Jews and Judaism in Classical Sufi Literature

Elisha Russ-Fishbane
New York University (USA)
elisha.russfishbane@nyu.edu

Abstract
This paper addresses a paradox at the heart of the classical Sufi tradition. On the one hand, key Sufi writers express a radical universalism or ‘transconfessionalism’ in their mystical verse. This has led a variety of modern scholars to identify Sufism as an ecumenical and non-dogmatic tradition. On the other hand, in other writings the selfsame authors conduct a vigorous literary polemic and celebrate missionary efforts against unbelievers of all stripes, yet with a notable emphasis on Jewish unbelievers. This article examines the image of Jews and Judaism in key Sufi texts in both Arabic and Persian between the tenth and thirteenth centuries through a variety of motifs, including the construction of the Jew as embodiment of the demonic and as archetypal unbeliever. These images become critical to the literary function of the Jew in classical Sufi texts with little connection to their historical role in Near Eastern societies.

Keywords

I Introductory Remarks
In the hands of her rivals in medieval Christendom and Islam, Judaism often served as a useful foil to their ongoing efforts at self-definition. The fixation on the image of the Jew and the essence of Judaism may offer little of value to the

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study of Jewish culture, but it speaks volumes on the evolution of Christian and Islamic typologies of self and other and the outsized role unwittingly played by its Jewish opponent. More often than not, the latter was constructed as the very antithesis of the defining party, the counterpoint that proves essential to identifying its opposite. This phenomenon has been studied of late by a number of scholars, most notably Susanna Drake and David Nirenberg, in the context of the western (primarily Christian) tradition with interesting, if not altogether surprising, results.1 Drake's and Nirenberg's works are in fact quite distinct—the one a study of a particular image within a limited timeframe, the other a wide-ranging exploration in the history of ideas—but both are fundamentally concerned with what Nirenberg felicitously calls 'the Judaism of thought,' the evolution of habits and systems of conceptualizing Jews or Judaism as objects (rather than as subjects) of thought.

A similar investigation into the Jewish 'imaginary' in the Islamic tradition has not yet received a comparable treatment.2 In the following pages, I take a few preliminary steps in this direction by focusing on one subsection of the medieval Islamic tradition, that of Sufi mysticism in its classical phase from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries. The interplay of Sufism and Judaism is a fascinating chapter in the history of the Islamic Near East. To date it has only been examined from the vantage point of the Jewish encounter with Islamic mysticism, rather than the other way around.3 It is my hope that the present inquiry will spur further research into this critical topic and in the process correct an imbalance in the field.

In the following section, I have selected two examples from Sufi literature that will serve as an overview of the general phenomenon and will therefore serve as a useful point of entry to the matter at hand. The first examines the apparent paradox of a Sufi tradition that is stridently averse to everything Jewish, portraying Jews as inherently evil and satanic, and yet one that, at other times, remains remarkably unencumbered by confessional boundaries (whether

2 Nirenberg devoted one chapter of his book to what he calls 'Jewish enmity in Islam,' focusing on the Quranic and early Islamic tradition. See Anti-Judaism, 135–82.
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Judaism or Islam) in its quest for mystical union. The second considers the distinctive image of the Jew in Sufi sources, first and foremost as archetypal infidel, the ideal counterpart to the sincere Muslim devotee. So powerful was this motif in the Sufi tradition that the term ‘Jew’ and its concomitant abject status was occasionally used by individual Sufis in reference to their own imperfection or abasement. This caricature of the insidious Jewish infidel led in turn to the prominent theme of Jewish conversion to Islam in Sufi lore and, by extension, of Sufi saints working their wonders to bring about the sincere conversion of the most perfidious of Jews. According to texts such as these, only in ceasing to be a Jew, in symbol and reality, can such an unsavory character shed his original nature and be embraced among the faithful.

II The Sufi Paradox: Between Confessional Orthodoxy and Interconfessional Mysticism

A Niẓāmī Ganjavī (d. 605/1209)

In his epic Persian poem, Haft Paykar (‘the seven images’ or ‘the seven spheres’), the Sufi poet, Niẓāmī of Ganja, in modern-day Azerbaijan, tells his ‘tale of the green pavilion,’ in which a pious Muslim sage named Bishr (‘glad tidings’), undertakes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. On his way, he meets a perfidious Jew named Malīkhā (‘rotten’ or ‘corrupt’), who becomes his companion in a circuitous route through the desert. On the verge of expiring from thirst, the travelers discover a lush oasis, with a verdant tree overlooking a well of pure water. After drinking his fill, the Jew was overcome with a desire to immerse himself in the pool so as to cleanse himself (clothing and all) of the desert filth. Intuitively, Bishr recognized the danger of sullying the waters by such an irreverent act, declaring the pool to be sacred and inviolable. Brash and self-confident, Malīkhā was inured to Bishr’s pleas, launching into a lengthy speech on his past triumphs which he proudly attributed to his intellect and wit. He then dives headlong into the pool, only to be immediately and mysteriously swallowed up in its depths. Like much of Niẓāmī’s epic, symbolism is key to deciphering the deeper story at play. It becomes clear early on that the pool is no ordinary pool, most likely a literary echo of the motif of the ‘apostle’s pool’ known from Hadith and Sufi tradition, according to which the prophet’s pure waters discriminate between the faithful and the sinful.4

4 On the motif of the apostle’s pool (سول), found in canonical Hadith collections as well as in the Ḩiyā’ ʿulūm al-dīn of the Sufi author and codifier, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 555/1111),
morality play, perhaps dramatizing the inner struggle of the faithful between pious submission (Bishr) and arrogant self-assertion (Malīkhā).

