

## Sufism – The Living Tradition



# Sufism

## The Living Tradition

Sufi Epistemology Encounters Modernity  
in the Tariqa of Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Sufi

Riyad Asvat

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Sufism, the Living Tradition

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# Definitions of Terms in the Titles

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## EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy dealing with theories of knowledge. This book is particularly focused on those aspects of epistemology which give an indication of what knowledge is and further how it is acquired in order to understand and interpret the meaning of reality.

## MODERNITY

Modernity refers to the post-medieval period when modes of thought and practices were supported by rational methods in all fields of inquiry. Modernist epistemology took the form of mechanism, materialism and structuralism. The assumptions that underpinned modernization were secularism, individualism and a commitment to progress through science and technology. Development was defined as the control of nature for the benefit of human beings, according to the principle of liberal market forces. Modernity in turn led to the establishment of nationalism, capitalism and democracy and the end of the age of faith and the supremacy of the Catholic Church.

## SUFISM

Sufism (known as *tasawwuf* in Arabic) is defined as “the science of the journey to the King [God]. ... It is taking the ancient way, the primordial path of direct experience of the Real [God].” This

statement outlines the theory and practice of Sufism, that is, the goal of Sufism and the methodology by which that goal is reached. The goal is direct experience of the presence of God (through *dhawq* – which literally means taste). The methodology is the actual undertaking of the Sufi journey (*sulūk*) itself. In his classical review of Sufism, Abu Bakr al-Kalabādhī (d. 990) wrote that they “were only named Sufis because of their habit of wearing wool (*ṣūf*).” He added: “... they did not put on raiment soft to touch or beautiful to behold, to give delight to the soul, they only clothed themselves to hide their nakedness, contenting themselves with rough haircloth and coarse wool.” The act of wearing wool signifies the act of having embarked on the journey (*sulūk*) towards direct experience of God and moreover, having made that the priority of one’s life. This definition indicates that action is essential for achieving the goal of Sufism. Further, this direct knowledge, that is the experience of the Divine Presence, cannot be attained through transmission or mere book-learning.

### ṬARĪQA

*Ṭarīqa* (lit. ‘road’) is the path of transformation of the self outlined by a Sufi master, or shaykh in Arabic. The shaykh guides the disciple on the journey (*sulūk*) of his or her spiritual development and experiences. The term is also synonymous with the English word “order”, as in “religious order.” It is therefore used to describe the various different mystical orders that exist under the broad umbrella of Sufism such as the Shādhilī, the Naqshabandī, the Mevlevi, the Chishti and the Tijānī to name but a few.

# Introduction

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This book aims to demonstrate that the modern idea defining epistemology as a branch of philosophy with only two sources for knowledge – reason and sense perception or, in other words, rationalism and empiricism – is wholly insufficient as a complete description of the true nature of knowledge. It will do this by focusing on the contrasting epistemological positions of modernity and Sufism and, in particular, on those aspects of knowledge which are required for the understanding and interpretation of the meaning of reality.

It is also clear that beliefs, and the knowledge employed in justifying and explaining them, lead to certain values and these values lead, in turn, to the institutionalization of specific types of behaviour. The institutions that develop around these values go on to form the core of the cultures and civilizations that grow up based on those beliefs. In this way, the beliefs inherent in Sufism, and the areas of Sufi knowledge that elucidate them, may well be able to contribute to social cohesion and harmony in the modern world.

The Sufi model we will be looking at, with regard to both theory and practice, is that of the contemporary Sufi Master, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Sufi, and the conceptual framework adopted in order

to examine these issues is existentialist, by which we mean that evidence for the validity of particular epistemic truths can only truly be ascertained from the actual results produced by the values and institutions that are born out of those truths. The community we will focus on is the one established in Cape Town by Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir. The main institutions around which it functions are the market, the mosque, the college and the Murābiṭūn movement. Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s *zāwiya*, the place where he lives and holds his meetings, is a hive of constant activity and, based on this, our aim is to highlight the contemporary practical implications of the Sufi epistemology which underlies his work.

