions about potentially deliberate omission of various traditional occultist practices. Such omissions may be explained from three different angles. The climate pervaded by booming rigorism, in which al-Nābulṣī developed his views,<sup>55</sup> may have caused a decrease of general interest in the occult. It certainly created an array of taboos, so the *quṭb*'s classification may have served to build an image of the Sufi saint and *shaykh*, freed of possible problematic notions to remain atop the spiritual hierarchy of the Ottoman religious establishment.<sup>56</sup> Finally, it should be considered that the *Muḥammadan Path* and its commentaries quite likely aimed for a wider audience, comprising various other social milieus in addition to al-Nābulṣī's peers and numerous popular preachers. The *quṭb* wrote in broad strokes of well-known beliefs in the unseen, offering points from which he thought all Muslims could benefit, while confining extensive details of occult operations to the appropriately trained.

This last argument stems from the axial saint's musings about the legitimacy of pursuing the study of magical arts. Al-Nābulṣī espoused an older belief among

51 Al-Nābulṣī, *Sharḥ*, 2: 391–392; I. Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life*, 2nd ed. (Oxford 2013), 163–168; Pantić, *Sufism*, 185–227.

52 Melvin-Koushki, "In Defense of Geomancy," 375–377; Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, 623–631.

53 M. Vedeler, "The Charismatic Power of Objects," in Z. T. Glørstad, E. Siv Kristoffersen et alii (eds), *Charismatic Objects: From Roman Times to the Middle Ages* (Oslo 2018), 9–30.

54 Al-Nābulṣī, *Sharḥ*, 2: 391–393.

55 Akkach, *Letters*, 1–54.

56 Similar to Ibn Khaldūn, *Shifā'*, 37–121.

theologians, that all forms of knowledge (*'ilm*) were sacred, and that therefore *'ilm* of various *sihr* subgroups was not inherently condemnable, as it helped the *learned* understand the distinction between magic and miracle. Emphasizing the superiority of learned over uninformed, the *qutb* insisted that *sihr* studies were beneficial, as long as magical practice was not their goal.<sup>57</sup> Given the character of Ottoman institutions of learning that imperial subjects had available, it is likely that al-Nābulṣī used this discourse on magic to insinuate that all knowledge of *al-ghayb* should have remained within (like-minded, naturally) ulamaic circles who supported the Sufi *shaykhs* and the imperial saintly network. The *'ulamā'* of proper *ṣalāḥ* allegedly reaped benefits from this knowledge, acquiring a deeper understanding of the ever-present *mu'jiza*, while their own saints, under the auspices of Allah and His angels, in widespread belief continued to perform similar wondrous feats (*karāma*) of which many directly related to *'ālam al-ghayb*.<sup>58</sup> In a “Khalidūnian” fashion, al-Nābulṣī underlined that purity and faith protected the graceful from all lowly acts—further backing his argument by alluding to the scriptural story of Solomon and the *shayātīn* (for while devils disbelieved, Solomon had not, Q2:102).<sup>59</sup> Al-Nābulṣī used the charisma of his office to justify the occult operations that were considered a part of Sufi thaumaturgical practice, and confine them to the Sufi-*'ulamā'*, whose power and privilege were casuistically linked to God through belief in the transmission of divine blessings (*baraka*).

A century later Ibn 'Ābidīn wrote within a ulamaic establishment that successfully resisted the Qādizādālī influence. However, echoes of the Qādizādālīs and the emerging Wahhābī movement provided ample motivation for further writings. Consulted unto the present day, Ibn 'Ābidīn's commentary (*Answer to the Baffled*) on al-Ḥaṣkafī's (d.1677) comprehensive book of *fiqh*, *The Gorgeous Pearl*, contains occasional instructions about the mystical. Within, saintly wonders drew legitimacy out of careful application of *Hādīth* narratives, while certain questions regarding the unseen received proper analysis and legal inter-

57 Al-Nābulṣī, *Sharḥ*, 2:389. Reminiscent of Ibn Khaldūn's attitudes, as in Sariyannis, “Ottoman Views of the Supernatural,” 8.

