Devotional Extremism (ghuluww)?

Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī and the Debate over the Veneration (taʿẓīm) and the Characteristics (khaṣāʾiṣ) of the Prophet Muḥammad in Saudi Arabia

Besnik Sinani

Various Islamic practices that manifest veneration (taʿẓīm) of the Prophet Muhammad, like the celebration of his birthday (mawlid), devotional poetry (madīḥ) dedicated to him, the practices of visitation of his tomb (zīyāra), or seeking blessing through his relics (tabarruk) have been depicted by Wahhābī scholars in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere as manifestations of ghuluww.¹ The term denotes excess, going to extreme, or crossing acceptable boundaries in praising, loving, and showing reverence for the Prophet. To Wahhābis, this results in the blurring of the boundaries between the Creator and creation, in the failure, therefore, to recognise the proper status of God, resulting in the blasphemous perception that the Prophet shares in His unique qualities.

Starting from the late 1970s till his death in 2004, a Meccan Sufi scholar, Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī, engaged critically with the Wahhābī teachings. He wrote a number of refutations of the Wahhābī doctrine, defending in them the legitimacy of various forms of veneration, and championing a vision of the Prophet that is divinely gifted with distinctive characteristics (khaṣāʾiṣ) that elevate him above others in creation. Mālikī became subsequently the target of a campaign of attacks and denunciations, which came to shape his legacy.

In this chapter we look at the Wahhābī conceptualisation of ghuluww, and Mālikī’s response to the Wahhābī claims. What do these debates tell us about Muslim conceptualisations of the Prophet in modern times,² in what way do they differ from their antecedent articulations in the medieval period, and

---

² The varieties of Muslim visions of the Prophet Muḥammad are certainly more diverse than the ones analysed in this chapter. See also Ali, The Lives, 2–5, passim; Andani, “Metaphysics of Muḥammad”, 100–104, passim; Bashir, “Muhammad in Sufi Eyes”; Gruber, The Praiseworthy; and Schimmel, And Muḥammad, 24–55.
what kind of concerns do they display? His writings positioned Mālikī at the centre of the modern manifestation of a centuries-old Muslim debate over the ways of thinking and connecting with the Prophet, as well as of the ritualistic, emotional, and devotional ways of expressing those connections.

1 The Saudi Context

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded on the bases of the partnership between a small clan from central Arabia, known as Āl Saʿūd, and a reformist movement inspired by the ideas of a local religious scholar, Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792). Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb was influenced by the teachings of the controversial medieval theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), and his critique of Sufi orders, practices of saint veneration, and speculative theology. The Saudi–Wahhābī relationship was one of partnership. The First Saudi State (1745–1811) emerged as a direct result of Wahhābī proselytising, while the homogenisation of the Wahhābī movement would not have been possible without the support of the Saudi political power. This relationship formed the foundations of the (current) Third Saudi State in the twentieth century. Wahhābī scholars recruited fighters for the Saudi territorial expansions into regions they considered as religiously deviant. Subsequently, they have endorsed the royal family with legitimacy and have condemned any form of rebellion against it. In exchange, the royal family has guaranteed Wahhābīs religious dominance, granting them coercive powers against groups they consider deviant, and financial resources for spreading their teachings.

The prime targets of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and his later followers were the dominant religious culture, popular practices, and the scholarly elites of his time. He showed a strong proclivity towards excommunicating Muslims he disagreed with, especially the Sufis and Shīʿa. Wherever the Saudi-Wahhābī troops entered, their presence was marked by the destruction of mausoleums, and the prohibition of practices of veneration for the Prophet, his descendants, and other saints. During the first Saudi-Wahhābī invasion of the Ḥijāz in 1803 they went as far as attempting to demolish even the tomb of the Prophet in

---

7 See Traboulsi, “I Entered Mecca”, 205.
Medina. As a result, the Wahhābīs drew the condemnation of the most prominent scholarly circles of the time, including the scholarly elites in the Holy City of Mecca, as illustrated by the writings of the prominent Shāfī‘ī mufti of the late nineteenth century, Ahmād Zaynī Dahlan (d. 1304/1886). Mecca and Medina had been for centuries important centres of scholarly exchange, resulting in the formation of rich and diverse scholarly environments, where practices of veneration of the Prophet and other saints constituted important markers of the religious life of these cities. After the second invasion of the Hijāz in 1924, which permanently incorporated the Holy Cities into the Saudi kingdom, Sufi practices were barely tolerated in private spaces, while the process was initiated for dismantling this pre-Saudi, multi-vocal, scholarly tradition. By the late 1970s, the Sufi scholar Muḥammad ‘Alawī al-Mālikī had emerged as the leading representative of this struggling, scholarly legacy. At this period, however, as a result of the political and religious developments in the kingdom, the pressure on the Sufi communities increased even more.

Despite its religious identity, the Saudi state has faced recurring challenges to its Islamic credentials, and thereby to its legitimacy. In 1979, the Saudis faced a number of momentous challenges, key among them being the siege of Mecca and the Iranian Revolution. In November of that year, a messianic group seized control of the holiest site in Islam, the Holy Mosque in Mecca. In addition to claiming the arrival of an awaited messianic figure, the Mahdī, the leaders of the rebel group argued that Westernisation had destroyed the values of Saudi society. They blamed the government for only paying lip service to Islam, and accused the princes of theft, bribery, and corruption. At the same time, riots broke out in the predominantly Shi‘ī Eastern Province, where protestors carrying pictures of the leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989), attacked government buildings and called for the overthrow of the Saudi royal family.

In order to address these challenges, the authorities took a number of steps, and their response had a strong religious component. They recognised economic deprivations in Shi‘ī-populated regions, and promised investments. Congruently, the Wahhābī scholars played a crucial role in delegitimising the
opposition by challenging the religious credentials of Khomeini and of the Iranian Revolution. Their fatwas were not meant only for domestic consumption, but sought additionally to undermine the appeal of the Iranian Revolution in other parts of the Muslim world.\textsuperscript{16} Likewise, as the authorities crushed the Meccan rebellion with an iron fist, their Wahhābī partners issued fatwas repudiating the messianic claims of the rebels, while ignoring their political and social grievances. A significant outcome of these events, which is particularly relevant to our investigation, was the government’s decision to appease the conservative circles in the kingdom, by enforcing stricter moral norms in society and by further empowering the religious establishment and their affiliated groups.\textsuperscript{17}

Congruently, at this period, a religious movement had been taking shape in Saudi Arabia and the wider region, known as the Islamic Awakening, or Ṣaḥwā. It represented the amalgamation of two important trends in modern Muslim thought: they inherited the Wahhābī teachings on theology, and the activist approach to politics, society, and world affairs as articulated by modern Islamist ideologues. The Ṣaḥwā sought to comprehensively Islamise the Saudi society, challenging the existence of societal spaces that operated outside of religious assessment. While the main targets of this movement were the state-sponsored, secular, intellectual circles, they additionally targeted expressions of religiosity that contradicted the Wahhābī teachings. Given that they enjoyed stronger and more robust networks than the senior clerics, with well-established presence throughout the educational institutions and youth organisations, Ṣaḥwā scholars played a crucial role in the dissemination of Wahhābī teachings, and Wahhābī-inspired sectarianism.\textsuperscript{18} A primary target of their activism became the remaining Sufi scholars, their writings, and the communities around them, particularly Muḥammad ‘Alawī al-Mālikī.

\section{Muḥammad ‘Alawī al-Mālikī: A Sufi Scholar in Modern-Day Saudi Arabia}

Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Alawī al-Mālikī was born in Mecca in 1946\textsuperscript{19} in a renowned family of descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad, of Mālikī jurists, and Sufis,
who for generations held seats as lecturers at the Holy Mosque in Mecca. He was educated from an early age to continue the family legacy, memorialising the Qurʾān by the age of nine, attending the lectures of his father, Sayyid ʿAlawī (d. 1971), at the Holy Mosque, while studying and later graduating from al-Falāḥ School in Mecca. He studied briefly also in Bombay, and at the Dār al-ʿUlūm of Deoband, before enrolling at the Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Sanūsī University in Libya. Following the anti-royalist revolution in 1969 he moved to Cairo, enrolling at al-Azhar, from where he received his doctorate in 1972. In Cairo he studied with some of the most prominent scholars at the time, among them Muḥammad al-Ḥāfīz al-Tijānī (d. 1978) and Ḥasanayn Muḥammad Makhlūf (d. 1990). His doctorate thesis was a study of the foundational work of the Mālikī legal school, *al-Muwatṭa*. The preservation of the Mālikī school in the context of the Wahhābī dominance represented one of his main scholarly concerns. In 2000, al-Azhar University conferred him the title “Professor”.