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s family name is Dallas. He was born in Scotland on 7th October 1930. After attending school in Ayr, he went on to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and the University of London. Following that, he worked as a contract writer and adapter for the BBC. He embraced Islam in Fes, Morocco in 1967 and then joined the Qādiri-Shādhilī-Darqāwī *ṭarīqa* as a student of Shaykh Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥabīb, who conferred on him the honorific title of al-Sufi and made him his representative (*muqaddam*) in Britain. After the death of Shaykh Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥabīb he went to his second master Shaykh Muḥammad al-Faytūrī Ḥamūda of Benghazi in Libya who put him into seclusion (*khalwa*). He emerged after having experienced *fanā’* (annihilation in God) and was given authorization (*idhn*) to guide others as a shaykh of *tarbiya* (Sufi Master of Instruction).

His authorization to lead the Qādiri-Shādhilī-Darqāwī *ṭarīqa* came from both his masters and he now has disciples throughout the world. Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir is a playwright, novelist, author and essayist and, in 2001, the Universiti Sains Malaysia conferred on him an Honorary Doctorate of Literature for his literary output. Following the tradition of his predecessors, he has established

mosques, schools, colleges, and taken care of the poor and needy. He also organizes regular conferences dealing with current issues of importance. The teachings of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir relate to: (i) Muslim minorities in non-Muslim countries; (ii) Western culture; (iii) Muslims in Muslim countries; and (iv) Sufism.

In Sufism knowledge is classified into five categories:<sup>1</sup> *‘ilm al-‘aql* (science of the intellect), *‘ilm al-aḥwāl* (science of states), *‘ilm al-asrār* (science of the innermost consciousness), *fanā’* (annihilation of the self in God) and *baqā’* (subsistence in God, when the Sufi returns to mankind after annihilation in God). These five levels of knowledge correspond to the Prophetic tripartite classification of Islam into three branches: *islām* (outward practice), *īmān* (creed) and *iḥsān* (Sufism).<sup>2</sup> These, in turn, correspond with the three stages of the Sufi journey to God: *sharī‘a*, *ṭarīqa* and *ḥaqīqa*. *Sharī‘a* literally means “road” but in this usage refers to the legal parameters of Islam, the science of the outward. It implies the recognition of biological laws that function at different levels of existence. *Ṭarīqa* means “path” or “way” and refers to travelling on the Path to God under the guidance of a Sufi master. *Ḥaqīqa* means “reality” and refers to the inward illuminations of knowledge which flood the heart of the seeker on the Path. The highest levels of *ḥaqīqa* are *fanā’* and *baqā’*.

At this juncture it is necessary to acknowledge that, from the point of view of rationalism and empiricism, religious beliefs and experiences are unverifiable. Intellectual arguments in philosophy and science have not resolved the issue of the epistemic status of religious belief, nor can they. However, from the Sufi point of view, rationalism and empiricism only hold sway in the realm of the first category of knowledge, the science of the intellect (*‘ilm al-‘aql*), and only cover the physical dimensions of existence or, in Sufic terminology, the *mulk* (the domain of solid forms). For the

Sufi there are, however, other cosmological dimensions of human existence: the *malakūt* (the domain of unseen forms) and the *jabarūt* (the domain of Divine power). The human being is able to perceive the *malakūt* (the domain of unseen forms) by means of *‘ilm al-aḥwāl* (the science of states) and the *jabarūt* (kingdom of Divine power) by means of *‘ilm al-asrār* (the science of the innermost consciousness).

In order to overcome the circularity of the philosophical – rationalist and empiricist – argument, religionists have sought entry at various points into this closed circle. This is to be expected because, although religion and science are now considered mutually exclusive, it has to be borne in mind that pioneers of modern science, such as Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton and Boyle were deeply committed Christians.<sup>3</sup> Scientists have argued, for example, that modern physics leads to considerations of metaphysics and biology leads to considerations of teleology.<sup>4</sup> Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) argued in the twelfth century that there is harmony between philosophy and religion. Religion and philosophy (and by extension science) may be mutually exclusive but they are not antagonistic and Ibn Rushd saw religion and science as supplementing one another.<sup>5</sup> Similar arguments by later theologians such as Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and John Calvin (1509-1564) held that religion and faith have a rational validity that is independent of inductive reasoning and science.<sup>6</sup> Similarly Sufis have maintained that communicating spiritual truths acquired through *dhawq* (taste) is not empirically feasible, a little like the incommunicability of the taste of a strawberry. It is not possible to communicate to someone else exactly what a strawberry tastes like even though it is undeniable that strawberries have a very specific and identifiable taste.