58 Al-Nābulṣī, *Sharḥ*, 1: 199–200.

59 Al-Nābulṣī, *al-Farḥ*, 136–137, and Al-Nābulṣī, *Sharḥ*, 1: 107–132. See also J.-C. Coulon, “Magie et politique: événements historiques et pensée politique dans le Šams al-ma'ārif attribué à al-Būnī (mort en 622/1225),” *Arabica*, 64/3–4 (2017), 453–462.



pretation.<sup>60</sup> However, Ibn ‘Ābidīn perhaps most eloquently delivered his views on the mystical in a treatise written in posthumous defense of his Naqshbandī master, the widely renowned Khālīd al-Naqshbandī (d.1827). As succession disputes arose within the *ṭarīqa* after al-Naqshbandī succumbed to an epidemic, the late *shaykh* was accused of heresy, sorcery, and infernalism.<sup>61</sup> Entitling his treatise *Unsheathing the Indian Sword*, Ibn ‘Ābidīn opposed puritan thought of the time in a text brimming with anger, arrogance, and sternness, which did not, however, cloud his usual attention to detail and care in approaching Sunni *fiqh*. Combining his pedigree as a Shāfi‘ī disciple and Ḥanafī authority, Ibn ‘Ābidīn defended his master’s legacy in language laden with mystical symbolism that celebrated the thaumaturgical power of the saints and *shaykhs*. The Damascene judge offered similar views as al-Nābulṣī, who was frequently quoted in Ibn ‘Ābidīn’s extensive work on *fiqh*. His approach to various occult practices was based on a triad of principles: the mystical force believed to empower the practitioner, the practitioner’s intent, and their social and religious image and standing, thereby classifying these practices along the spectrum between thaumaturgy and sorcery.

Ibn ‘Ābidīn maintained that the continuous flow of divine grace from Allah to His *awliyā’* enabled the manifestation of *karāmāt* on Earth, which were akin in essence to *mu‘jizāt*, yet lacked the same outreach, stability, and the prophetic calling.<sup>62</sup> The Sufi *shaykhs* and saints represented all-seeing sages for whom dealing with *al-ghayb* was a natural privilege. Glimpses into the unseen and hints of future or past events were a classical element of imagined saintly repertoire,<sup>63</sup> yet Ibn ‘Ābidīn insisted that the *awliyā’* knew only what God wished them to know (or wished to announce through His messengers), and that they would not claim to be the ultimate masters of such knowledge, nor that their wisdom is absolute. They simply received what God revealed, as *charismata* to

60 For brief instances, Muḥammad Amīn Ibn ‘Ābidīn, *Radd al-Muḥtār ‘alā al-Durr al-Mukhtār* 14 vols., ed. Muḥammad Bakr Ismā‘īl (Beirut 1994), 2: 114–115, or 9: 111.

61 M. Mundy, “On Reading Two Epistles of Muhammad Amin Ibn ‘Ābidīn of Damascus,” in Y. Aykan and I. Tamdoğan (eds), *Forms and Institutions of Justice: Legal Actions in Ottoman Contexts* (Istanbul 2018), Open Access: [10.4000/books.ifeagd.2316](https://doi.org/10.4000/books.ifeagd.2316) (accessed: November 2023); Grehan, *Twilight*, 151.

62 Muḥammad Amīn Ibn ‘Ābidīn, “Sall al-Ḥusām al-Hindī li-Naṣrat Mawlānā Khālīd al-Naqshbandī,” in *Rasā’il* 4 vols. (Damascus 1883–1885), 2: 14–16; Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, 139–165.

63 Akkach, *al-Nabulusi*, 125–126.

His chosen. These minor insights were nowhere near His own knowledge, everlasting and omniscient.<sup>64</sup> Anyone who with certainty claimed awareness of hidden things needed to adhere to the notion that Allah was the sole mediator of the occult. Claims of acquiring revelation independently, or with assistance of the power of natural and celestial objects, without the acknowledgement of God's supremacy, was heinous and despicable. All the while, it was believed that saints and prophets could enter an individual's consciousness to impart messages or insights as determined by God.<sup>65</sup> Notably, al-Nābulṣī had posited a century earlier that, with divine providence, deceased *shayḥks* could also provide spiritual guidance.<sup>66</sup>

Discussing astrology (*'ilm al-nujūm*), Ibn 'Ābidīn acknowledged the potential benefits of this practice. Astronomical calculations were useful, particularly in determining the precise direction of the *qibla*, or the appropriate prayer time. Ibn 'Ābidīn derived two types of astrological practice—arithmetic (*ḥisābī*) and inferential (*istidlālī*). The former he based on precise calculations through which one could identify the positions of celestial objects. The latter aimed at inferring certain phenomena or events from the movements of such bodies. Both were permissible insofar as the practitioners would stick to clear material evidence and understood the importance of the Creator as the supreme being in the universe, who caused celestial movements and everything that followed them. Problems arose when practitioners of astrology sought to transcend the boundaries of rational outcomes, which was a violation of God's will to let certain things remain hidden from human knowledge. Furthermore, as such operations may have inspired both the practitioners and the audience to believe in the independent supernatural powers and direct influence of created objects or human beings over the universe, they bore the risk of *shirk* and heresy.<sup>67</sup>