Mālikī took great pride in having received licences to teach, and chains of *ḥadith* transmissions from some of the leading scholars in the Muslim world, from India and Pakistan to Yemen, Egypt, Syria, and Morocco. However, he was best known as the inheritor of the scholarly tradition that had dominated the religious life in Mecca prior to Saudi rule. In addition to studying with his father, he enlisted among his teachers some of the most prominent Meccan scholars, like the Algerian-born Muḥammad al-ʿArabī b. al-Ṭabbānī (d. 1970) and Muḥammad Amin Kutubī (d. 1984). This Meccan scholarly legacy was characterised by the following of the canonical schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*madhhab*), the classical schools of Sunni theology, and the various Sufi orders that had been gathering in the Holy Cities throughout history. Mālikī was initiated into the Shādhili order at the hands of his father, and received additionally the Bāʿalla order from several of the order’s leading figures,

---


21 See Schacht, “Mālik b. Anas”.


23 He was also known by his pen name Abū Ḥāmid b. Marzūq. It is under this name that he published his book Barāʾ al-ʿAshārīn min ʿaqāʾid al-mukhālifīn (*The Innocence of the Ashʿarīs from the Creed of the Adversaries*) in 1968, a harsh critique of the creed of Ibn Taymiyya and the Wahhābīs.

24 A close associate of the father of Mālikī, Kutubī was considered one of the leading students of Tabbānī.

25 Interview with Sayyid ʿAbd al-Mālikī, the son of Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī. Mecca, 4 June 2018.

like ‘Umar b. Sumayṭ.\(^\text{27}\) As heir of this tradition, Mālikī saw Wahhābīsm and other manifestations of Salafism as threats to the balance of the traditional Sunnī scholarly edifice and embarked on the project of defending it. Mālikī, therefore, emerged as one of the main representatives of what Jonathan Brown calls the “late Sunnī traditionalists”.\(^\text{28}\)

The prominence of the Mālikī family can be discerned also by the fact that, despite Mālikī being a representative of what Wahhābīs considered a deviant sect, starting from 1970, he received a teaching position at the Faculty of Shari‘a in Mecca. He worked also for several prominent religious organisations, including the Meccan-based World Muslim League. Upon the death of his father, he took his father’s position as a lecturer at the Holy Mosque. In 1980, however, he became the target of a campaign of attacks which brought to an end his academic career and his public engagements. The content of those attacks will be discussed later in this chapter. Following death threats against him, he was forced into exile, moving for few months to Indonesia till King Fahd (d. 2005) invited him back and appeared with him in public, practically announcing his protection.\(^\text{29}\)

In the mid-1990s, following the Gulf War, the Ẓāḥīwī movement emerged as the leading opposition to the Saudi monarchy, opposing the presence of US forces in the kingdom, and demanding wider participation of the public in the country’s decision-making. The royal family responded by imprisoning the leading Ẓāḥīwī scholars, and by granting limited freedom of assembly to previously marginalised religious communities, like the Shī‘a with no affiliation to Iran and the Sufis of the Ḥijāz.\(^\text{30}\) By granting limited presence to these groups, the authorities sought to break Ẓāḥīwī’s monopoly on the religious sphere. This development enabled Mālikī and other Sufis to organise teaching circles, and pass down the tradition to a new generation of Sufi scholars. Some of his students are currently prominent scholars in their own right, among them his son, Sayyid Açḥmad, who recently (in 2018) received a doctorate in Qur‘ān exegesis from al-Azhar and currently runs the seminary founded by his father in Mecca; Sayyid ‘Abd Allāh Fa‘aq, considered today as the public face of Sufism in the kingdom; and the world-renown Sufi TV preacher Ḥabīb ‘Alī al-Jīfīrī.\(^\text{31}\)

In 2003, following a period of political volatility in Saudi Arabia, marked by the rise of religious militancy, the royal family initiated several meetings under


\(^{29}\) Interview with Sayyid Açḥmad al-Mālikī.

\(^{30}\) Lacroix, Awakening Islam, 211–23.

\(^{31}\) Sinani, “In the Path”, 159–71. See on him also the introduction of this volume, 12n20.
the umbrella of a National Dialogue. Mālikī was invited to participate and offer his suggestions on how to address extremism – ghulūw. The kind of extremism authorities were concerned with at that period was not related to excessive veneration of the Prophet, but rather to religious militancy. In his paper, Mālikī identified core tenets of Wahhābī teachings, especially the proclivity towards excommunication, as responsible for feeding extremism – understood primarily as a manifestation of sectarian and political militancy.

Mālikī died a few months later, in 2004. He was accompanied to his resting place by thousands of Meccans. His legacy was celebrated by the leading liberal newspapers of the kingdom, and some of the senior princes, including Crown prince and later king ʿAbd Allāh, visited the home of Mālikī to offer their condolences. In his death, Mālikī had rendered a final service to the Sufis of the Ḥijāz. The visits of the princes constituted a licence to continue the Sufi gatherings till their disruption following the death of King ʿAbd Allāh in 2015 and the rise to power of Crown prince Muḥammad b. Salmān – a development that requires a separate analysis.

The campaign against Mālikī did not prevent him from authoring several books on jurisprudence, hadīth and Qurʾān studies, compilations of litanies, and on several other genres of Islamic learning – almost fifty titles in total. Perhaps some of his best-known works were his polemical writings, where he challenged core aspects of the Wahhābī doctrine. As we shall see, among his earlier works and among the first to draw the attention of his Wahhābī critics was al-Dhakhāʾir al-muḥammadīyya (The Muḥammadan treasures) and Ḥawl al-iḥtifāl bi-dhikrā l-mawlid al-nabawi l-sharīf (On celebrating and commemorating the noble birthday of the Prophet). Additionally, he wrote several works dedicated to the life, the virtues, and the practices of veneration of the Prophet, among them Shifāʾ al-fuʾād bi-ziyārat khayr al-ʿibād (Cure of the heart through the visit of the best of God’s servants), al-Ziyāra al-nabawiyya bayna al-sharʿīyya wa-l-bidʿīyya (Visitation of the Prophet between what is legitimate and heretical), and Muḥammad: al-insān al-kāmil (Muḥammad: The perfect man).

He authored additional polemical works that were critical of Wahhābī teachings, like Manhaj al-salaf fī fahm al-nuṣūṣ (The methodology of the ancestors in the understanding of the texts). Yet, the book that perhaps better than any other work of Mālikī encapsulated his concerns vis-à-vis the Wahhābī dogma was Mafāhīm yajib an tuṣḥaḥ (Concepts that need to be corrected), published first in Cairo in 1985. It was a direct response to accusations made

32 Mālikī, al-Ghulūw, 10–11, passim.
33 Ambah, “In Saudi Arabia.”
against him. It mounted a defence of the classical schools of Sunnī theology, which are deemed as deviant by Wahhābīs; it critiqued the Wahhābī proclivity towards excommunication; and presented textual evidence in support of the practice of seeking the intercession of the Prophet. A considerable part of the book, which is directly relevant to the questions addressed in this chapter, dealt with the debate over the distinctive characteristics of the Prophet and the acceptable limits of veneration. To this section of Mafāhīm we return later in this chapter.