In this book we will compare the quality of life produced by modern civilization and that produced by Islamic civilizations in

which Sufism has played a key role, concentrating on the existential reality, in terms of values, institutions, culture and civilization, of those who adhere to the particular variety of epistemic truths that underpin both the former – modern civilization – and the latter – Islamic civilization. On the Islamic side this will be firmly grounded in the primary sources of Sufism: the Qur’ān, the *sunna* (normative practice of the Prophet Muḥammad) and the *‘amal ahl al-Madīna* (the practice of the first three generations of Muslims in Madīna, the city in which Islam was first established).

In its encounter with modernity, Sufism has come under sustained attack, both physically and intellectually, from three groups: the colonizers of Muslim countries such as the British, French and Italians; neo-colonial regimes such as those of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey and; Muslim modernists.<sup>7</sup> In the book we will investigate the underlying causes of this conflict.

My hypothesis is, firstly, that the modernist worldview is based on epistemological foundations that are essentially different from those of Sufism and, secondly, that the limitations of modernist epistemology have been fully exploited in the modern world for political and economic reasons. We will examine the nature of the conflict between the epistemologies of modernity and Sufism and the possible limitations of the former and the potential transcendence of the latter. Then we will look at Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s contribution to this matter: his criticism of modernist epistemology, his contribution towards the creation of a new epistemology, and the practical implications that this has for the world we live in.

# Chapter 1

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## THE CHAIN OF MASTERS

There are three key characteristics that underpin Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s vision of Sufism: firstly that Sufism originated entirely from Islam; secondly, that the *sharī‘a* – the legal parameters of Islam – and Sufism are inextricably connected; and, thirdly, that politics constitutes an essential element of the *sharī‘a* and, therefore, that political activism is absolutely germane to Sufism. In order to ascertain whether these characteristics are truly representative of Sufism we will start by looking at the *silsila* (chain of transmission) of the branches of the Qādirī-Shādhilī-Darqāwī *ṭarīqa* of which he is the present shaykh. The term *silsila* refers to the chain of authoritative spiritual transmission from one master to another, going back to and originating with the Prophet ﷺ. There are two separate chains in the *silsila* of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir with a common thread linking the two. (See diagram 1 below.) Between the Prophet ﷺ and Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir on the al-Faytūrī side of the *silsila* there are forty-two masters and, on the Ibn al-Ḥabīb side, forty-one.

We will look briefly at the first nine masters of the Ibn al-Ḥabīb side of the *silsila*. They represent the formative period of Sufism, extending from the time of the Prophet ﷺ (571-632) to the death of