For Ibn 'Ābidīn, Allah's grace represented the only legitimate force that allowed for occult operations. Beliefs in independent powers of stars, planets, other celestial bodies, or natural elements, led to *shirk*, while attempts to avail of such powers were classified as *siḥr*, especially if they were harnessed with malicious intent.<sup>68</sup> The judge treated similarly the attempts at manipulating jinnic

64 Ibn 'Ābidīn, "Sall," 2: 40–42.

65 Ibn 'Ābidīn, "Sall," 2: 38–39.

66 Al-Nābulṣī, "Kashf," 171B–172A.

67 Ibn 'Ābidīn, "Sall," 2: 42–44.

68 Ibn 'Ābidīn, "Sall," 2: 25–37.

or infernal forces for divination and talismanics.<sup>69</sup> Ibn ‘Ābidīn discarded as impotent the talismans produced with alleged assistance of jinnic powers, or those that invoked properties of celestial objects disregarding of Allah’s supremacy, adding that their effects were due to ordinary causes. Unlike with *karāmāt*, the reasons of magical efficacy may have appeared imperceptible, but did not truly transcend the custom.<sup>70</sup> Yet for Ibn ‘Ābidīn, graceful individuals were—like the Prophet—capable of asserting control over the *jinn* without committing any harm, which was permissible as a part of their wondrous repertoire. They did not claim independent power but were considered servants of divine will. Unsurprisingly, Ibn ‘Ābidīn too added Solomon’s example to legitimize such implications.<sup>71</sup>

Ibn ‘Ābidīn concluded his discussion on *al-ghayb* indicating *who* could possibly access the occult. Any individual putting forward a claim to unseen knowledge needed to be properly evaluated. Any notion of cooperation with the *jinn* or belief in independent supernatural power of created things immediately annulled the veracity of their claims and implied heresy. However, if the claimant was “of good faith (*min ahl al-diyāna*), virtue (*al-ṣalāḥ*), and uprightness (*al-istiqāma*), then that was their wonder (*karāma*), since they did naught but inform upon true inspiration (*ṣādiq al-ilhām*).”<sup>72</sup> The *ṣalāḥ-baraka* link informed the legitimacy of the Sufi-ulamaic and saintly praeternatural faculties. That the Damascene judge directly referred to this professional establishment, to which he himself belonged, is reflected by the author’s immediate turn to warning against denying saintly powers and denouncing the authority of the Sufi-‘*ulamā’*, the people of learning and gnosis (*ahl al-‘ilm wa al-‘irfān*).<sup>73</sup>

As with al-Nābulsi’s *Explanation*, Ibn ‘Ābidīn’s *Indian Sword* quite likely aimed at a wider audience, and provided insufficient detail about the exact procedures of thaumaturgical and occult operations. Similar to the Damascene *quṭb*, Ibn ‘Ābidīn may have preferred to leave technical matters to the confines of the lodges. To examine which particular practices kept the Sufis busy behind closed doors, one must turn to a different type of written material.