3    Wahhābī Views of Sufism as a Manifestation of Devotional Extremism

The context in which the debates we analyse in this chapter took place is crucial to the understanding of the relations of power the opposing religious views represented. The opinions of the Wahhābī scholars analysed here are representative of the established dogma of state-sponsored religious institutions, which enjoyed coercive powers, and were articulated by leading scholars of the religious bureaucracy. What did ghuluww mean to these scholars and what kind of concerns did it represent? A leading contributor to these debates, Shaykh Ṣāliḥ Āl-Shaykh (b. 1959), has been the longest-serving Minister of Religious Affairs of Saudi Arabia, from 1996 to 2014, and 2015 to 2018, when he was removed from that position in the midst of a government reshuffling. He is a descendant of the founder of the Wahhābī movement, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, and the grandson of Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh (d. 1969), the mufti of Saudi Arabia till the end of his life, arguably the most influential Wahhābī scholar of the modern Saudi state.34 In 1987 Ṣāliḥ Āl-Shaykh wrote a polemical work titled Hādhihi mafāhīmunā: radd ‘alā kitāb Mafāhīm yajib an tuṣḥaḥḥaḥ (These are our concepts: A refutation of the book “Concepts that need to be corrected”), which, as the title states, was a refutation of Mālikī’s Mafāhīm. The book focused primarily on opposing the textual evidence Mālikī had presented in the Mafāhīm regarding the validity of visiting and seeking the intercession of the Prophet. Āl-Shaykh wrote:

The Followers of the Sunna and Hadīth – by the praise of God and His favour – venerate (yuʿazzīmūn) the Messenger of God, may the peace and blessing of God be upon him, in the manner he commanded us to venerate him, through faith in him and in his teaching, in what he censured

34    Mouline, The Clerics of Islam, 121.
and in what he venerated, by following the light brought by him, committed in all affairs to following his guidance and his way. They love the accounts of his statements (ḥadīth) and his example (sunna), they defend them, protect his sayings, they are angered if words are falsely ascribed to him … They recognise the status where he was placed by God, and they are far from decreasing in that, nor from elevating him beyond that, as do the extremists (ghulāt). In all this they followed the path of the Companions [of the Prophet], may God be pleased with them all, and of those who followed them among the Imams of guidance and religion. Later, when sects of heretical innovation (ṭawāʾif al-ibtidāʾ) like the extreme Sufis appeared, a major tribulation was manifested, trying people with the emergence of the veneration (taʿẓīm) of the Messenger of God, may the peace and blessing of God be upon him, with certain words, followed by practices, which differed from the command of the Messenger of God, may the peace and blessing of God be upon him, and the path of the blessed Companions [of the Prophet], [and] the rightly guided caliphs from among them.35

The notion of extremism presented here has nothing to do with the meaning one encounters commonly in our times, which perceives of extremism in terms of violence and militancy. In the Islamic polemical tradition, several groups, both Sunnī and Shiʿī, have been labelled as “extremists” (ghulāt), and the term has taken several meanings, as dictated by the context.36 The focus here is on a particular rendering of extremism as excessive devotion, on the kind of concerns it has come to represent in modern Islamic thought, and how it speaks to Muslim visions of the Prophet Muḥammad. In this context, the words of Āl al-Shaykh are instructive in a number of ways: they represent a well-known depiction of Wahhābī understanding of history and the movement’s role in it. This vision of history points to the early stage of revelation and establishment of correct dogma by the Prophet and his Companions, followed by the later corruption of creed and practices at the hands of Sufis and other heretical innovators, necessitating the eventual emergence of a group that holds fast to the way of the ancestors (salaf) – the role claimed by the Wahhābī scholarly tradition. They point also to Wahhābī understanding of how to honour and exalt the Prophet, primarily through following and studying his recorded sayings and

35 Āl al-Shaykh, Hādhihī mafāhīmunā, 235–36. While Āl al-Shaykh is addressing here only the Sufis, Wahhābī scholars make very similar accusations against the Shiʿa; see Ismail, Saudi Clerics, 67–69.

36 Anthony, “Ghulāt”.
accounts of his behaviour. The emphasis, certainly, is on the Wahhābī claim that “they are far from decreasing ... nor from elevating [the Prophet] beyond” the position where God has placed him – a claim of balance juxtaposed against Sufi extremism. But how is the Sufi devotional extremism manifested?

A key hadīth of the Prophet is often quoted in relevant Wahhābī writings: “Do not exaggerate in praising me (lā tuṭrūnī) as the Christians praised the Son of Mary (kamā aṭrat al-našārā Ibn Maryam), for indeed I am His servant, so say God’s servant and messenger.”37 The idea of devotional extremism is quite prevalent in Muslim views of Christianity, and plays an important part in Wahhābī understanding of Sufism as a Christian type of deviance. The Qurʾān appeals to Christians in several verses to refrain from going to extremes (lā taghlū) in matters of religion by claiming divinity for Jesus, or claiming that he is the son of God.38 According to the Qurʾān, Jesus distanced himself from extremist claims, and declared his true status as God’s servant and prophet: “He said: I am God’s servant, He gave me scripture and made me a prophet.”39 This narrative points to the essential problem of later corruption of the teachings of the prophets. Among the Christians it is manifested in the excessive veneration of Jesus, which leads Christians to ascribe him attributes that belong exclusively to God, resulting in the corruption of the creed of pure monotheism (tawḥīd). These verses do not convey only a particular Muslim view of Christianity, but also a typology of deviance. As Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) wrote, the Christian way of going astray represents one of the most likely means for Muslims to deviate.40 At the heart of these debates, therefore, is the question of divine sovereignty.

To contemporary Wahhābis, Sufis are the primary group guilty of the charge of devotional extremism. The work of a contemporary Wahhābī author, Šādiq b. Muhammad b. Ibrāhīm, titled Khaṣāʾiṣ al-muṣṭafā bayna al-ghulūww wa-l-jafāʾ (The distinctive characteristics of the Chosen One between exaggeration and alienation) serves as a representative collection of Wahhābī concerns. It is based on the author’s thesis in 1995 at the University of Medina, a leading institution dedicated to the dissemination of Wahhābī teachings.41 In it, the author addressed critically a collection of Muslim writings dedicated to describing the distinctive characteristics (khaṣāʾiṣ) of the Prophet, by which Muslims come to perceive of him. As the author pointed out, ghulūww refers

37 Wensinck, Concordance, 111, 543, 2.
38 Q 5:77 and 4:171. For the translations of Qurʾānic verses I have consulted the English translation by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem.
39 Q 19:30.
40 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿ al-fatāwā, 1:64.
41 Farquhar, Circuits of Faith, 67–85.
primarily to exceeding the boundaries of what Muslims should believe regarding the status of the Prophet. It implies that the contested perceptions regarding the Prophet represent contestations of the very understanding of faith. Accordingly, manifestations of devotional extremism differ in Wahhabī classifications: some of them constitute heretical innovations (bidʿa), and others constitute manifestations of polytheism (shirk). According to Wahhabī officials, such manifestations of polytheism justify excommunication (takfīr) – known also as khurūj min al-milla, or expulsion from the community, which calls for scholarly rebuke and potentially the death penalty for unrepentant offenders. Perceptions of the Prophet, therefore, are evoked to mark correct dogma, communal boundaries, and the dynamics of inner Muslim polemics.

Ibn Ibrāhīm identified two categories of manifestations of devotional extremism among Sufis: those related to extreme beliefs about the Prophet before his existence, and those related to his intermediary life (al-Ḥayāt al-Barzakhīyya), the stage of existence between this life and the hereafter. Excessive devotion in the Prophet’s pre-existing stage is further divided into four sub-categories, consisting of the belief that (1) the Prophet Muḥammad is the first of the prophets in creation, and that he was sent as a messenger from God to all prophets and their respective communities; (2) he was created from the light of God (min nūr Allāh) and that the entire creation has been created from his light (makhlūq min nūrihī); (3) the prophets sought mediation, or nearness to God, through the Prophet Muhammad before his creation (tawassul al-anbiyāʾ bihi qabla wujūdihī); (4) and the People of the Book, the Jews and the Christians, sought to draw close to God through the Prophet Muhammad.

Excessive devotion to the Prophet in his intermediary life is further divided into eight sub-categories, consisting of the belief that (1) intercession becomes obligatory on the Prophet for someone who visits his tomb (man zāra qabrahu wajabat lahu shafāʿatuhu); (2) people who, among other virtuous deeds, visit the tomb of the Prophet, will not be taken into account by God; (3) the belief...
in the ability of the Prophet to erase sins, regarding his knowledge of what is contained in the divine preserved tablets of the knowledge of the past and future (al-qadā‘wa-l-qadar), as well as of what is concealed in the hearts of people (see below the discussion about the Prophet’s knowledge of the unseen); (4) the Prophet offers refuge and protection in times of need; (5) the Prophet answers prayers and that the hands of devotees are raised in prayer towards him — related to point (3); (6) the belief that the hand of the Prophet had come out of his grave to greet his saint, among his recorded miracles is the coming out of the grave of the hand of the Prophet so that Rif‘i‘ could kiss it.  

These beliefs regarding the Prophet Muḥammad constitute for Wahhābis a blurring of the separation between Creator and creation, God and His prophet, leading towards attribution of divinity to the Prophet, as Christians did with Christ. To Wahhābis this is particularly manifested in the devotional rituals of Sufis, as indicative of this form of excess is the verse from the Mantle Odes, 144, which implies in Wahhābi reading that the poet seeks refuge in other than God. See Stetkevych, *The Mantle Odes*, 144.