# The Isnad of the Tariq

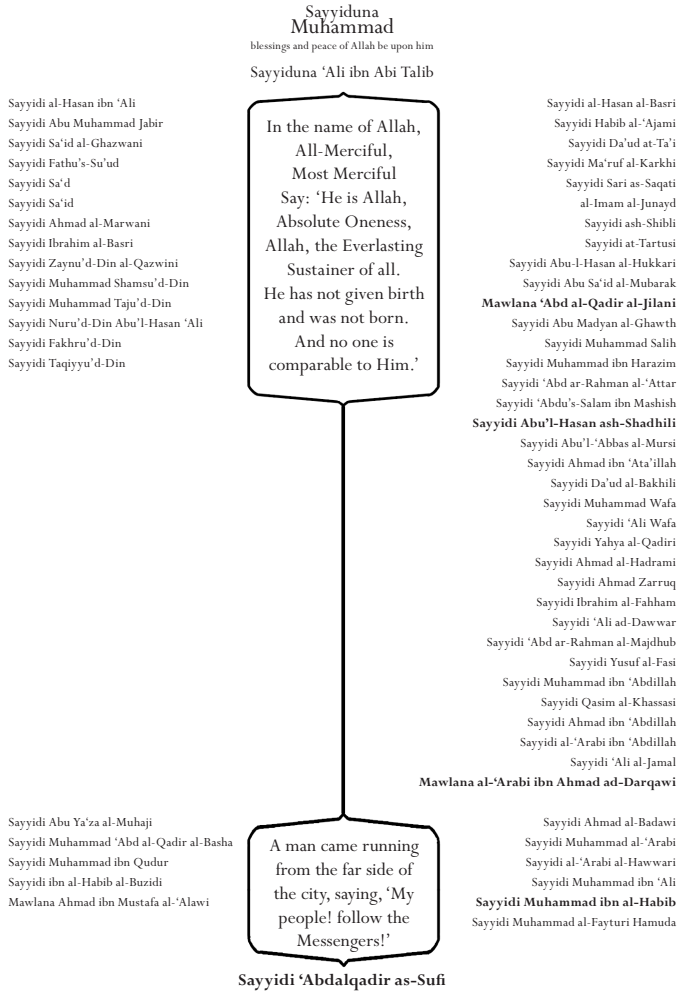


Diagram 1<sup>1</sup>

al-Shibli in 946, a period of 375 years. The tenth review will outline the teachings and methodology of the forty-second and latest master on the Ibn al-Ḥabīb side of the *silsila* who is Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir himself. Ideally it would be better to survey all the masters on both sides of the *silsila* but even a brief overview of them would be much too long for our present purpose. Hopefully the masters reviewed here will be sufficient to demonstrate that the three characteristics mentioned above truly are a common factor in traditional Sufic teaching.

This study of the first shaykhs of the *silsila* will provide a survey of the early history of Sufism and a brief summary of the lives, teachings and practices of the Sufi masters comprising it. It will also give an introduction to the following features of Sufism: its theories and practices, the five categories of the classification of knowledge, the different stages of spiritual development, and finally the Sufi’s goal of arrival at the Divine Presence and the correspondent acquisition of direct knowledge of God. Through the above analysis it will become clear how this knowledge pervades the three major themes which characterize Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s work. They are: the elimination of the split between the inner and outer aspects of human personality, knowledge of the methodology for determining correct behaviour (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), and affirming the relationship between political power and ideology.

#### 1. THE PROPHET MUḤAMMAD ﷺ (571-632)

The *silsila* shows that the originator of Sufism and the first in the link in the chain of the Qādirī-Shādhilī-Darqāwī *ṭarīqa* is the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ himself. He did not, however, use the terms Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) or Sufi. The terms he did use instead were *iḥsān* and *muḥsinīn* from the Arabic root *ḥasana*, as exemplified in the following Qur’ānic verse: “Those who do good (*aḥsan*) will have the best (*al-ḥusnā*) and more.”<sup>2</sup> (10:26) *Iḥsān* is one of the three branches

of Islam as indicated by the Prophet in the famous Ḥadīth Jibrīl,<sup>3</sup> the others being *īmān* (belief) and *islām* (outward practice). The Prophet's Companion 'Umar said that in reply to the Angel Gabriel's question "tell me about *ihsān*" the Prophet ﷺ said: "It is to worship God as though you are seeing Him and even if you do not see Him, He sees you."<sup>4</sup>

A whole science developed around the term *ihsān*, which came to be called *taṣawwuf*. The same is true of *īmān* and the science for understanding it came to be called '*aqīda* and '*ilm al-kalām*. The science for the application of the outward practices of Islam – the *sharī'a* – became known as *fiqh*. In Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir's view, success in establishing the *sharī'a* depends on having correct beliefs ('*aqīda*) and spiritual development in *taṣawwuf* depends on the establishment of the *sharī'a*. The renowned jurist Mālik ibn Anas (711-795) stated that: "Anyone who practices *taṣawwuf* without applying the *fiqh* is a heretic, while anyone who applies the *fiqh* without practicing *taṣawwuf* is a deviant. Whoever combines the two achieves realization."<sup>5</sup> The Mālikī scholar, jurist and Sufi, Aḥmad Zarrūq (1442-1493) stated that the position of *taṣawwuf* in respect to the *dīn* (religion) is like that of the spirit in respect to the body. He also said that about two thousand aspects of Sufism have been defined, delineated and explained but all of them are facets of one thing, that is, a person's sincerity in turning to God.

In Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhi's (d. 990s) survey of Sufis and Sufism, *The Doctrine of the Sufis (Kitab al-ta'arruf li-madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf)*, he discusses the meaning of the words 'to worship God as though you are seeing Him'. The discussion centers on the following Qur'ānic passage:

*When Mūsā [Moses] came to Our appointed time and his Lord spoke to him, he said, 'My Lord, show me Yourself so that I may look at You!' He said, 'You will not see Me but look at the mountain. If it remains firm in its place then you will see Me.' But when his Lord manifested Himself to the mountain, He*

*crushed it flat and Mūsā fell unconscious to the ground. When he regained consciousness he said, 'Glory be to You! I turn in repentance to You and I am the first of the believers.'* (7:143)<sup>6</sup>

Al-Kalābādhī explained that the Sufis are agreed that:

Vision (of God) is possible through the intellect, and obligatory through the hearing.<sup>7</sup> As for its being intellectually possible, this is because God exists and everything which exists may [logically speaking] be seen. For God has implanted in us vision. And if this vision of God had not been possible, then the petition of Moses, 'O Lord, show Thyself to me, that I may look upon Thee', would have been (evidence of) ignorance and unbelief. Moreover, when God made the vision dependent on the condition that the mountain should abide firm – for He says, 'And if it abide firm in its place, then shalt thou see Me' – and seeing also that its abiding firm would have been intellectually possible, if God had made it firm – it necessarily follows that the vision that was dependent on this was intellectually permissible and possible.<sup>8</sup>

Al-Kalābādhī then produces evidence from the hadiths<sup>9</sup> (sayings of the Prophet ﷺ) asserting that vision of the Divine is a reality and that it is necessary to believe that it is true.<sup>10</sup> In his examination of this issue al-Kalābādhī states that whilst vision of God is an established fact, it is conditional upon the annihilation (*fanā'*) of the experiencing locus of the subject. This is necessary because, as the Qur'an says: "Eyesight cannot perceive Him but He perceives eyesight. He is the All-Penetrating, the All-Aware."<sup>11</sup> Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir says that God took Moses to the station of *ma'rifa* by stating, "You will not see Me but look at the mountain". *Ma'rifa* is gnosis, the direct awareness of the Divine Reality in the heart, the organ in the human being with the capacity to perceive spiritual realities that the intellect cannot grasp. When the mountain disintegrated Moses fell unconscious. This is understood by the teachers of Sufism to be a description of what the Sufis call *fanā' fi'llāh*.<sup>12</sup> *Fanā' fi'llāh* means

annihilation in God, the cessation of personal actions, attributes and essence.

The knowledge that Moses attained during *fanā'* is in the vision or, to use Ibn al-'Arabī's expression, Divine Self-disclosure. Moses' return to consciousness is described by the Sufis as *baqā' bi'llāh*.<sup>13</sup> *Baqā bi'llāh* refers to subsistence in God after the Sufi has returned from his state of annihilation. The Prophet Muḥammad's own experience of *ma'rifa*, *fanā'* and *baqā'* are described in the accounts of the *Isrā'* (Night-journey) and *Mi'rāj* (Ascension) and referred to in the first verse of Surat al-Isra in the Qur'ān:

*Glory be to Him Who took His slave on a journey by night from the Masjid al-Haram (Sacred Mosque in Makka) to the Masjid al-Aqsa (the Distant Mosque in Jerusalem) whose surroundings We have blessed, in order to show him some of Our Signs. He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing.*<sup>14</sup>

The Night-journey was a bestowal of *ma'rifa* upon the Prophet ﷺ. Accompanied by the Archangel Gabriel, he travelled between the two mosques on a celestial being called Burāq, described by the Prophet ﷺ as a white animal taller than a donkey but smaller than a mule and whose step covered a distance equal to the range of its vision.<sup>15</sup> During this journey he was witness to the *malakūt* (the kingdom of unseen forms) and the *jabarūt* (kingdom of power or lights), which were some of the Signs of God. Another verse of the Qur'ān describes what happened at the end of the Prophet's ascent through the seven heavens:

*He was two bow-lengths away or even closer. Then He revealed to His slave what He revealed. His heart did not lie about what he saw. What! Do you dispute with him about what he saw?*<sup>16</sup>

Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir explains that two bow-lengths is the closest it is possible to come to God because, in the language of the Arabs, two bow-lengths is the nearest that a person is allowed to approach a king. He says, "In other words, it was an intimacy of

the most extreme limit of what is permitted.”<sup>17</sup> For Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir these verses of Qur’ān refer to the *fanā*’ of the Prophet and the Prophet’s return designated his *baqā*’.

*Ma’rifā* (‘ilm al-ahwāl and ‘ilm al-asrār), *fanā*’ and *baqā*’, epistemic sources of Sufism, are, therefore, firmly grounded in the Prophetic *sunna*. The Prophet ﷺ did not, however, envisage a society made up of individuals whose inner selves were disconnected from their outer selves. Madīna al-Munawwara – the Illuminated City – was established by the Prophet ﷺ and set up as a model community for future generations and its socio/spiritual fabric was based on an ethos in which the inward and outward sciences were unified. This Madinan phenomenon was recorded by Mālik ibn Anas in his book *al-Muwatta’a* and shows that Madinan society was a nomocracy (law governed society). Islamic governance was administered by the Prophet ﷺ who, in delivering legal judgments covering all areas of life, directed every aspect of the society he had brought into being. The legal judgements of the Prophet found their basis in the Qur’ānic revelations and came to constitute Islamic law.