69 Ibn ‘Ābidīn, “Sall,” 2: 28–29.

70 Ibn ‘Ābidīn, “Sall,” 2: 36.

71 Ibn ‘Ābidīn, “Sall,” 2: 34–35.

72 Ibn ‘Ābidīn, “Sall,” 2: 44. Also see Akkach, *al-Nabulsi*.

73 Ibn ‘Ābidīn, “Sall,” 2: 45–47.

### III. Behind Closed Doors: The Occult within and beyond the Lodge

For centuries, the Ottoman realm witnessed the emergence of tomes of occult knowledge and practice, offering instructions into various thaumaturgical methods and “strange” rituals. At first glance, most such volumes seem to hold no comprehensive topical arrangement. They sometimes begin without the usual *basmala*, written by groups of anonymous authors in various imperial languages (such as Ottoman Turkish and Arabic), and cover a wide range of prophylactic, apotropaic, divinatory, and many other practices. Within, readers can find precise wordings for *du‘a*-type invocations aimed at a multitude of goals, from general wellness, to highly specific queries, such as romance, wealth, acquisition of otherwise inaccessible strategic information, protection from evil, diseases, and odious human beings, or conjuration of mysterious *khuddām* that fulfilled wishes and imparted hidden knowledge. Usually labeled by cataloguers generically as “Collection” (*majmū‘*),<sup>74</sup> such grimoires suggest proper times and detailed conditions in which invocations needed to be completed. They contain ample detail about the alleged powers of the Arabic alphabet, potent divine names and the thaumaturgical potential of Qur’ānic chapters, methods for creating talismans for a variety of purposes, descriptions of occult forces, such as the *jinn* and *shayāṭīn*, geomantic tables, magic squares, various diagrams for seals and rings, instructions for exorcisms and healing, and lists of mystical powers of the zodiac and astrological operations. Combining occasional excerpts from older grimoires, with certain thaumaturgical procedures attributed to legendary names such as al-Bunī, Abū Ḥanīfa, al-Ghazālī, and others, many such tomes were produced and copied in the Middle East during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some of the procedures detailed in these pages remained in use centuries after they have been written down,<sup>75</sup> and some can still be found today.<sup>76</sup>

These tomes were far from unusual across the Ottoman realm during early

74 For instance, see “Majmū‘ min Kull Fann,” MS Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Glaser 100, Berlin, or “Majmū‘,” MS Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Hs. Or. 14283, Berlin. Further see Pantić, *Sufism*, 185–227.

75 Compare Glaser 100, 147A, with E. W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, Written in Egypt*, 2 vols. (London 1836), 1:351.

76 Compare Hs. Or. 14283, 16B, with [www.youtube.com/watch?v=3U-0crlL9EA&t=67s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3U-0crlL9EA&t=67s) (Last Accessed: Nov 6th 2023).

modernity.<sup>77</sup> Their pages echo ulamaic emphasis that strict adherence to *sharīʿa* and *tawḥīd* were fundamental for any thaumaturgical endeavor. Contents of such grimoires extensively glorify God and warn that the Creator represents the cause and catalyst for all procedures within, which is frequently reflected in the wording or diagrams pertinent to various listed rituals. These compendiums should be approached as training manuals, which were most likely intended for internal use among disciples in the Sufi lodges—the level of detail sketched out by such manuals indicates that intended readers were required to possess an advanced stage of thaumaturgical training, after more divine names had been revealed and complex *dhikr* recitations became a matter of course. Deeply involved with Sufism, scholars like al-Nābulṣī and Ibn ʿĀbidīn must have been aware of the existence of this material, while their own works thus indicated ulamaic strategies of knowledge control within the exclusive circles of the Sufi-*ʿulamāʾ*.

An old theological argument dictated that deliberate intent distinguished magic from wonder, as the saints in theory served only as vessels for Allah’s will.<sup>78</sup> These tomes further demonstrate that ulamaic rhetoric served mostly as a representational strategy, as thaumaturgical practice naturally involved practitioners’ intent at all times. It usually did not bode well for free-lancers, however. In Egypt, Syria, and Palestine (even until the twentieth century), alleged magicians were incarcerated under accusations of black magic,<sup>79</sup> geomancers without proper pedigree were beaten and banished,<sup>80</sup> vigilantes made judges conduct official investigations of enchantresses’ abodes,<sup>81</sup> while sorcerers attracted unwanted attention through daemonology, or entrancing women over long dis-

77 A. Buturović, “The Melting Occult Pot in Ottoman Bosnia: Between Theory and Practice,” *Acaʿib: Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural*, 3 (2022), 113–124. Further see Chih, *Sufism*, 52, or G. Burak, “Prayers, Commentaries, and the Edification of the Ottoman Suppliant,” in T. Krstić and D. Terzioğlu (eds), *Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450–c. 1750* (Leiden 2020), 232–252.

78 See, for instance, M. Asatrian, “Ibn Khaldūn on Magic and the Occult,” *Iran & the Caucasus*, 7–1/2 (2003), 73–123; Ibn ʿĀbidīn, “Sall,” 2: 1–47.