49 This is perhaps one of the most contentious points of these debates. Given that Wahhābis maintain that forgiveness of sins is God’s prerogative, they consider Sufi devotional poetry, which appeals to the Prophet for forgiveness, as violation of the creed of monotheism. By so doing, Ibn Ibrāhīm writes, the Sufis “open for themselves the gates of hellfire”. Among the various responses, Sufi have been citing Q 4:64, which states: “Had they, when they wronged themselves, come to you and asked God’s forgiveness and the Prophet had asked forgiveness for them, they would have found God Forgiving and Merciful”. The Wahhābis understand the verse to refer strictly to the lifetime of the Prophet. Their Sufi opponents, however, see the verse as applying to the present as well, implying a continuous presence of the Prophet through his intermediary life, which justifies asking the Prophet to pray for forgiveness on their behalf. See Ibn Ibrāhīm, *Khaṣā‘iṣ al-muṣṭafā, 174–86*.  

50 A prime example quoted by Wahhābis as indicative of this form of excess is the verse from the poem of Buṣirī (d. 694–96/1294–97), “O most generous of all creation, I have no one to turn to / But you, when the dreaded Day of Judgement comes” (part 10, v. 152), which implies in Wahhābi reading that the poet seeks refuge in other than God. See Stetkevych, *The Mantle Odes*, 144.  

51 An example of this claim is the account of the Sufi master ʿAbd all-Riḍā (d. 578/1182). Among his recorded miracles is the coming out of the grave of the hand of the Prophet so that Riḍā could kiss it. See Margoliouth, “al-Riḍā”.  

52 On the Sufi evocation of the vision of the Prophet in a state of wakefulness see, for example, Radtke, “Iriziana”, 122; and Sedgwick, *Saints*, 13. For a contemporary account of such a vision, see Özselç, *Forty Days*, 84–85.  

53 The Moroccan Sufi master ʿAbd all-Tiǧānī (d. 1150/1785), for example, claimed that he received the teachings of the order directly from the Prophet, rather than through a lineage of previous teachers (siḥila) that goes back to the Prophet. See Abun-Nasr, “al-Tiḏānī”.  

expressions that address the Prophet as refuge in times of need, asking from him forgiveness for one’s sins, or attributing him knowledge which belongs exclusively to God.

4 The Wahhābī Campaign against Mālikī

The power with which the Saudi state has endowed the Wahhābī establishment meant that their scholars were not limited to identifying beliefs they considered deviant. They were further empowered to punish deviance by targeting its representatives. As pointed out earlier, Mālikī was recognised by Wahhābīs as the leading representative of Sufi beliefs they had categorised as ghulaww. The initial Wahhābī attacks against Mālikī, starting in the late 1970s, were in response to some of his earliest works, particularly al-Dhakhāʾir and Ḥawl al-iḥtifāl. Dhakhāʾir comprises miscellaneous chapters promoting textual sources in support of the veneration of the Prophet. Ḥawl al-iḥtifāl, on the other hand, as the title indicates, is meant to support the legitimacy of the practice of celebrating the birthday of the Prophet, a practice which became particularly contested in the 1980s.

In the context of the intensified sectarian milieu that followed the siege of Mecca and the Iranian Revolution, the Committee of Senior Scholars (Ḥayʿat Kibār al-ʿUlāmāʾ) held a number of meetings in order to address the case of Mālikī. The first, corresponding to the sixteenth session of the assembly of the committee, took place on 17 Shawwāl 1400/29 August 1980 in Ṭāʾif. The leading religious figure presiding over the meeting was Shaykh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Bāz (d. 1999). He had been one of the leading students of the former grand mufti Ibn Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh and he later served himself as Grand Mufti, from 1993 till the end of his life. The attendees were presented with a number of allegations against Mālikī. The statement claimed that he was an active proselytiser of heresies (biḍʿa), superstitions (al-khurāfāt), calling to misguidance (al-ḍalāl), and idolatry (al-wathaniyya). The claim was supported by a presentation of the content of a number of books of Mālikī, like al-Dhakhāʾir, al-Ṣalawāt al-maṭḥūra (Authentic prayers), and Adʿiyat al-ṣalawāt (Supplications after prayers).

57 Ibn Bāz, Majmūʿ al-fatāwā, 19–12. See also Al-Atawneh, Wahhābī Islam, 32.
58 Ibn Manīʿ, Ḥiwār, 9. See also Ahmad, Fatwās of Condemnation, 120–30.
He was accused of affiliation with an Egyptian-based, occult Sufi group, with Shiʿī beliefs. The members of the committee were told that followers of this sect were infiltrating Saudi Arabia, and that Mālikī was the representative (nāʾīb) of the sect’s leader in the kingdom.59 He was also reported to have visited Sufi shrines, like the shrine (darīḥ) of Abū l-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258),60 and was accused of distributing his books, like Dhakhāʾīr, for free. Following the report from Egypt, the statement of the committee directed its attention to the content of the book, pointing at its false beliefs (al-muʿtaqadāt al-bāṭila), and extreme views about the Prophet.61

In order to respond to these charges, Mālikī appeared few days later in front of the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Jurists (raʾīs al-majlis al-aʿlā li-l-qadāʾ), ʿAbd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Ḥumayyid, the President of the Committee, Ibn Bāz, and the General President of the Affairs of the Two Holy Sanctuaries (al-raʾīs al-ʿāmm li-shuʿūn al-ḥaramayn al-sharīfayn), Sulaymān b. ʿUbayd. According to the minutes of the meeting, included in the report, Mālikī admitted being the author of the following books: al-Dhakhāʾīr al-muḥammadīyya, Ḥawl al-iḥtifāl bi-dhikrā l-mawlid al-nabawī l-sharīf, and al-Ṣalawāt al-maṭḥūra, but he denied being the author of Adʿiyat al-ṣalawāt. Mālikī admitted having visited many different people in Egypt, but denied being a member of the kind of group described in the report, or being a follower of the views attributed to the occult shaykh. Mālikī also denied the accusations of extremism. He argued that his statements had been misunderstood, and that some of the passages that the committee cited as examples of shirk were statements quoted from other authors.

In response, the committee demanded from Mālikī to collect all the citations they deemed to represent deviant beliefs, to sign a written statement denouncing those beliefs, which would be distributed to the press, and that he would have to declare his repentance on radio and television. Were he to refuse, he would be banned from teaching at the Holy Mosque, from the university and elsewhere, banned from radio, television, and the press, and banned from traveling, so that he would not be able to spread the falsehood of his deviant beliefs. Mālikī informed the committee of his refusal to comply with their demands. Ibn ʿUbayd met with Mālikī on two other occasions in attempts to persuade him to comply with the requests of the committee, but he refused each time. On the seventeenth assembly of the committee, which took place in the following year in the month of Rajab (May 1981) in the capital, Riyadh, it

59 Ibn Manīʿ, Ḥiwār, 10–11.
60 Lory, “al-Shādhilī”.
61 Ibn Manīʿ, Ḥiwār, 10–11.
was decided to submit the statement to the deputy prime minister, requesting him to suspend all the activities of Mālikī, placing him under house arrest.62

The proceedings of these meetings set the tone for the future attacks against Mālikī. In 1983, a member of the committee, ‘Abd Allah b. Sulaymān b. Manī’, wrote Ḥiwār maʿa al-Mālikī fi radd munkarātihi wa-ḍalālātihi (Dialogue with Mālikī in refutation of his abominations and deviance). Mālikī responded to many of the attacks against him in his Mafāhim, published in 1985. Two years later, in 1987, Šāliḥ Āl-Shaykh wrote his refutation of Mafāhim, titled Hādhihī mafāhimunā, quoted earlier. While these were not the only texts written against Mālikī, they became representative of these contestations, authored by representatives of the main institutions of Wahhabīsm in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, leading Ṣaḥwa scholars were also important contributors to this campaign. One of them, Ṣafar al-Ḥawālī (b. 1950), wrote several papers attacking Mālikī, accusing him of being the leading promoter of idolatry in the modern age.63