From the above we have clear evidence that Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s interpretation of Sufism accords with the Prophetic example, since it is clear from the Prophetic example that Sufism originated from Islam, that the *sharī’a* and Sufism are inextricably connected, and that politics constitutes an essential element of the *sharī’a*.

## 2. ‘ALĪ IBN ABĪ ṬĀLIB (600-661)

‘Ali ibn Abī Ṭālib was the son of ‘Abd Manāf (otherwise known as Abū Ṭālib) and a first cousin of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. After the death of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the grandfather of the Prophet ﷺ and leader of the Qurayshī clan of Hāshim, ‘Abd Manāf, the Prophet’s uncle, became the clan leader and cared for the Prophet ﷺ. ‘Ali was brought up by the Prophet ﷺ after ‘Abd Manāf got into financial difficulties. At the age of ten he became Muslim and lived with

the Prophet ﷺ for thirteen years. He married Fāṭima, the daughter of the Prophet ﷺ, and they had five children, one of whom died in childhood. He was an accomplished warrior, caliph, jurist and scholar. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said: "I am the city of knowledge and 'Alī is its gate."<sup>18</sup> Ḍirār al-Asadī, a companion of 'Alī, outlined his qualities in the following words:

He was a man of strong willpower and determination. His speech was full of wisdom. ... He was nearest to the poor. He never allowed a powerful man to take advantage of his power. The weak were never disappointed of his justice. I bear witness that in many battles he woke up during the night and took hold of his beard and started to cry as though he was in a state of commotion and exclaimed, 'Oh world! Do not try to betray me for I have left you long ago. Do not have any desire for me for I hate you. Your age is short and your end is despised. Oh! the provision is very little, the journey is too long and the way is full of danger.'<sup>19</sup>

In the above statement 'Alī is describing a station (*maqām*) on the Sufi's journey called *faqr* (poverty). The Sufi historian and master Al-Hujwīrī explained *faqr* as having both a form (*rasm*) and an essence (*ḥaqīqa*). The form is destitution and the essence is fortune and free choice. The one who has found the essence averts his gaze from all created things and, in a state of complete annihilation, sees only God. The poor man (*faqīr*) has nothing and so can suffer no loss. He does not become rich by having things nor indigent by having nothing. Both these conditions are the same for him because, "Worldly wealth holds them [Sufis] back from the path of contentment (*riḍā*)."<sup>20</sup> This station is attained only by the most spiritually developed Sufis, the masters.

The characteristics underpinning Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir's view of Sufism are found in the example of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib.

### 3. ḤASAN AL-BAṢRĪ (642-728)

Ḥasan al-Baṣrī lived during the generation that followed the

Prophet ﷺ and his Companions. He was born in Madīna during the caliphate of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and attended the Friday sermons of the third caliph, ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, where he met ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib who initiated him into Sufism. Al-Baṣrī was a scholar who had memorized the Qur’ān and learnt reading, writing, and mathematics early in life. When he was fifteen-years-old he moved to Basra in Iraq where he studied *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *ḥadīth* and Arabic from the Companions of the Prophet who were living there at the time. He taught at the main mosque in Basra and was later appointed as a judge there in 720.

As a Sufi master he held special gatherings in his home for his disciples. Al-Hujwīrī tells us that al-Baṣrī wore a patched woollen robe and is quoted as saying: “I saw seventy Companions who fought at Badr and they all wore woollen garments; and the greatest Ṣiddīq [the first caliph Abū Bakr] wore a garment of wool in his detachment from the world (*tajrīd*).”<sup>21</sup> Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir explains that this means that the Sufi “has ‘put on the wool’. This is distinct from those who confirm the way of Islam with the tongue and by book learning. It is taking the ancient way, the primordial path of direct experience of the Real [God].”<sup>22</sup> Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir is indicating here that action is essential for achieving the goals of Sufism. Further, this direct knowledge, that is immediate experience of the Divine Presence, cannot be attained through transmission or mere book-learning. The act of wearing wool signifies the act of having embarked on the journey towards direct experience of God and, moreover, of having made that the priority of one’s life.