Yet there is more to the Jew in Niẓāmī’s tale than the danger of pride. According to the poet, Malīkhā embodies the perfidy of all Jews and, for that matter, of Judaism. In the stylized tale, the kind and color of the clothing of the two travelers represent opposing spiritual realms. Islam, the very image of piety and faith, is pitted against Judaism, the epitome of corruption and disbelief. Bishr is dressed in a green mantle, the color of verdant foliage and unblemished virtue, “the color adorning the angels.” The Jew, for his part, is robed in the pale yellow reserved for all Jews according to the religious hierarchy prescribed by Islamic law, tied at the waist with the girdle, which Niẓāmī simply calls “the Jewish sash.” Even in the final moment of his life, the Jew is unable to shed this outer mark of his true self. He sinks to his death still clothed in his yellow robe and sash, bound forever in perfidy. At this point, Niẓāmī’s narrative takes a darker turn. Even more than a symbol of the irredeemable infidel, Malīkhā’s character exhibits an unmistakably diabolical quality. Toward the end of the tale, the poet lifts the veil of symbolism: “On account of his faith, the Jew was possessed of a spiteful nature, a serpent of sorcery, the dragon of the synagogue.” The connection between faith (عَقِيْدَة) and nature (سُرْشَت) in this verse is especially intriguing. What makes Malīkhā a practitioner of sorcery and embodiment of evil is none other than his faith. The reader is reminded of the insidious serpent Malīkhā has come to represent: the satanic synagogue from which every Jew has sprung. As the story bears out (a point to which we shall soon return), the renunciation of the Jewish creed makes even this demonic creature redeemable.

As a rather crude manifestation of anti-Jewish bias, Niẓāmī’s typology is not altogether uncommon in medieval Sufi literature (whether in its Arabic or its Persian variety), as this article will argue through a variety of examples. What is striking, however, is the fact that the same Persian poet was known
in his other poetry for a distinctly transconfessional mystical doctrine, that is to say a vision of the mystical quest that transcends traditional confessional boundaries.\(^8\) In a famous *ghazal* by Niẓāmī, the poet reports a mysterious late night visit to a tavern. After multiple attempts rapping at the door but receiving no answer, the solicitor discovers a man with a drunken appearance to whom he turns to beg admittance to the tavern. The man is identified as a *rind*, a familiar term in Persian Sufi texts for the devotee in a state of mystical intoxication. The *rind* rebukes him by informing him that the tavern is unlike a mosque, open to all Muslims at all times. The tavern only grants entry to those who have first proven themselves worthy of its hallowed company. Those who appear to the outside world as heretics and vagabonds are granted entry. Here it is the spiritual character of the adept that determines his status, no matter the confessional community to which he belongs. “Every [group of people] from throughout the world find themselves in this tavern—believers, Armenians, Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews.”\(^9\)

This ostensibly inclusive mysticism, the Sufi version of what the late Frithjof Schuon once called the “transcendent unity of religions,”\(^10\) stands in stark contrast to the vilification of the satanic Jew in the *Haft paykar*. Yet it, too, is well represented in medieval Sufi texts. Not infrequently, one finds the two opposing poles—‘orthodox’ hierarchy and ‘unorthodox’ egalitarianism—invoked by the same author in different works. This paradox of opposing images of non-Muslims within the Sufi tradition—even within different works of the same Sufi author—is reinforced by the second example to which we now turn.

**B  Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Balkhī (d. 672/1273)**

The phenomenon of the transconfessional mystic doubling as an interconfessional polemicist, as improbable as it may appear, is well attested in the celebrated Persian poet and mystic, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Balkhī, better known to the West simply as Rumi.\(^11\) The Jew in Rumi’s verse becomes at times the

\(^8\) It is worth clarifying that my use of the terms, ‘confessional’ and ‘transconfessional’ (and later, ‘interconfessional’), is not meant to signal the primacy of the confessional (i.e. doctrinal) aspect of Islam or Judaism over their practical components. It is rather intended as a generic reference to the boundaries between one religion and another. ‘Confessional’ in this sense refers to that which adheres to one religion exclusively, as opposed to that which transcends religious distinctions or boundaries.


\(^11\) I do not mean to imply that Rumi, or any of the Sufi authors examined in this paper for that matter, engaged in overt religious polemic. I adhere in this case to a broader
archetypal symbol of the infidel in conflict with God’s faithful. “God sent the prophets and their scriptures below,” declares the poet, “in order to separate the wheat from the chaff. Infidel and faithful, Muslim and Jew, were all as one before the prophets came.” The infidel Jew is “overweening and blind to what lies before him, like the moon of truth concealed by clouds.” As in medieval Christian polemic, the Jew was not only in error, but willfully so, blinding others to the truth by all manner of wily stratagems.

At other times, the Jew is symbolic of demonic forces. In the first extended tale of Rumi’s Masnavī, his celebrated collection of rhymed couplets, there is an account of a Jewish tyrant and his diabolical vizier and their repeated attempts to oppress and massacre the prophet Jesus and his faithful followers (presumably an allusion to Herod and his massacre of the innocents). Rumi names this Jewish tyrant King Aḥwal (‘cross-eyed’), a form of distorted vision well attested in medieval Islamic texts with a sinister connotation. Yet the motif of seeing double is also a poetic nod to a dominant trope in the Quran and early Islamic tradition, according to which all genuine prophets are said to bear an identical message, even if their divine mission is specific to their time and place. Those who do not recognize the unitary message of God’s messengers, according to the poet, see double when in fact it is one. For Rumi, it was axiomatic that each prophet, while burdened with a unique task, bore the same fundamental message and was identical in the eyes of God (even if their divine revelations, with the exception of Muhammad, were ultimately

conception of interfaith polemic articulated by Israel Yuval in his Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, tr. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 27: “[T]he field of polemics is far broader than the specific literary genre bearing that name. If we tune our ears to listening to more hidden tones, rustlings of subtle hints intended to counter the claims of ‘heretics’ will reach our ears.” I would contend that the anti-Jewish trope in Sufi literature is far less subtle than this quote might suggest, although it is still far from full-blown polemic.


On attitudes to cross-eyed vision in late medieval Islamic texts, see Kristina Richardson, Difference and Disability in the Medieval Islamic World: Blighted Bodies (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 25–6, 27.
corrupted by their respective communities). Rumi’s use of the term *ahwal* to describe the condition of seeing double was already employed by Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (d. 620/1223), Rumi’s nearest predecessor and most likely influence in the art of Persian Sufi verse.