5 Wahhabī Identification of ghuluww in the Writings of Mālikī

The text that gained a wider circulation among the various denunciations against Mālikī was that of Ibn Manīʿ (b. 1930). In addition to being a member of the most prestigious scholarly body in the kingdom, Ibn Manīʿ had served for several decades as a judge. The introduction was written by Ibn Bāz, adding to the status of the book as the expression of establishment position. The book included the entire text of the report of the committee against Mālikī, and focused particularly on the debate over the validity of the celebration of the mawlid. Ibn Manīʿ dedicated much attention also to what he considered as extreme views of Mālikī in regard to the veneration of the Prophet. He pointed at examples of excessive veneration of the Prophet in the poetry quoted in Dhakhāʾir. He cited as examples verses like “the whole universe lies under the sandals of Muḥammad” (ʿalā raʾsi hādhā l-kawni naʿtu Muḥammad). Verses like this seek to convey the sublime status of the Prophet in reference to his celestial Night Journey (al-isrāʾ wa-l-miʿrāj).64 Other verses are quoted as examples

---

62 See Ibn Manīʿ, Ḥiwār, 12–14; and Ahmad, Fatwās of Condemnation, 127.
63 Šāliḥ Āl-Shaykh, “Khilāfūn aʿlā al-ṣūfiyya”; Ḥawālī, “Mujaddid millat ‘Amr b. Luḥayy”; Ḥawālī, “al-Radd ‘alā l-khurāfiyyīn”. Ḥawālī was imprisoned in the mid-1990s as part of the government crackdown on the Ṣaḥwa. He has been detained again since 2012 together with fellow, former Ṣaḥwa leaders.
64 Ibn Manīʿ, Ḥiwār, 15. The veneration of the sandals of the Prophet is linked to the story of the heavenly journey during the night of ascension, referring to the sandals of
of extremism that leads to polytheism, or blameworthy innovations, like the verses of Buṣūrī (see note 59).

Another example of extremism, according to Ibn Manīʿ, is the claim that the night of the birth of the Prophet is more virtuous (afdal) than the Night of Destiny, which is specifically mentioned in the Qurān as being a night “better than a thousand months”. Another quote pointed at a poem by the prominent medieval Shāfiʿi scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytami (d. 974/1566) in it he writes that the Prophet is alive in his grave, and he performs the five canonical prayers (al-ṣalawāt al-khamsa), as well as the rituals of purification (yataḥṭahhar), pilgrimage, and fasting. Particularly alarming to Ibn Manīʿ was the language that indicated that the author sought recourse from the Prophet, whereas “seeking recourse by other than God is from the types of major shirk”, a point that is repeated several times.

Ibn Manīʿ further pointed out that Mālikī encouraged kissing and touching the tomb of the Prophet and of the pious (ṣāliḥin) as a way of receiving blessing (tabarruk), having attributed the practice to the Companions (ṣaḥāba) of the Prophet. This, according to the statement, is a heretical innovation that leads to major shirk. Furthermore, Mālikī was accused of wrongful attribution of his views to the Companions of the Prophet. Ibn Manīʿ further stated that Mālikī had claimed that visiting the tomb of the Prophet perfects the pilgrimage to this night, which is specifically mentioned in the Qurān (Q 9:24) (ṣīr), as well as the rituals of purification (yataḥṭahhar), pilgrimage, and fasting. Particularly alarming to Ibn Manīʿ was the language that indicated that the author sought recourse from the Prophet, whereas “seeking recourse by other than God is from the types of major shirk”, a point that is repeated several times.

Ibn Manīʿ, Ḥiwr, 15. He is referring to Mālikī, al-Dhakhāʾir, 40–41. Probably Ibn Manīʿ was using a different edition from the one we are using here and therefore I have not given his page numbers from Mālikī’s work but cross-referenced his points to the pages of the edition I have used.

Q 973. Ibn Manīʿ, Ḥiwr, 15. He is referring to Mālikī, al-Dhakhāʾir, 40–41. Probably Ibn Manīʿ was using a different edition from the one we are using here and therefore I have not given his page numbers from Mālikī’s work but cross-referenced his points to the pages of the edition I have used.

65 See Arendonk and Schacht, “Ibn Ḥadjar al-Haytami”.

66 It should be noted that Wahhābīs, like Ibn Taymiyya, do not deny that the Prophet is alive, but to them the knowledge of the modality of that life is severely more restricted than the elaborate descriptions found in the works of Sufi scholars like Mālikī. Additionally, they deny the possibility of the believer’s communication with the Prophet, or the Prophet’s presence in the devotional life of the Muslims. See Albānī, al-Tawassul, 58–63; ‘Uthaymin, Majmāʾ, 2:339; Meier, “Eine auferstehung Mohammeds”, 44–45.

67 Ibn Manīʿ, Ḥiwr, 14, referring to Mālikī, al-Dhakhāʾir, 66–71. In the commentary that follows the poem Mālikī refers again to the Night Journey, and the reports about Muḥammad seeing Mūsā (Moses) and other prophets praying, which confirms the devotional life and prayers of prophets in the barzakh. To Sufis, this account, which is otherwise widely accepted also by Wahhābīs, is particularly important, because it includes the report on Moses assisting the Prophet during the journey, which speaks to the debate over the practice of seeking the assistance of the dead. See Colby, Narrating, 81–82. See also Meier, “Eine auferstehung Mohammeds”, 30.

68 Ibn Manīʿ, Ḥiwr, 15. For Mālikī’s position, see al-Dhakhāʾir, 78.
in Mecca (ḥajj) and that for the Sufis the visit is an obligation (farḍ); he wrote about miracles occurring when visiting the Prophet’s tomb, engaging in this manner – the statement asserts – in discussions over the unseen (ghayb), and speaking about God without knowledge (qawl ‘alā Allāh bi-lā ‘ilm). As these examples show, Ibn Mani‘ī located the manifestations of extremism in the language of poetry of veneration for the Prophet, in practices of tomb visitation and seeking blessing, as well as in beliefs about the modality of the intermediary life of the Prophet.

Ḥiwār, however, was primarily concerned with rebuking Mālikī’s claim regarding the permissibility of celebrating the mawlid. As such, the book engaged at length with the relevant legal (fiqh) arguments. One specific practice in the mawlid gatherings attracted particular attention: the practice of standing during the mawlid (qiyām). The qiyām takes place at the stage in the ceremony when the birth of the Prophet is mentioned, and it is meant to signal respect for the Prophet. According to some, however, it also welcomes the presence of the Prophet to the mawlid gathering. Marion Katz has traced the practice back to the fourteenth century, in the writings of the Shāfī‘ī judge Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355) and his son, Tāj al-Dīn (d. 769/1370). In the following centuries the practice became so widespread that failing to perform it would lead to suspicion of disbelief. The practice was opposed by Ibn Taymiyya, based on lack of documented precedence from the disciples of Muḥammad. Nevertheless, for centuries it remained a popular practice, meant to express reverence (ta‘zīm) for the Prophet. A central issue in modern polemics, however, focused on the notion that such an act went beyond mere reverence, problematising the belief of the actual presence of the Prophet in mawlid celebrations.

Mālikī opposed the idea of the physical presence of the Prophet during the mawlid gatherings, depicting it as the view of the ignorant ones. He added, however, that “yes, we believe that he, peace and blessings be upon him, is alive in the intermediary life (barzakh) in accordance with the wholesomeness of his status, his soul travelling and roaming the creation of God ... able to attend the gatherings of goodness, scenes of light and knowledge.” It clearly indicates that Mālikī did not deny the possibility of the Prophetic presence but objected to the physical modality of that presence. Wahhābī scholars

70 See Ibn Mani‘ī, Ḥiwār, 15; and Mālikī, al-Dhakhā‘īr, 102.
71 Subkī, Ṭabaqāt, 10:208; Katz, The Birth, 128–34; Schacht and Bosworth, "al-Subkī".
74 Mālikī, Ḥawl al-‘ītīfāl, 40–42. In the Mafāḥīm, Mālikī dedicated much of the book to providing textual evidence for these claims. When asked about the modality of the Prophetic
strongly attacked these arguments. Ibn Bāz emphasised the Wahhābī view that “the Prophet will not emerge from his grave before the Day of Resurrection; he is not in communication with anyone and does not attend their gatherings. Rather, he is abiding in his grave till the Day of Judgement, and his spirit is in the highest heaven with his Lord in the abode of grace.” Katz has succinctly captured the nature of the contestation between Wahhābīs and scholars like Mālikī in the debate over the qiyām:

The debate over the qiyām reflects a fundamental difference in the two parties’ views of the Prophet. For supporters, the Prophet is directly accessible to participants in the mawlid. Whether in body, in spirit, or in imagination, he is intimately present to those who love him; it is thus appropriate to engage in physical manifestation of joy and honour, such as rising to one’s feet. For opponents, the Prophet is remote from the individual Muslim of the present day. While he is loved and honoured as a messenger and will be rejoined on the Day of Judgment, no immediate encounter is possible. In the long interlude of human history between revelation and judgment, only God’s word and the Prophet’s example remain to sustain our connection with the divine.