79 Lane, *Egyptians*, 1:345–346.

80 Mikhāʾil Burayk al-Dimashqī, *Tārīkh al-Shām* 1720–1782, ed. Quṣṭanṭīn al-Bāshā al-Mukhalliṣī (Harissa 1930), 14.

81 Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Budayr, “Ḥawādiṯ Dimashq al-Shām al-Yawmiyya min Sanat 1154 ilā Sanat 1176,” MS Chester Beatty Library Ar 3551/2, Dublin, 36B; Grehan, *Twilight*, 152.

tances.<sup>82</sup> Occasional primary evidence testifies to the heavy popularity of various occult practices among the ordinary people, and it is likely that the 'ulamā' could not control every trader of charismatic goods, especially in the countryside.<sup>83</sup> However, the conservative religious establishment of the Ottoman Empire remained steadfast in their claims to monopoly. They wrote in defense of their saints' wonders, ensuring the beliefs in continuous effluence of *baraka* past the *al-salaf* age. The 'ulamā' presented themselves as bearers of prophetic legacy,<sup>84</sup> passing down grace to the rest of the ordinary people. Such tendencies are visible even up to the very late phase of Ottoman rule. Simultaneously a member of approximately half a dozen Sufi orders,<sup>85</sup> the Ottoman judge Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (1849–1932) left a dictionary of saintly wonders to break down the very same theological arguments used by Ibn 'Ābidīn and al-Nābulī (the latter quoted by al-Nabhānī), and defend the beliefs in an enchanted ulamaic office against detractors.<sup>86</sup> Such narratives, however, could not hope for much success in a climate increasingly pervaded by the Muslim reformist thought of the modern period.<sup>87</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

Juxtaposing early modern ulamaic apologetics to Sufi grimoires and primary material that testifies to popular religious practices reveals that the Ottoman religious authorities' distancing from various occult sciences was more a representational strategy than an actual state of affairs. Faced with stern opposition

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82 Burayk, *Tārīkh*, 22; Lane, *Account*, 1:345–346; S. H. Stephan, "Lunacy in Palestine Folklore," *The Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, 5 (1925), 1–16 at 6, n.3.

83 Grehan, *Twilight*, 141–163.

84 A. Al-Azmeh, "God's Caravan," in M. Boroujerdi (ed.), *Mirror for the Muslim Prince: Islam and the Theory of Statecraft* (New York 2013), 326–400; Akkach, *Letters*, 114–122.

85 See A. Ghazal, "Sufism, *Ijtihād* and Modernity: Yūsuf al-Nabhānī in the Age of 'Abd al-Ḥamid II," *ArchOtt*, 19 (2001), 239–272; B. Abu-Manneh, "Sultan Abdulhamid II and Shaikh Abulhuda Al-Sayyadi," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 15/2 (1979), 131–153.

86 Yūsuf Ismā'īl al-Nabhānī, *Jāmi' Karāmāt al-Awliyā'*, ed. 'Abd al-Wārith Muḥammad 'Alī, 2 vols. (Beirut 2009), 1: 9–58.

87 Commins, *Islamic Reform*, 45–46, 116–118; A. Al-Azmeh, "The Discourse of Cultural Authenticity: Islamist Revivalism and Enlightenment Universalism," in *Islams and Modernities* (London 1993), 39–59.



of various rigorist, and later, reformist groups of theologians, the Ottoman conservative religious establishment strove to confine further the details of occult ritual to the privacy of Sufi lodges, busying with establishing proper credentials for licensed practitioners of occult arts. While early modern apologetic theology may have inspired historians of the previous decades to perceive the official *'ulamā'* as aloof from various Sufi and occult practices, closer research reveals that it was not so. Despite the emergence of more puritan attitudes,<sup>88</sup> even with certain Sufi practitioners, *'ulamā'* in-office seemed mainly focused on rhetorical, and very subtle changes, relying on old theological arguments emerging as early as proto-Sufi works. At the same time, traditions of contending with *al-ghayb* featured among the collective representations<sup>89</sup> of Sunni Muslims long after the proliferation of reformism in the modern period, comprising in part the cultural influence to which the *'ulamā'* themselves were exposed for centuries.<sup>90</sup> Aside from apologetics addressed to wider audiences and opponents, Sufi lodges quite likely continued to bustle with various occult arts, controlled by vows of silence and strict management of knowledge circulation through initiatory chains and allegedly charismatic *silsilas*. Preserving the enchanted character of their office well into modernity, the Sufi-*'ulamā'* handled criticism and free-lance incursions into their practice by issuing accusations of magic and infernalism, striving to maintain the disenchantment of the uninitiated and perpetuate their own claim to *al-ghayb*.

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88 Chih, *Sufism*, 77–109, 146–147.

89 E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain (New York 2008), 1–22.

90 See T. Canaan, *Mohammadan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (London 1927), for an ethnographical research into customs of the ordinary people and Sufis in Palestine of the early twentieth century.

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