In Rumi’s telling, the Jewish tyrant is called ‘cross-eyed’ for failing to properly recognize or ‘see’ Jesus as a genuine prophet and for not identifying his prophetic spirit as the Muhammadan light that, according to Sufi doctrine, manifested itself in Moses and Jesus and ultimately in Muhammad himself. Rather than see one essential truth, the king sees double. Moses and Jesus have become, in his poor eyesight, two separate entities. As he frequently did throughout his epic, Rumi alternated between storyteller and interpreter of his tale. “Indignation and desire,” explains the poet, “make a man cross-eyed and corrupt his noble spirit ... Out of Jewish hatred, the king became hopelessly cross-eyed [and] slew a hundred thousand innocent believers, [claiming] ‘I am the protector and patron of the religion of Moses.’” Fury may corrupt the soul but, in Rumi’s telling, fury has a Jewish face. The king is spurred to act by what the poet simply calls “Jewish hatred” and one is left to wonder whether such hatred is meant to be characteristic of Jews or of the “religion of Moses” to which they adhere.

The Jewish tyrant and his vizier devise the most dastardly plans to annihilate the faithful in cold blood, in what the poet calls the typically Jewish murderous tendency. When this fails, the Jewish vizier develops a sinister plan to divide the Christian community and inject errors and contradictions into

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16 Note Rumi’s formulation in Nicholson, *Mathnawí*, vol. 1, book 1, l. 3086: “Every prophet and every saint has [his own] path, but each one leads to God—all are one.”


19 Elsewhere, Rumi also employed the motif of double vision to underscore his notion of the unity of the divine beloved. See Rumi, *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā Dīvān-i Kabîr*, ed. Badiʾ al-Zamān-i Furūzānfar (Tehran: Dānishgāh-i Tihrān, 1957), vol. 8, no. 29, esp. l. 2: “The beloved woman is but a pretext; the beloved is God. Whoever believes they are two entities is but a Jew or a Christian.”

20 See Nicholson ed., *Mathnawí*, 1, ll. 333–4, 337–8, and esp. l. 499: “All around is unity; just cross-eyed wretches see duality!”

21 See the vizier’s duplicitous remarks ibid., l. 354, in which he feigns adherence to Jesus and persecution at the hand of the king: “Had the spirit of Jesus not been my aid, [the king] would have, in the Jewish manner, torn me to pieces.”
Jesus’ gospel, a convenient explanation for how the prophet’s message was so quickly and utterly corrupted in what became the separate Gospel texts. In Rumi’s version, the vizier secretly appointed each of the twelve apostles as his successor, each with a separate gospel, sowing confusion in the Christian community: “To each he gave one scroll, [but] the contents of each was contrary to every other ... [T]heir religion and law fell into disarray on account of the falsified scrolls.”

The role of the Jewish deceiver in Rumi’s verse becomes a seamless symbol for the antichrist, known as the dajjāl, or ‘deceiver’, in Arabic and Persian. As Michael Barry has recently shown, the character of the dajjāl is frequently depicted as cross-eyed (aḥwal) and duplicitous in Sufi literature. Rumi leaves little room for ambiguity, describing the Jewish vizier and his entire people, “the cruel, oppressive Jews,” as “the cross-eyed devil within.” As running commentator on his own verse, Rumi thus confirms the allegorical nature of the tale, even as he simultaneously seeks to provide a quasi-historical explanation for the intentional corruption (taḥrīf) of the prophetic message of Jesus at the hands of the diabolical Jew.

The story of the king and his vizier is then followed by a second tale of another (also anonymous) Jewish king and his plot to massacre the faithful followers of Jesus (i.e. those not corrupted by the machinations of the vizier). The second king erects an idol next to a fiery inferno and orders all his subjects to bow before the idol or be cast into the fire. Rumi once again interrupts his tale to provide the key to unlocking the allegory: “In as much as he did not give due punishment to this idol of the self (بُطِن نفس), from the idol of self the other idol was born.” The physical idol devised by the Jew is, according to Rumi, an outer manifestation of the worship of ego, and the fire beside it becomes, by

22 See ibid., ll. 659 and 736.
23 On the antichrist in Islamic tradition, see David Cook, “Dajjāl,” in Encyclopaedia of Islam Three.
24 See Barry, “Jews,” 876–82.
26 On the polemic of taḥrīf vis-à-vis the Gospel, see David Thomas, “Muslim Conception of Gospel,” in Encyclopaedia of Islam Three, and Ryan Schaffner, “The Bible through a Qur’ānic Filter: Scripture Falsification (Tahrīf) in 8th- and 9th-Century Muslim Disputational Literature” (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2016).
27 This narrative has distinct echoes of Nimrod and Nebuchadnezzar, biblical figures not explicitly mentioned in the Quran, although alluded to in later Islamic literature. The precise sources that may have influenced Rumi’s rendition remain to be determined, although it is clear that he has creatively adapted both characters in his retelling.
28 Ibid., l. 771.
implication, a concretization of the voluntary mortification of the self, that is the nullification of ego before the unity of God.

In the ensuing tale, a child is thrown into the blaze in an effort to compel his mother to bow to the idol. Before she can comply, the son speaks to his mother miraculously from the flames: “Come in, mother, I am happy here, although in appearance I am in the midst of the fire ... The fire is a veil intended to conceal ... Come in, mother, and behold the evidence of the truth, so that you may see the delight of Truth’s elect.” The Jew is here deceiver par excellence in a world of outer illusion, who has misjudged the destructive force of the flames. The fire does indeed destroy the life of the individual: for the saint such a death entails true life, for the king it is nothing but a consuming cauldron. In Rumi’s conclusion of the tale, the divine recompense is not limited to the Jewish king but is visited upon all the Jews. The punishment, in the words of the poet, was perfectly measured: “Following this, a fire blazed forty cubits high, formed a ring, and burnt those Jews. In their root, they originated from fire; they returned in their demise to their very root. That sect was born of fire; the path of particulars is toward the universal. They were but fire to ignite the faithful; their fire consumed itself like deadwood.”