The debate over the qiyām, therefore, went to the heart of the contestation over the current status of the Prophet, and on whether the believer perceives of him as alive, present, able to hear, respond, and act on his behalf; or as distant and unresponsive.

Our necessarily brief exposition of the accusations of Ibn Manī’ point at some of the examples that he considered to be manifestations of extremism, some of them fitting to the categories listed in the writing of Şâdiq b. İbrāhîm, quoted earlier. Some of these manifestations deserve, according to Wahhābīs, to be denounced as shirk and others as bid’ā. The charge of shirk, the pronouncement of excommunication, as we have seen in the case of Mālikî, could result in serious consequences not only for one’s social status and employment, but also for one’s life. In his Mafāhīm Mālikî made it abundantly clear that in writing the book he did not necessarily seek for his Wahhābī opponents to agree with him. Instead, he argued, given that the textual bases for

[75] Ibn Bāz, “Hukm al-iḥtīfal”, 62. See also note 68 above.

presence in such gatherings, many Sufis employ once again the metaphor of the light, the particles of light spreading in several places at the same time. The most common metaphor, however, is that of the sun, which can be seen by different people at the same time. See also Meier, “Eine auferstehung Mohammeds”, 42.
the beliefs and practices regarding the Prophet have been a matter of debate among scholars for centuries, they should be treated as acceptable scholarly differences, and should not result in excommunication. He was appealing in this manner to a pre-modern, multi-vocal Muslim scholarly tradition. That is the reason that Şāliḥ Āl al-Shaykh dedicated a large section of his refutation of Mafāhīm to making the case for excommunicating deviants who hold extreme views of veneration of the Prophet, underlining an exclusivist Wahhābī salvific theology.\(^77\) Given that for Wahhābīs these differences went to the core of the creed of monotheism, they could not be treated as acceptable differences, but had to be denounced and condemned as blasphemous.

6 The Response of Mālikī to the Accusations of ghuluww

In light of the accusations of ghuluww against Sufis, Mālikī addressed the differentiation between the status of the Creator and creation, and the qualities shared among them, without contradicting divine transcendence. He addressed the charge of extremism in expressions of love and veneration of the Prophet by differentiating between worshipping the Prophet and addressing him with adequate etiquette. To Mālikī there are unique divine qualities of the Creator, and distinctive limitations on all created beings. Among the creation, however, the Prophet holds a lofty status, a sign of divine favour on him. This lofty status was not limited to his earthly life, but persists to the present, in the Prophet’s intermediary existence. Due to this divinely granted lofty status, the Prophet shares on a limited scale some of the divine prerequisites. These considerations, then, inform the manner and extent of praise, love, and veneration for him, not as expression of ghuluww, but as obedience to God and recognition of God’s favour on His most noble creation.

The notion of Christian ghuluww serves Mālikī to set the limits that mark excess. He quoted the verses of Buṣirī, appealing to the Muslims: “Leave aside what the Christians have claimed for their Prophet / Then praise him as you like.” Quoting the ḥadīth already mentioned above, “Do not exaggerate in praising me as the Christians praised the Son of Mary”, Mālikī argued that limitations of praise are set by refraining from ascribing to the Prophet attributes of lordship (rubūbiyya) and divinity (ulūhiyya).\(^78\) Otherwise, Mālikī argued, “it is not blameworthy and it does not constitute disbelief or idolatry to venerate

\(^77\) Shaykh, Hādhihī mafāhīmunā, 172–99.

\(^78\) For an exposition of how these concepts are employed in Wahhābī creed, see Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought”, 39.
him [the Prophet] ... for as long as divine qualities are not attributed to him. On the contrary, this is among the greatest forms of obedience to God and of achieving closeness to Him (min aʿzam al-tāʾat wa-l-qurubāt). He considered honouring the Prophet as honouring the symbols and the entities that God has awarded sanctity to. For example, showing veneration for the Kaʿba – the cubic structure visited by Muslims during the pilgrimage to Mecca – does not constitute worshipping the Kaʿba, but worshiping God through veneration of an object that God has sanctified. To Mālikī, the central argument is expressed in the fact that, as he wrote, “we do not believe in any independent causation besides Him [God], who brings benefit or harm”. Like other human beings, the Prophet has incidental qualities, and he was prone to become sick, which implies human deficiency. Furthermore, Mālikī emphasised the status of the Prophet as a servant (ʿabd) of God.

In opposing the accusation of extremism, Mālikī constructed his argument as one of establishing balance. On the one hand, he confirmed the limitations of the Prophet as a human being, while emphasising the distinguished status of the Prophet among people, on the other. The very human qualities of the Prophet, Mālikī argued, pointed also to his very wondrous nature. This dual depiction is important to Mālikī in order to argue against the description of the Prophet as simply a human being like others. Mālikī cited several verses from the Qurʾān, which recount the opposition of earlier nations to prophets sent by God, questioning their status as divine messengers by arguing that they were human beings just like the people they were sent to. Over-emphasising the human dimension of the Prophet, Mālikī argued, without balancing in one's judgement the humanity of the Prophet with the distinguished qualities that God had awarded him, is from the qualities of the people who refused God's message.

It is worth mentioning here some of these unique Prophetic qualities listed by Mālikī, who provided ḥadīth references in support of each one of them. Many of them are hardly points of contention among Muslims, especially those referring to qualities he was described with during his life. Among them are his truthfulness, having conveyed the divine message (tablīgh), trust, intelligence, being free of loathsome defects (al-salāma min al-ʿuyūb al-munaffira), and his infallibility (al-ʿiṣma). In listing these qualities Mālikī sought to establish the

---

79 Mālikī, Mafāhīm, 21–22.
80 Q 2:30 and 2:32.
81 Mālikī, Mafāhīm, 22–23.
82 Q 11:27. See Gril, “The Prophet in the Qurʾān”.
83 Mālikī, Mafāhīm, 150.
qualitative difference of the Prophet from other common human beings. He pointed, therefore, to a number of additional physical attributes of the Prophet as reported in hadith collections. Among them he quoted reports according to which his disciples would bottle his sweat during his sleep because of its sweet scent, and add it to their perfumes; that his urine and blood – substances normally considered impure in Islamic jurisprudence – were not considered as such in the case of the Prophet; or that he did not cast a shadow from either the sun or the moon.84

Additionally, Mālikī listed: (1) the Prophet told his Companions that he was unlike them, for even when his eyes would sleep, his heart was awake; (2) he had superior perception (hearing and seeing) that others did not; (3) he was handed the keys to the treasures of creation; (4) he told his followers that after his death their salutations will be presented to him, and that each time a Muslim would send him greetings and salutations, an angel would return his soul to him, so that he could return the greetings;85 (5) God has forbidden the earth from decomposing the bodies of the prophets; (6) the Prophet told his Companions that the actions of the Muslims will be presented to him after his passing, and he will praise God for their virtuous actions, and seek His forgiveness for their sins. These qualities were indicative of the Prophet’s lofty status in the eyes of God, which explains why Muslims, Mālikī argued, seek his intercession and seek to draw close to God by virtue of the status of the Prophet.86

Among the distinctive attributes of the Prophet, Mālikī listed those which are shared among the status (maqām) of the Creator and that of the Prophet.87 Mālikī wrote:

Many people have erred in their understanding of some of the aspects that are shared between the two stations. Some have thought that attributing those aspects to the status of the creation constitutes association (shirk) with God, the Sublime. Some have erred in their understanding of some of the distinctive Prophetic characteristics (khaṣāʾiṣ). They measure these qualities with the scale of humanity and, therefore, they judge them to be extreme and to constitute an exaggeration when attributed

84 Mālikī, Mafāhīm, 159–54.
85 This belief is quoted to confirm the notion of the communication with the Prophet after his passing and it is supported by several hadith. Noteworthy, many of these hadith are accepted as authentic by Wahhabī and Salafi scholars. See, for example, Albānī, Ṣaḥīḥ al-targhīb, 2:292–93.
86 Mālikī, Mafāhīm, 22–25.
87 For a discussion of both the human and divine nature of the Prophet, see Radtke, “Ibriziana”, 117–21.
to the Prophet of God, may the peace and blessing of God be upon him. They assume that depicting the Prophet with such attributes constitutes attributing him some of the unique divine qualities [of God]. This constitutes immense ignorance because God, the Sublime, gives to whomever He wills, what He wills, and without any necessary limit; to the contrary, it is from His generosity and bounty to honour and elevate the station of whomever He wishes in order to manifest the receiver’s bounty over others in the creation. There is no contradiction in this with God’s divinity (ulūhiyya).\(^{88}\)

If any human being is described with characteristics associated with the divine, Mālikī continued, that description is in accordance with the human status. Such characteristics are limited and conditioned by the will of God. Therefore, to describe the Prophet by these qualities does not assume his elevation to divine status. Mālikī then listed some of these shared attributes: ability of intercession, knowledge of the unseen, and ability to offer guidance.