Al-Baṣrī was fearlessly critical of the rulers of his time. He opposed al-Ḥajjāj, the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik’s (r. 685-705) governor in Iraq. He nevertheless disapproved of removing evil governors through rebellion. When the followers of the rebel leader



Ibn Ash‘ath (d. 704) ordered him to join them, he explained that the violent actions of tyrants were a punishment sent by God and must be endured with patience.<sup>23</sup> Muslim jurists were averse to anarchy because they regarded it to be even worse than oppression. When the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (r. 717-720) requested his advice, al-Baṣrī told him that the just ruler must educate his subjects, reform the corrupt, strengthen the weak, ensure justice for the oppressed, and be a refuge for all who are in need of compassion. The just ruler should be the guardian of the orphan, the provider of the poor, the young and the old. When the ruler is just, the society is healthy and when he is corrupt, the society is corrupt.<sup>24</sup>

Ḥasan al-Baṣrī was, therefore, both a Sufi and, at the same time, an Islamic scholar and jurist who was politically active. These characteristics accord with Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s understanding of Sufism.

#### 4. ḤABĪB IBN MUḤAMMAD AL-‘AJAMĪ (D. 737)

Ḥabīb al-‘Ajamī, was a Persian who had settled in Basra. Al-‘Ajamī began his career as a usurer and property owner. His life-experience led him to repent and his conversion was aided by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, from whom he acquired knowledge of the theory and practice of religion. He became a noted authority of Prophetic *ḥadīth* and transmitted from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Ibn Sīrīn, and others. He frequently attended the gatherings of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and became his disciple and one of his closest associates.

After his conversion, al-‘Ajamī gave away all his possessions until he was left penniless.<sup>25</sup> He subsequently spent his daytime hours at a *zāwiya*<sup>26</sup> on the banks of the Euphrates. The respected author and scholar, Abū Nu‘aym al-Isfahānī (d.1038), reported that on his tenth day at the *zāwiya* he became concerned about the upkeep of his wife. At exactly the same time a delivery of flour, a skinned

sheep, oil, honey, herbs and seasonings was made to his house. The porters then handed his wife a purse containing three hundred silver dirhams (coins) and said, “Say to Ḥabīb: ‘You increase your output, and we will increase your wages.’”<sup>27</sup> After that al-‘Ajamī dedicated his entire time to the service of God. This is reminiscent of the teaching of the earlier master ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, who said: “Do not let your wife and children be your chief cares; for if they be friends of God, God will look after His friends, and if they are enemies of God, why should you take care of God’s enemies?”<sup>28</sup> Al-‘Ajamī taught his disciples that God is pleased with a heart which is not sullied by hypocrisy because there is no connection between hypocrisy and love. Love exists when one is pleased with whatever is decreed by God.<sup>29</sup>

Ḥabīb al-‘Ajamī was an Islamic scholar and, as we have seen, his Sufism was firmly grounded in the *sharī‘a*. These again are key characteristics in Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s vision of Sufism.

#### 5. DĀWŪD AL-ṬĀ’Ī (D. 783)

Dāwūd al-Ṭā’ī narrated hadiths from a number of the *Tābi‘īn*<sup>30</sup> and studied *fiqh* with Abū Ḥanīfa, the founder of the Ḥanafī school of law. He was well-versed in all the sciences and unrivalled in jurisprudence.<sup>31</sup> Abū al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200) the famous Ḥanbalī scholar reported:

“Abū Ḥanīfa said to Dāwūd, ‘Abū Sulayman! As for the instrument [meaning legal methodology] we have mastered it.’ Dāwūd said, ‘What is left?’ Abū Ḥanīfa said: ‘What is left is to put it into practice!’ Dāwūd said: ‘When I heard this, my soul stirred me to seclusion and solitariness, but I told it: Sit with them for a year and do not raise a peep during that time.’ During that year, he said, ‘A question would come up which made me crave to answer more than someone parched craves water, but I would not answer.’ After one year, he went into seclusion.”<sup>32</sup>

When Sufyān al-Thawrī, the great jurist, visited Dāwūd al-Ṭā’ī

with Abū Khālid al-Aḥmar, the latter was annoyed that al-Ṭā'ī did not look at al-Thawrī during the visit. After they departed al-Aḥmar made his displeasure known to al-Thawrī. Al-Thawrī turned to al-Aḥmar and said: “He is unconcerned with affection. Did you not see his eyes? They see other than what we fiddle with.”<sup>33</sup> Ma'rūf al-Karkhī described him as one who held no desire for worldly goods and the world and its people had no allure for him. He used to regard dervishes (*fuqarā'*) as perfect although they displayed many faults.<sup>34</sup>

Dāwūd al-Ṭā'ī was also an accomplished Islamic scholar and his Sufism was firmly grounded in the *sharī'a*. These are foundational characteristics of Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir's understanding of Sufism.