If Rumi’s epic verse drips with anti-Jewish rancor, this is but half the legacy he left his Sufi readership. Much like Niẓāmī, Rumi composed his share of ‘heterodox’ verse, far removed from the narratives that demonized Jews as a lesson for the faithful. He, too, has been celebrated for his ability to surpass traditional confessional boundaries in his quest for transcendent truth. This half of Rumi’s legacy is powerfully expressed in the famous lines from his dīvān dedicated to his mystical mentor, Shams-i Tabrīz: “What can be done, O Muslims? For I do not recognize my own self. I am neither Christian nor Jew nor Zoroastrian nor Muslim ... Let my place be the Placeless, let my trace be the Traceless. No more body nor soul, for I am of the Soul of souls.” This image of the Sufi shaykh was movingly portrayed by Rumi’s first hagiographers, beginning with his eldest

29 Ibid., ll. 786–8. ‘Truth’ appears twice in this verse, each in a different valence. Contrary to Nicholson’s rendering (vol. 2, 45), I read the first as a reference to demonstrable truth (برهان حق), the other a use of Truth as a name for God in Sufi (as well as philosophical) terminology (خاصّان حق).
30 Ibid., ll. 873–5.
31 Reynold Nicholson, Selected Poems from the Dīvāni Shamsi Tabrīz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 124–5, no. 31, ll. 1 and 6. Like Nicholson, I translate لَا مَكَان as Placeless and Traceless respectively (capitalized), understanding both as allusions to God. But I have rendered جَانِ چَانَائِر literally, also as an allusion to God, as compared with Nicholson’s ‘soul of the Beloved.’ While there is no scholarly consensus on the authenticity of this poem, the transconfessional theme is attested in other
son, Sulṭān Valad (d. 712/1312). In the latter’s own maṣnavī masterpiece, variously known as *Ibtedānāma* or *Valad-nāma*, he relates the life of his grandfather and father and other prominent figures in the development of the nascent Mevlevi order. Sulṭān Valad describes a remarkable scene of the widespread mourning during his father’s funeral procession in Konya in 672/1273.

> Then, from this filthy, foul world, our master passed on …
> The people of the town, young and old, all as one wailed and mourned and sighed.
> The villagers, too, Greeks and Turks alike, tore their collars in pain at his loss …,
> People of every religion were faithful to him,
> Followers of every faith declared their deep love for him,
> The Christians venerated him, the Jews saw him as one of their own,
> The adherents of Jesus said, “He is our Jesus!”
> And the adherents of Moses said, “He is our Moses!”

Some eighty years after Rumi’s demise, the Persian hagiographer, Shams al-Din al-Aflākī, included a review of the life and death of the Sufi saint in his *Manāqib al-ʿārifīn* (‘Exploits of the Gnostics’). Building upon Sulṭān Valad’s poetic account, Aflākī noted that crowds from a variety of religions and ethnicities converged upon Rumi’s funeral procession, including Christians, Jews, Greeks, Arabs, and Turks, “each one according to the custom of its own scriptures,” as they read verses from the Psalms, the Torah, declaring that Rumi was “the true Moses, the true Jesus, and [the essence of] all the prophets.” Elsewhere, Aflākī recorded that among Rumi’s greatest miracles was the fact that he was so venerated by people of all faiths.

The image of the tolerant and ‘transconfessional’ Sufi saint continues to reverberate in modern scholarship on Rumi. One recent writer extols the cases of ‘intoxicated’ verse in Rumi’s oeuvre. See Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *Kulliyāt-i Shams yā Dīvān-i Kabīr*, vol. 2, no. 790, 142, l. 8271.

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33 On Aflākī and his hagiographical work, see Lewis, *Rumi*, 249–53.


35 See ibid., 1:519.

36 For a good overview of this phenomenon in Rumi scholarship, see Lewis, *Rumi*, 528–63.
message of tolerance and religious diversity in Rumi’s writings, suggesting that “Rumi’s message is about peaceful coexistence and respect for the multiplicity of human spiritual experiences.”37 As an antidote to the perceived doctrinal rigidity of confessional Islam, modern scholars have discovered in Rumi and like-minded Sufi mystics a message of universality and pluralism. While this message serves a useful purpose for those seeking to accommodate Islamic tradition to modern sensibilities, it tends to miss the complexity and context of the Sufi tradition.

How, then, are we to account for this disparity in the sources? I propose the key is to be found not in doctrinal hairsplitting but in identifying the literary genre unique to each source. In the case of Niẓāmi and Rumi, the poetry falls along two main lines: epic narrative verse, on the one hand, and ecstatic disconnected utterance, on the other. While the epic form remains faithful to some of the more radical ideals of ecstatic Sufism, it is also conventionally orthodox in its doctrinal stance. The second genre, by contrast, was a form of intoxicated speech that was typically unrestrained by orthodox sentiment, one used to great (and occasionally controversial) effect by generations of Sufi masters.

As Rumi put it at the end of the poem cited above in which he confesses no confession: “O Shamsi Tabriz, I am so intoxicated in this world that, but for drunkenness and revelry, I have no tale to tell.”38 Without denying the transconfessional content of these verses, it would be wrong, in my view, to read them as an opposing doctrinal position. Such ecstatic testimonials are in fact speaking not to the idea of religious pluralism but to the experience of mystical transcendence. We must not overlook the fact that the ecstatic utterances of Niẓāmi and Rumi appear in lyrical verse depicting the altered state of intoxication (sukr), in which traditional barriers of religious commitment and even individual consciousness are overcome and absorbed in divine unity. They should not be confused with polemical discourse by the very same mystics, which reinforce and often exaggerate religious differences rather than the other way around.