According to the Qurʾān, intercession belongs to God, and yet God grants the right of intercession to whomever He wills, specifically to the Prophet.\(^{89}\) Likewise, knowledge of the unseen is God’s prerogative (see point (3) in Ibn Ibrāhīm), and yet, He grants part of it to whomever He so desires.\(^{90}\) In terms of guidance also God both confirms that it is His exclusive prerogative, while affirming having granted part of that ability to the Prophet as well.\(^{91}\) However, while God’s ability to guide is unrestricted and absolute, the ability of the Prophet is limited. This same criteria, Mālikī pointed out, is used to reflect on the occasions in the Qurʾān when the Prophet is described with qualities of mercy or grace, which are ascribed in their absolute sense to God alone, and in their restricted and limited meaning, to the Prophet.\(^{92}\) The shared attributes, therefore, are essentially derived from God, and the Prophet possesses such qualities only in a limited way. An ultimately transcendent God offers access to His blessing through the blessing awarded upon the Prophet, who becomes a manifestation of divine eminence, and this vision is at the core of the practices of seeking blessing at the tomb or through the relics of the Prophet.

\(^{88}\) Mālikī, Mafāḥīm, 26.

\(^{89}\) Qur’an 3:944.

\(^{90}\) Qur’an 27:65 and 72:26–27.

\(^{91}\) Qur’an 28:56 and 42:52.

\(^{92}\) Mālikī, Mafāḥīm, 27.
Textual Destabilisation, Authority, and Change

The representative Wahhābi texts quoted in this chapter, those of Āl al-Shaykh, Ibn Ibrāhīm, and Ibn Manīʿ, identify a key factor leading to ghuluw: reliance on hadīth they consider as either fabricated or weak. The insistence of grounding religious opinions on strictly authenticated texts represents a crucial component of the legacy of the Taymiyyan methodology.93 The arguments of the Wahhābi scholars, therefore, turn the attention to the textual sources that describe the distinctive characteristics of the Prophet. Indeed, the Wahhābi texts that have been quoted here are for the most part lengthy discussions on particular hadīth, and on the scholarly authorities that have either affirmed or denied their authenticity, weakness, or fabrication. Noteworthily, the scholars identified in Wahhābi polemical works as promoters of ghuluw are not simply controversial Sufis, like the Andalusian mystic Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), but also prominent names of the medieval Islamic legal and hadīth scholarly traditions, scholars like Subkī, Suyūṭī, and Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī.

The most extensive collection of the khaṣāʾīṣ of the Prophet that Mālikī referred to in his work is Suyūṭī’s Khaṣāʾīṣ al-kubrā: kifāyat al-ṭālib al-labīb fī khaṣāʾīṣ al-ḥabīb (The great characteristics: What is sufficient for the reasonable student regarding the characteristics of the beloved). One can even argue that the fact that Mālikī focused his discussion on ziyāra, tabarruk, the barzakh, and other related issues on the case of the Prophet was in itself an approach he borrowed from Subkī, from his Shifāʿ al-siqām fī ziyārat khayr al-anām (The cure of ailments through the visit of the best of mankind). It is a polemical work written in response to Ibn Taymiyya’s opposition to ziyāra. As Christopher Taylor has pointed out, the focus on the ziyāra of the Prophet was a tactical decision by Subkī, for it is where he “detected the greatest weakness” in Ibn Taymiyya’s argument.94 Mālikī also addressed in his work only the Prophet, refraining from discussing devotion to other saints. One can see, however, how making the case for the veneration of the Prophet leads to similar considerations applying to other saintly figures. Mālikī, therefore, was echoing the works of some of the most prominent hadīth, legal, and Sufi scholars from the late medieval Islamic tradition.95 Many of these scholars represented the congruence of legal scholarship and Sufism.96

---

94 Subkī, Shifāʿ al-siqām, 2; Taylor, In the Vicinity, 195–96.
95 See Meier, “Eine auferstehung Mohammeds”, 34–35.
In discussing the textual sources that inform Muslim views on the characteristics of the Prophet, Mālikī raised two methodological concerns. First, he challenged the relation between evaluation of the texts and judgement on creed, and, second, he problematised the Wahhābī criteria over the reliability of the texts of this particular genre. Some of the reported Prophetic characteristics, Mālikī argued, are based on authenticated chains of transmission, and others that are not. Scholars, he added, have differed over the criteria of authentication and in their views of particular ḥadīth, but these differences have not translated into judgement over confirmation of faith or disbelief. Mālikī, therefore, argued against employing these disagreements as grounds for excommunication: “For the longest time, the debates among the scholars regarding these topics have revolved around the reports being correct or incorrect, authentic or invalid. The debates have never revolved around disbelief and faith.” In citing the ḥadīth from the Prophet, according to which a scholar (muftahid) receives a reward for his scholarly efforts, even when his ruling is incorrect, and receives double the reward in case his ruling is correct, Mālikī sought to frame the disagreements on grounds of acceptable differences.97

The second argument Mālikī made in regard to the textual sources is that of categorising the ḥadīth about the characteristics of the Prophet in the same category as ḥadīth regarding “virtuous actions” (faḍā’il al-a’māl). Mālikī was appealing to a principle that was widely accepted by medieval scholars, including those that are seen by Wahhābis as eponyms of their school, which accepted the use of weak ḥadīth, particularly on matters related to ethics or encouragement of virtue, using stricter criteria instead on matters of creed.98 Once again, by seeking to categorise these debates in terms of “virtuous actions”, Mālikī was arguing that they are not related to matters of creed, and that they are not discussed in the classical texts of creed. Therefore, scholars can disagree over them, but not declare their opponents as disbelievers over disagreements over their content.

It becomes apparent that the target of Wahhābī attacks was not only Mālikī, but also the scholarly tradition he represented. For a religion that is self-characterised in its perception of scholarly authority in terms of traditionalism, where knowledge – precisely because it is revealed – is primarily inherited, rather than produced, the implications could not be more serious. On the one hand, these debates over the status of the Prophet seem to reflect disruptions over communal boundaries, as seen in the evocation of the threat

97 Mālikī, Mafāhīm, 132.
98 See Brown, Hadith, 191–2.
of excommunication. On the other, the radical Wahhābī review of texts equally points to the disruption of authoritative textual sources.

The Wahhābī grounding of their arguments on the writings of Ibn Taymiyya and Mālikī’s echoing of Suyūṭī, Subkı, and Haytamī points at what William Graham and others have identified as the Muslim predilection to ground opinions in the statements of earlier authorities. It would be a mistake, however, to think of the polemical works presented in this chapter as simply a repetition of the scholarly debates from the late medieval period. For once, there is a total collapse of the power dynamics. As Taylor and others have observed, the views of Ibn Taymiyya were at the time and indeed for most of the Islamic history quite unpopular among scholars. While Subkı was the chief judge of the Mamluk state, Ibn Taymiyya was considered a controversial scholar and was imprisoned several times on charges of heresy. In the contemporary debates over the distinctive characteristics of the Prophet the power relations have been turned upside down. The once controversial Taymiyyan views became increasingly popular in modern times. Additionally, they have been represented in the establishment dogma of the religious institutions of a modern nation-state like the Saudi kingdom, which has supported financially and politically the proliferation of the Taymiyyan scholarly legacy. On the other hand, the once dominant views of Subkı or Suyūṭī and Haytamī have been increasingly challenged in modern times and, as this chapter has attempted to show in the Saudi context, they have been represented by a scholarly tradition struggling to survive, that of the Meccan Sufis. The prominence in modern times of the Taymiyyan legacy constitutes in itself an indication of the transformation of Muslim thought, reflected also in the perceptions about the Prophet.

