CHAPTER 2

Al-Suyūṭī, the Intolerant Ecumenist: Law and Theology in Ta’yīd al-ḥaqīqa al-ʿaliyya wa-tashyīd al-ṭarīqa al-Shādhiliyya

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1 Introduction

Al-Suyūṭī is an independent yet affiliated scholar in the core sciences of law, theology and Sufism, as well as the other sciences of religion, such as Quran, ḥadīth, and the linguistic arts, necessary for the study and understanding of the sacred sciences. He also wrote a number of works in more mundane sciences such as belles-lettres and history. His many hundreds of works on a vast variety of different topics—ranging from shorter treatises to multi-volume compendiums—and his sometimes outspoken or controversial views on various subjects establish him as an independent thinker with unique perspectives on a variety of issues.

A broad examination of his works and discussions of various topics have given us a portrayal of al-Suyūṭī as a jurist of the Shāfiʿī school who had reached the highest level possible for a scholar affiliated with the legal school (madhhab). Like teachers and contemporaries, he was counted among the followers of the Ashʿarī school of theology, with reservations about rational theology (kalām) as it was commonly approached in his time, especially considering what had become a necessary connection between rational theology (kalām) and syllogistic logic (manṭiq). His Sufism, though rooted in a number of orders, was primarily of the Shādhilī order, in that his spiritual training (tarbiya) had been under a Shādhilī master. Al-Suyūṭī was a master of prophetic narrations (ḥadīth) who claimed to have memorized all ḥadīths in

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1 Shāfiʿī, Ashʿarī, Shādhilī.
2 For a partial, yet lengthy list in English, see Spevack, al-Suyūṭī. For a complete list in Arabic, see Shaybānī and al-Khāzindār, Dalīl.
3 I discuss many of these issues related to law, theology, Sufism, and other sciences in several of my previous works. See Spevack, al-Suyūṭī; also Spevack, Archetypal and Spevack, Apples.
4 On this see Geoffroy, Al-Suyūṭī as a Sufi, (8–14).
existence,\textsuperscript{5} and an expert in the numerous Quranic sciences, knowledge of which was a condition of independent legal reasoning (\textit{ijtihād}), a rank which al-Suyūṭī claimed for himself.

Centuries after his death, his works and opinions remain standard and oft-quoted in books of Islamic law, theology, Sufism, \textit{hadīth}, and Quranic studies, to name a few. While his reception by later scholars was not uncritical and his relationship with many of his contemporaries was heated and often in disagreement, he remained an important and prominent authority for so many, especially within his native Egypt.

Al-Suyūṭī occupies an interesting space in Islamic intellectual history, especially with regard to how contemporary scholars of Islam—whether in the western academy or in Muslim religious scholarly circles—view the boundaries between various groups such as “rationalist” and “traditionalist,” Ashʿarī and Atharī, early and later jurisprudential independence (i.e. rank of \textit{ijtihād}), and a host of other issues. Al-Suyūṭī, the Intolerant Ecumenist, challenges the boundaries of our definitions and our assessment of pre-modern Islamic intellectual history. His many ironies (such as his apparent intolerance and ecumenism) problematize our all-too-quaint boundaries, definitions, and affiliational possibilities (i.e. the necessary positions that ascribe one to a particular school or method).

For example, while writing in the tradition of the Ashʿarī-affiliated Shādhilis in the work to be discussed in what follows—whose luminaries were often vocal critics of the Ḥanbalī-Atharī-Qādirī jurist-theologian-Sufi Ibn Taymiyya—al-Suyūṭī nonetheless embraces Ibn Taymiyya and other Atharīs in certain legal and theological matters. In matters related to independent legal reasoning (\textit{ijtihād}) and the rational sciences, al-Suyūṭī embraced the likes of Ibn Taymiyya—a staunch opponent of song and dance in Sufi ceremonies, Ibn al-ʿArabi’s metaphysics, and Ashʿarī-Māturīdī \textit{kālām}—yet sang and danced in Sufi sessions of remembrance, warned the ignoramus who found fault in Ibn al-ʿArabi, and argued for a Ghazālian Ashʿarism that was tolerant of \textit{kālām} so long as it was limited to those in dire need.

On the other hand, his apparently intolerant side manifested in his harsh critiques of his opponents,\textsuperscript{6} even those who shared his affiliations, as well as in his view that the centrality of the Shāfiʿī school in Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s Sunni revival of Egypt more than three centuries prior was sufficient reason to critique

\textsuperscript{5} Ibn al-ʿImād, \textit{Shadharāṭ x}, 76.
\textsuperscript{6} See examples in Spevack, al-Suyūṭī and Sartain, \textit{Biography}.