38 See Nicholson, Selected Poems from the Dīvānī Shamsi Tabrīz, 126–7, no. 31, l. 12.
III Imagining the Jew in Sufi Literature

A systematic study examining the image of the non-Muslim in Sufi literature, and the Jew in particular, is a major scholarly desideratum. The present essay is a preliminary step in that direction and does not pretend to do full justice to such a rich and wide-ranging topic in a single article. In what follows, I will call attention to two independent but ultimately interconnected images of the Jew in classical Sufi sources. The first depicts the Jew as the quintessential infidel, the epitome of the abject unbeliever worthy of disdain but occasionally a symbol of humility in the lexicon and praxis of medieval Sufism. The second image, of the miraculous convert to Islam, derives its force from the first. If the Jew in his original state is an abject infidel, it is precisely in contact with Sufi saints, known for their ability to work wonders (karāmāt), that Jews are said to recognize the one true faith. In this respect, Sufi conversion tales, appearing with some frequency in the Arabic hagiographical tradition, epitomize the miraculous powers by which Sufi saints were often renowned.

This aspect of the miraculous conversion and transformation of the original state of the Jew is perfectly represented in the ‘tale of the green pavilion’ by Nizāmī, the story related at the outset of this study. In the tale, after the perfidious Malīkhā sinks to his death in the well of living waters, the pious Bishr fishes the Jew out and immediately proceeds to Jerusalem to return the body and clothing of the deceased to the latter’s widowed wife. In miraculous fashion, the wife of the Jew displays no emotion over the death of her deceased husband. Instead she expresses her desire to convert to Islam on the spot and marry the pious Muslim standing at her door. Presented providentially with the woman of his dreams (the romantic heart of the story), Bishr forthwith replaces the yellow robe and matching sash of her former community with the green garments permitted the true believer. “[Bishr] chanted a spell to protect himself from the evil eye and freed his queen from her Jewish state, revealing the moon from its [state of] eclipse. He cleansed her silky yellow sash, [resembling] a lily petal budding from a weed ..., and adorned her with a green robe like an angel.”

Even when the conversion is not described in miraculous fashion, it is often attributed to the supreme piety of the saint. In his hagiography of Rumi, for example, Shams al-Dīn al-Aflākī noted on multiple occasions how love for the Sufi master led many thousands of infidels in Konya to convert to Islam over the course of his lifetime. We shall examine each of these

motifs, the archetypal unbeliever and the archetypal convert, in the sections that follow.

A The Jew as Archetypal Other and Focus of Spiritual Praxis

The first image before us, that of the Jew as archetypal unbeliever, appears in a number of guises. Two examples will suffice to illustrate the motif. In his epic poem on asceticism, known as the *Ilāh-i nāmeh* or 'Book of God,' Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār tells of a pious sage named Abū Bakr Warrāq who refused to allow himself to be buried in the Muslim cemetery, acknowledging that he had not attained the rank of true believer. At the same time, the sage confesses, he cannot allow himself to be buried among the Jews, for neither was he a pure unbeliever. “My faith is weak—I do not wish to be [to be buried] among the Muslims. Seeing as I do not possess the light of the Muslims, what am I to do in the cemetery of the faithful? Yet neither do I wish to be a companion of the Jews, for the apostle is not among them. My plot of land shall be between the two cemeteries, for alas it is true that I do not belong neither to these nor to those ...”

In his hagiographical masterpiece, *Taẕkirat al-awliyāʾ* ('Recollection of the Pious'), ‘Aṭṭār included the story of Mālik-i Dīnār, a renowned Sufi preacher active in eighth-century Basra, who finds himself mistaken for a Jew and is about to be beaten with a stick by an angry man. In the story, the man’s son had confused Mālik with a Jew when the saint was found in a mosque with a handful of dates and suspected him of being Jewish. The custom among the faithful in the city was to avoid eating food during the day, so the child naturally believed Mālik was a Jew (presumably the most visible minority in the city) and asked his father what a Jew was doing in the mosque. The father flew into a rage at the Jew and was about to beat the intruder before he recognized him and immediately fell at his feet to beg forgiveness. Meanwhile, Mālik, who had nearly given into his temptation to eat dates (for which Basra was duly famous, a temptation he had suppressed until that moment), realized immediately that this was a divine chastisement directed at him for giving into his temptations. Reassuring the man for his mistake, the saint insisted that the boy was but an instrument of “the tongue of the Hidden Reality” (نوده عن وردن). The mistaken identity was a message of his own insincere faith and, as such, he was providentially identified as a Jew, the very essence of faithlessness. Were it not for the vilification initiated by this youth, Mālik confessed, he would not

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41 See Hellmut Ritter ed., *Ilahi-Name, die Gespräche des Königs mit Seinen sechs Söhnen; eine mystische Dichtung* (Istanbul: Staatsdruckerei, 1940), 279, ll. 13–16 (discourse 17, story 9).
have been spurred to repent. Rather, he says, “my name would have become synonymous with unbelief.”

In both tales, the Jew epitomizes the stigma of unbelief, the perfect counterpoint to the idealized piety of the Muslim community. The Muslim sage of the first tale attests that he has not attained the rank of the true faithful, yet neither does he belong with those who are infidels to their very core. The shaykh in the second tale views the case of mistaken identity as a divine call to root out any trace of unbelief in his heart. To be a Jew, in these and other stories of this type, is to be a degenerate infidel, little better than a dog. As ʿAṭṭār related in the name of Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (d. 335/946): “O God, hand this world and the other world over to me so that I may make a morsel from this world and throw it into a dog’s mouth, and make a morsel from the other world and put it into a Jew’s mouth, for both are veils before the true goal.” Spurning reward in this world and the next is a familiar trope in the Sufi hagiographical tradition. For the sincere adept, the one is unworthy of one’s attention, the other unworthy of one’s aspiration. In this case, the Jew strives for heavenly reward, not for heaven but for the reward. He is at once the perfect foil to the sincere Sufi and the symbol of spiritual corruption.