It would also be a mistake to perceive the two views discussed here as representing simply differences on the authenticity of the Prophetic statements. There are several reports quoted by Mālikī that fulfil strict standards of ḥadīth authenticity, and there are several cases when Wahhābis appear to selectively overlook ḥadīth that would otherwise meet authenticity standards, when they do not comply with their theological positions. What are the implications of the Prophet returning greetings to those who send greetings to him, of his meeting with Moses and praying with previous prophets during his celestial Night Journey, of enjoying Muslims to greet the dead when visiting cemeteries, or the account of the Prophet addressing the dead after the Battle of Badr and confirming that they could listen – to mention but a few? By Muslim

99 Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam”.
100 See Jackson, “Ibn Taymiyya on Trial”; and Taylor, In the Vicinity, 171–172.
scholarly standards these reports are authentic and are accepted as such by Wahhābis.102 Are not these reports indicative of ongoing communication between the inhabitants of both realms?

Despite the Wahhābi claim that the differences between these two scholarly traditions have resulted due to the reliance of their opponents on inauthentic ḥadīth, that is certainly not always the case. Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytami, for example, in his defence of the vision of the Prophet in a state of wakefulness quotes a ḥadīth reported by Bukhārī, and therefore accepted as authentic even by Wahhābis: “Whoever sees me while asleep will see me while awake (yuqaṣa)”. Those who oppose the possibility of the vision consider the state of wakefulness to refer to the Day of Judgement. However, Haytami argued that the Prophet will be seen on the Day of Judgement by those who see him in their sleep and those who do not. Therefore, to him, the logical understanding of the report refers to the vision of the Prophet before the Day of Judgement. The contentions between the two parties, therefore, are not always based on the authenticity of the reports, but on different interpretative approaches.103

It should be additionally noted that presenting these debates as simply a repetition of the arguments made by earlier authorities is only partly correct. Indeed, as it will be shown below, one of the prevalent rhetorical tools that Mālikī used in the Mafāhīm and other works was to point at examples of Wahhābi departure from the views of Ibn Taymiyya. For Mālikī, this meant that Wahhābi views lacked precedent and, therefore, they were not grounded in the pool of classical scholarship. However, these examples are also indicative of the fact that while contemporary scholars seek to ground their arguments in the opinions of earlier authorities, this process is selective. As such, they display the critical evaluations and concerns of modern scholars, not a mere re-rendering of earlier arguments. Indeed, one of the main accusations of traditionalist scholars against Wahhābis is that they have not remained true to their claimed sources, or that they have tampered with them.104 This critical assessment of sources constitutes, therefore, a crucial element of contemporary polemical works. Mālikī’s use of the writings of Ibn Taymiyya, therefore, is illustrative of a larger trend of contemporary traditionalist polemical approach. He quoted Ibn Taymiyya precisely because on the topic of khaṣāʾiṣ

102 On the ḥadīth from the Battle of Badr, Bukhārī, Šahīh, no. 1370, 3475; see also Wensinck, Concordance, 11, 445, 2 (s-r, a-yusirrukum). See also Ibn Bāz, “Bāb al-istiḥbāb ziyārat al-qubūr li-l-rijāl wa-mā yaqūluhubu al-zā’īr”.
103 Haytamī, al-Fatawā al-ḥadīthiyya, 51–13. See also Suyūṭī, Tanwīr al-ḥalak. For a contemporary case for the vision based on the positions of Haytamī and Suyūṭī, see the opinion of the former grand mufti of Egypt, ’Alī Jum’a, “Hal yumkin fi’lan ru’yat al-nabi”.
104 Rifā’ī, Naṣīḥa, 56.
Ibn Taymiyya himself cited *ḥadīth* with chains of transmissions that have not been authenticated according to the strictest standards. Mālikī, therefore, argued that such *ḥadīth* were acceptable to the claimed eponyms of the Wahhābī school, and that Wahhābis had deviated from their own foundational methodology. Mālikī quoted from Ibn Taymiyya’s *al-Fatāwā al-kubrā*:

> It has been narrated that Allah wrote his [the Prophet] name on the Throne, and on the domes, gates, and leaves of paradise. There are many reports narrated that agree with these well-affirmed *ḥadīth* that portray the veneration of his name and elevate his mentioning ...

> The wording of the *ḥadīth* found in the *Musnad* from Maysara al-Fajr was already mentioned before in which it was said to him, may the peace and blessing of God be upon him: “When were you a Prophet?” He responded: “When Adam was between a soul and a body”.

> Other similar *ḥadīth* are quoted by Ibn Taymiyya, which point at the creation of the Prophet before the rest of creation. While this quote is meant to support Mālikī’s discussion on the sources, it addresses also one of the beliefs considered ghuluww by Wahhābis (see point (1) in Ibn Ibrāhīm). Such narrations are used to support additional aspects of this debate on the status and the characteristics of the Prophet. The quote continues:

> I said: “O Messenger of God, when were you a prophet?” He replied: “When God created the earth, ‘Then He turned to the heaven, and fashioned it as seven heavens’ (Q 2:29), and created the Throne; He wrote on the leg of the Throne: ‘Muḥammad, the Messenger of God is the Seal of Prophets’, then God created the garden in which Adam and Eve (*ḥawwā*) dwelled, and He wrote my name on its gates, its leaves, its domes, and its tents at a time when Adam was still between the spirit and the body. When God, the Sublime, breathed life into him, he saw the Throne and saw my name, and God informed him, ‘He is the master of all your descendants’. When the Devil deceived those two [Adam and Eve], they repented and sought intercession to God with my name.”

> The imagery of the name of the Prophet ornamenting paradise is read by Sufis as indicative that veneration for the Prophet is not bound to time. It was celebrated in humanity’s primordial stage and always from thereon in

---

the everlasting garden of paradise. As Mālikī goes back to this hadith in other parts of his book, the report informs other aspects of this debate. The section of the hadith retelling that Adam and Eve sought intercession with God by the name of Muḥammad implies that intercession with the Prophet could be sought not only when he was alive and on the Day of Resurrection – two stages when the intercession of the Prophet is accepted by Wahhābīs – but even when he was not present in body, as it was sought by Adam and Eve before. Consequently, it can be sought in the present day, while the Prophet lives in the intermediary life.107

8 Conclusion: Perceiving the Prophet

To Wahhābī scholars, excessive veneration of the Prophet has led to the divinisation of Muḥammad and the violation of monotheism – Muhammad’s core teaching and legacy. To Sufi scholars like Mālikī, Wahhābī teachings represent an attempt at de-sacralisation of Muḥammad, resulting in leading the community away from the divine blessing represented through the Prophetic presence. This de-sacralisation has been illustrated in attacks against practices of veneration and notions of Prophetic presence, against forms of imagination of the Prophet as manifestation of divine blessing, and against the scholarly tradition built around his metaphysical dimension. The notion of ghuluww, with its grounding in the narrative of the divinisation of Jesus, has formed the bases of Wahhābī teaching on the correct appreciation of the Prophet and the identification of the Sufis (and Shi‘a) as representing a Christian type of deviance. Scholars like Mālikī saw the spread of these Wahhābī teachings as a distortion of the complex and multidimensional persona of the Prophet, and of the scholarly tradition that has informed the various expressions of his veneration. The campaign against Mālikī, the engagement of the highest religious authorities of Saudi Arabia, and the extent of disciplinary actions taken against him are all testimonies of the gravity of the matter for the parties involved.

From the Prophetic qualities listed by scholars like Mālikī in response to the Wahhābīs – be they related to the Prophet’s personality, like his truthfulness, his particular physical traits, like his lack of casting a shadow, or his post-mortem actions, like praying for Muslims in his intermediary life – emerges a vision of the Prophet that is both human and yet imbued with unique and distinctive qualities. He is depicted as both historical and ever-present since primordial

107 Mālikī, Mafāhīm, 62.
times, both of human flesh and of light, both earthly – known as the walking Qur’an – and celestial, with his name ornamenting the gardens of paradise. The destabilisation of this image, as we have pointed out, has highlighted the shifting notions of communal boundaries, a shift marked dramatically by the proliferation of Wahhābi use of excommunication. The destabilisation of that image has been reflected also in a de-evaluation of texts and authoritative references of the Muslim scholarly tradition. The two different ways of thinking of and perceiving the Prophet among contemporary Muslims as highlighted in this chapter are, after all, indicative of the complex legacies of the Prophet in modern times.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Secondary Literature


El-Rouayheb, K. “From Ibn Hajar al-Haytami (d. 1566) to Khayr al-Dīn al-Alusi (d. 1899): Changing Views of Ibn Taymiyya amongst Sunni Islamic Scholars”, in Y. Rapoport