The Jew in these sources serves the role of quintessential other, infidel to the true believer and self-infatuated to the selfless devotee. He is also, by virtue of his abject state, synonymous with debasement. In another tradition attributed to Shiblī, this one appearing in the Kashf al-asrār (‘Revelation of Mysteries’) of the twelfth-century mystic, Abū l-Faḍl Maybudī, we read of the experience of ‘expansion’ or love of God that is the counterpoint to ‘contraction’ or awe. According to Maybudī, when Shiblī was in the state of mystical expansion, in proximity to God, he would declare, “Where are the heavens and the earth that I may carry them upon my eyelashes?” And when in the opposing state of contraction, filled with the fear of God, he would remark, “My abasement exceeds (lit. suspends or annuls) the abasement of the Jews (دَلِّي عَقْلَ ذَلِّلَ الْيَهُودِ)”. Much as the Sufi is taught to surpass the poor in poverty, Shiblī teaches his followers to eclipse the Jews in humiliation. He has, in

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43 Ibid., Part II, 165.


45 The association of the Jews with debasement has its routes in the Qur’an (7:152), in which the children of Israel were punished with divine wrath and debasement (ذَلَّلُ) in this life for the sin of the golden calf.
the process, transformed the humiliation of the Jews from a legal formality to a symbolic identity, against which pious adepts may judge the extent of their own self-abasement.

In perhaps the most interesting application of the image of the debased infidel, ‘Aṭṭār relates numerous episodes of Sufi masters adopting the trappings of the unbeliever as antidote to the vice of ego and pride. A series of stories related by ‘Aṭṭār of Bāyāzīd Bistāmī (d. ca. 233/847) and Junayd of Baghdad (d. 298/910) suggest that a number of Sufi masters adopted the wearing of the infidel sash, known as the zunnār, as a spiritual exercise to cultivate humility.46 It is related of Bāyāzīd that he would tie such a sash upon his waist before each prayer.47 Elsewhere he was said to don the sash as a reminder of his lack of piety. “Bāyāzīd said, ‘I was overcome with doubt as to the sincerity of my devotion. I said, ‘I shall go to the store and buy an infidel sash to tie around my waist.’”48 In this way, Bāyāzīd would add sash upon sash for every breach of pure devotion, at one point bearing as many as seventy sashes around his waist, and would untie one each time he reached the state of sincerity.49

In a separate tradition, also related by ‘Aṭṭār but in his Ilāh-i nāma, a certain Sufi devotee proclaimed his desire to pay the jizya (or jizyat in Persian), the poll tax owed by the ahl al-dhimma (tolerated religious minorities) to their Muslim rulers. The Sufi declares his extreme humility by confessing that he ought to pay the Jews the jizya, rather than the other way around. “I know myself to be so full of shame in this world that it would be more fitting for one hundred of the most downtrodden Jews to seek the jizyat from me.”50 Similar to the reuse of the infidel sash as an instrument of personal piety, the very institution of the dhimma, which traditionally dramatizes the humiliation of Jew and other infidels, has been reworked in this anecdote as a means of internalizing sincere humility in the devotee. In the typology of the Jew as archetypal other, the word ‘Jew’ has become synonymous with ‘infidel,’ represented (as in other parallel passages) by the dog, an animal with a range of associations in the Islamic tradition, both positive and negative.51 While it is unclear that the jizya, like

46 On the sash and non-Muslim attire in general, see above, n. 6. On the use of the zunnār as a symbol of inner devotion in Persian Sufism, see Harry Neale, “The Zoroastrian in ‘Aṭṭār’s Taḏkira’t-Awliyā’,” Middle Eastern Literatures 12 (2009), 145–6.
48 Ibid., 146.
49 See ibid., 159.
51 On the image of the dog in Sufi literature, see Javad Nurbakhsh, Dogs from a Sufi Point of View, tr. Terry Graham (London: Khaniqahi-Nimatullahi Publications, 1989), and Nathan Hofer, “Dogs in Medieval Egyptian Sufi Literature,” in Our Dogs, Our Selves: Dogs in
the infidel sash, was ever adapted as a spiritual exercise in mystical praxis, it is clear that the outer trappings of Jewish subjugation were creatively recast as concrete symbols of utter humility for the sincere devotee.

B  Mystical Missionaries

The image of the Jew as archetype helps put the numerous conversion tales in Sufi literature in proper perspective. The tales take a number of forms. In one type, prevalent in ‘Aṭṭār’s Ṭaẕkirat al-awliyāʾ, a villainous Jew hails abuse upon Mālik-i Dīnār, only to be overcome by the latter’s forbearance and piety. After repeated attempts to rile the Sufi saint, the Jew asks him how he managed to overcome his anger in the face of such abuse. Mālik calmly replies that it is the command of the Hidden in the verse (Quran, 3.134), “[God loves ...] those who restrain [their] anger ...” Overwhelmed by the character of the saint and convinced of the truth of his religion, “the Jew became a Muslim on the spot.”52 Frequently the Jew in these tales is devious, concealing his intentions and his true identity, and immediately converts upon discovery of the shaykh’s knowledge of the truth. In one such case, which appears in different versions in a number of hagiographical texts, a Jew goes undetected in a circle of Sufi devotees until the master secretly reveals the truth of the newcomer’s true identity to his followers. When the Jew asks the disciples about the master’s words, they are too ashamed to tell him, but finally confessed that the shaykh suspected him of being a Jew. Upon hearing this, the Jew immediately prostrated himself before the master and, without further ado, embraced Islam then and there. The narrator concludes by adding that the Jew went on to become a great Sufi shaykh, with a devoted following of his own.53

In a variety of cases of this type, the conversion of the Jew is depicted as the inevitable and instantaneous reaction to the saintly character of the Sufi shaykh. Such a total transformation confirms not only the reader’s expectations of the triumph of Islam, but more importantly provides evidence to

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52 See Ṭadhkirat al-auliyāʾ, ed. Nicholson, Part 1, 44. Compare the story of the Jew who plots against the Muslims until he witnesses a miracle performed by Fuḍail ibn ‘Ayāḍ (ninth-century ascetic) and proclaims his readiness to convert to Islam on the spot. See ibid., 76.

53 The earliest appearance of this tale appears in Qushayrī, al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya, ed. A. Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd bin al-Sharīf (Cairo: n.pub., n.d.), 2:490.
non-devotees of the veracity of the Sufi saint. The key to the interpretation of these tales is in the fact that the spontaneous metamorphosis of the infidel Jew-turned-believer constitutes one of the miracles of the Sufi saint, no less than the latter’s ability to detect the truth behind the Jew’s vain effort to deceive him. Sufi hagiographies of the classical period often depict the saint, or ‘friend of God’ (wālī Allāh), as capable of performing supernatural wonders (karāmāt and āyāt), including possession of near-prophetic insight (firāsa) to detect that which is concealed from the naked eye.54 The miraculous character of the conversion tale is so central to the hagiographical tradition that, in some versions, it is the Jew who directly beseeches the Sufi to produce a miracle worthy of his conversion. “Show me a miracle,” a Jew reportedly demanded of Ibrāhīm al-Ajurrī, “that would make me become a Muslim!”55

The scholarly conundrum regarding the nature and scope of Sufi missionary activity in the medieval period is an old one and many questions remain unanswered. Over one hundred and twenty years ago, Ignaz Goldziher published a biographical account of the thirteenth-century Sufi shaykh, Abū ‘Ali b. Hūd (d. 699/1300), of Andalusian origin though a resident of Damascus toward the end of the thirteenth century, who was reportedly responsible for numerous Jewish conversions to Islam under his direction.56 Nearly a century later, Joel Kraemer, reexamining the evidence, wondered how it could be that a true adherent to Sufi ‘interconfessionalism’ such as Ibn Hūd could have been such a zealous missionary for his own creed. His resolution of the quandary was to suggest that Ibn Hūd, like many Sufis, philosophers, and Shiites in general, adopted a practice of dissimulation, known as taqīya, such that the mystic’s

54 Denis Gril has argued that the performance of miracles is not depicted as a criterion for Sufi sainthood, but is nonetheless one of its most prominent features. See his “Le miracle en islam, critère de sainteté?” in Saints orientaux, ed. Denise Aigle (Paris: De Boccard, 1995), 69–81, esp. 77. See also Bernd Radtke’s study of the earliest exposition of miracles and sainthood in the writings of Tirmidhī, “Al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī on Miracles,” in Miracle et Karāma, ed. Aigle, 287–98, esp. 296, in which he argues that Tirmidhī affirmed the miracles of the saints without contending that they constitute a “proof” of the latter, any more than do for prophecy. In the same volume, Éric Geoffroy stresses the diverse views of Sufi writers on miracles, with some experiencing them externally and others only internally and not at all the discretion of the saint. He depicts the role of miracles as unique to the situation and character of each saint. See idem, “Attitudes contrastées des mystiques musulmans face au miracle,” in Miracle et Karāma, ed. Aigle, 301–16, esp. 314.

55 Qushayrī, Risāla, 2:686.

missionary activity was but an outer show to conceal his more authentic and radical doctrine of universalism. Sufis such as Ibn Hūd, argued Kraemer, “were accordingly inclined both to uphold the religious law and devotion to Islam and to profess interconfessional universalism.”

Based on the typology of the corrupt, and occasionally converted, Jew in classical Sufi sources, I propose a fresh approach to the question of Sufi missionary activity during the medieval period. In my view, it is impossible to separate the conversion tales from the literary (and mystical) typology of the Jew, and from the literary genre known as ‘miracles of the saints’ (kārāmāt al-auliyā’) in particular. Biographical narratives such as those of Ibn Hūd and his conversion of numerous Damascene Jews may indeed have a foundation in fact, although the evidence rests on shaky ground, with not all versions of the life of the saint containing the anecdote in question.

But seen within the larger context of Sufi conversion tales, there is good reason for healthy skepticism on the matter. In the final analysis, the historical phenomenon of Jewish conversion to Islam, not to mention the precise role of Sufism as a facilitator in that process, is impossible to gauge with any degree of accuracy. From the sources at our disposal, Sufi conversion tales speak not to any meaningful historical dynamic but to a typological drama of an imaginary other and the spiritual annihilation and sublimation of the latter through the agency of the Sufi saint. It is a literary genre with predictable characters and clearly defined

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58 See ibid., 67, in reference to the version of his life told by Ibn al-ʿImād.
topoi that speak to the triumph of the sacred over the forces of evil and unbelief. Its ultimate expression finds the infidel pleading with the Sufi for a path to his own conversion. To the examples already adduced, we may offer one final anecdote. Speaking to his Jewish physician, a Sufi devotee reportedly declared, “What a fine man you would be if only you weren't Jewish!” Overcome by the truth behind the Sufi’s clairvoyant remark, the Jew humbly responded: “Pray for healing for yourself and religious guidance for me!”

IV Conclusions and Future Directions

The examples discussed in this essay, though the tip of the iceberg, are representative of the imaginary landscape occupied by Jews in the medieval Sufi tradition. While the image of the Jew is remarkably malleable in this literature, it consistently serves to define the archetype of unbelief, pride, vanity—that is, anything the ideal Muslim or Sufi is not. At times, the Jew is the embodiment of vein and often ruthless deceit, and is therefore closely aligned with diabolical forces. The triumph of the sacred, according to the tradition’s internal logic, requires that these forces be nullified in some fashion, whether by a physical demise (as in the tale of the Jews consumed by their own hellish blaze) or by a spiritual annihilation in the form of conversion. In the story of the green pavilion told by Niẓāmī, we see both motifs: Malīkhā is consumed in his own vanity and his wife becomes a willing convert. In almost all cases I have found, the conversion of the Jew is a semi-miraculous occurrence. According to my reading of the motif, the essential nature of the Jew requires such a supernatural reversal. The logic is fairly straightforward. If the Jew (as ideal type) is the epitome of unbelief, the ultimate feat of the Sufi is to transform any given Jew into a pious believer. The variety of forms this narrative takes and the fact that it is attested in Arabic and Persian sources reinforce how deeply ensconced it was in the stock and trade of the symbolic lexicon of Sufism.

The fact that the Jew functions in the Sufi material in a highly stylized and often symbolic capacity means that we need not search for a specific historical breakdown in Muslim-Jewish relations to explain what is at heart a literary phenomenon. Historical causation is, in my view, entirely beside the point. Versions of the anti-Jewish motif appear in such diverse contexts as the writings of a tenth-century Sufi master from Baghdad (when the Jewish community was well established in the city and highly accepting of its intellectual...

60 Qushayrī, Risāla, 2:500.
and spiritual currents) and the poetry of a thirteenth-century saint from Konya (renowned by his contemporaries for his positive relations with members of other faiths). Rather than look for a specific historical explanation for the negative image of the Jew, it is in the uniquely literary context of what Nirenberg calls the ‘Judaism of thought’ (or, more frequently, the ‘Jews of thought’), that we may find the key to unlocking its religious functions within the Sufi tradition.61 And just as we must be cautious in reading the conversionary tales as witnesses to historical events, we should not interpret the diabolical image of the Jew as a reflection of a downturn in interfaith relations. At no point in the Middle Ages do we find a Near Eastern parallel to the libels leveled against Jews in western Christendom or ritualized violence against the Jewish community in reaction to such anti-Jewish libels.62

The literary context may also help explain the paradox we addressed at the outset of this essay. It is most intriguing that we find utterances of radical transconfessionalism made by the same Sufi authors who were central to the construction of an anti-Jewish typology in their other works. The image of the Jew does not, in fact, undergo a pronounced reversal in the so-called transconfessional writings. It is rather the experience and orientation of the mystic that has changed, from doctrinal propriety to a transcendental perspective. But the shift is also reflected in the different literary genres in which the two orientations find expression. If one is normative and (even with its mystical symbolism) fairly predictable in its traditional piety, the other is intentionally shocking and meant to undermine all predetermined doctrine. It is the literature of intoxication, of the ‘tavern’ of wine-imbibing lovers, all of whom (according to the poet) defy their own religious orthodoxies in search

61 There is no meaningful distinction between the image of Judaism and that of Jews, as Harry Neale argued in the case of ʿAṭṭār’s depiction of Zoroastrianism versus Zoroastrians. See Neal, “The Zoroastrian,” 151.

62 In her study of accusations of Jewish host desecration in late medieval Christendom, Miri Rubin called attention to the central role of narrative in the construction and perpetuation of anti-Jewish animus. Yet, as Rubin noted, this accusatory narrative was intimately connected with actual relations between Christians and Jews. As she put it: “Narrative has a mimetic function: narrative prefigures and refigures action.” See Rubin, Gentle Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 2. While there is no direct parallel to this connection between constructed narrative and historical relations in the Sufi anti-Jewish tradition, in both cases Jews and Judaism were central to the project of self-definition by Christians and Muslims alike. Rubin articulated this as follows: “The host desecration tale was told by Christians, to Christians, to make Christians act and redefine that which made them Christian.” See ibid., 5.
of a mystical common ground in God. In this literature, meant to undermine conventional expectations, such utterances become expected in their own way. The image of the Jew has not been rehabilitated. Rather, Judaism and Islam alike have been obliterated in the mystical unity of Truth.

But critical questions remain. Further research is important to determine how Judaism compares in this body of literature with that of other infidel groups, notably Christianity and Zoroastrianism. We have already noticed the motif of the dhimmi sash adopted in a number of Sufi texts as a symbol not of the enforced humiliation of the impious but of the ritualized humility of the pious. In this case, no distinction was made between one infidel group and another. Tales of miraculous conversions of Christians and Zoroastrians also abound, many of which appear in the context of Sufis confronting these infidels on the battlefield as holy warriors.63 In other instances, the Jew is unquestionably in a category of his own as a symbol of unbelief, treachery, or degradation. This is frequently the case even when there is no obvious reason why the Jew has been selected over any other infidel. An intriguing example is that of the Sufi who publically declared that he deserved to pay the humiliating jizya tax even more than the Jews, when this tax was paid by all tolerated infidels alike. Preliminary research suggests that Sufi texts occasionally single out Christians and Zoroastrians as bearers of a positive spiritual message, while I have yet to encounter such an exception in the case of Jews.64 While no two sources are identical, the patterns are undeniable and worthy of further scholarly attention.

If there is a common denominator to the panoply of representations of the Jew we have encountered in this study, it is the image of the anti-Muslim with which we began. The Jew is most powerfully depicted as the antithesis of the true believer and, not infrequently, as the determined and nefarious opponent of the prophets and their message. By extension, the word ‘Jew’ need not always signify an actual Jew, no matter how artfully constructed, but on occasion it functions as an attribute of an otherwise confessing Muslim who fails to embody the ideals of the true believer. We have cited the case related by ʿAṭṭār of

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63 In his study of Egyptian Sufi texts from a slightly later period, Tamer el-Leithy has shown that Christians receive more attention than other non-Muslims. See his “Sufis, Copts and the Politics of Piety: Moral Regulation in Fourteenth-Century Upper Egypt,” in Le développement du soufisme en Égypte à l’époque mamelouke, ed. Richard McGregor et al. (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 2006), 75–119.

64 For examples of Christian exceptions, see Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 34. For Zoroastrian exceptions, see Neale, “The Zoroastrian,” 137–56, esp. 141–6.
the Sufi angrily accosted by a youth and called ‘Jew’ by mistake, which the saint accepted gratefully as a heavenly sign that he had not yet attained the rank of perfect faith. Or, to come full circle, we may cite the verse of Rumi, in which the status of the Jew effectively evokes the condition of the anti-Muslim, against which the believer must be perpetually on guard:

If I deny the dawn, I am but a bat—
If I deny Aḥmad, I am but a Jew!65