#### 6. MA'RŪF AL-KARKHĪ (D. 815)

Al-Karkhī was of Persian descent, the client (*mawlā*) of 'Alī ibn Mūsā al-Riḍā, through whom he accepted Islam. Al-Karkhī was a *murīd* (disciple) of Dāwūd al-Ṭā'ī and the advice he received from him was to obey God continually and to serve and advise people.<sup>35</sup> The following statement by him summarizes the source of his motivation for action and service. “When God chooses good for a person He opens the door to action for him and closes the door to argumentation; and when God chooses evil for a person he opens the door of argumentation and closes the door to action.”<sup>36</sup> His actions certainly confounded his uncle the governor, who, on passing some wasteland, observed al-Karkhī sitting there eating bread. In front of him there was a dog and al-Karkhī was putting one morsel in his own mouth and then another in the dog's. “Are you not ashamed to eat bread with a dog?” cried his uncle. “It is out of shame that I am giving bread to the poor,”<sup>37</sup> replied Ma'rūf.” It was his way of chiding the governor for neglecting the poor.

The deep significance of the Sufi teaching of patience (*ṣabr*) is clear from the following account given by the scholar, jurist and

Sufi Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996).

It was reported that whenever food was presented to Ma'rūf as a gift he always accepted and ate it. Someone said to him, 'Your brother Bishr ibn al-Ḥārith always refuses such food,' and Ma'rūf replied, 'Abstaining causes my brother's hands to be tied, whilst gnosis causes my hands to be stretched forth. I am only a guest in the house of my Lord ... when He feeds me I eat; when He does not, I have to be patient. I have neither objection nor choice.'<sup>38</sup>

It was neither death, nor paradise nor hell that impelled al-Karkhī to action but it was love of God that prompted him to act. He taught that God has power over death, paradise and hell and, when you love Him, He will protect you from all these things.<sup>39</sup>

Ma'rūf al-Karkhī's political acumen is evident from his lesson to the governor and his teachings came from a profound knowledge of the *sharī'a*. Here again we see similarities between the earlier masters and Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir.

#### 7. SARĪ AL-SAQATĪ (D. 837)

Al-Saqatī traded in spices in the market in Baghdad. He was renowned for his learning in the Islamic sciences. During his lifetime of ninety-eight years he saw the reign of seven or eight caliphs. Al-Saqatī was highly esteemed amongst people in general but also amongst influential members of society in politics, scholarship and the military.

His turning to Sufism was precipitated by a fire in the market which housed his shop. When told that his shop was saved from the fire, he exclaimed, "God be praised". This sentiment shocked him and he later said, "Instantly I was brought to my senses with the realization that, granted that my shop was unharmed, should I not have been thinking about others."<sup>40</sup> He subsequently devoted himself to Sufism, becoming famous for his scrupulousness (*wara'*). He was the first to outline the "arrangement of 'stations'

(*maqamāt*) and the explanation of spiritual ‘states’ (*aḥwāl*).<sup>41</sup> He is regarded as the founder of the Sufi school of Baghdad, or the Iraqi school, whose members were renowned for being the masters of unification (*arbāb al-tawḥīd*). Al-Saqaṭī was the maternal uncle and Sufi master of Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd, the famed theoretician of Sufism. Al-Saqaṭī has been likened to Socrates for the way he transmitted his knowledge to his disciples through questioning them. Al-Junayd related:

I came to al-Sarī one day and found him different from usual and I asked him, ‘What is the matter?’ He replied, ‘A young man came to me and asked about repentance. I answered ‘repentance is not to forget your sin.’ The young man objected and said, ‘On the contrary, repentance is to forget your sin.’

When al-Junayd said that he was of the same view as the young man, al-Saqaṭī asked him for his reasons. Al-Junayd replied that if a person had been on bad terms with God and afterwards came to be on good terms, to think of the former state was bad.<sup>42</sup> Like Socrates, al-Saqaṭī left behind no writings; it is through al-Junayd that his teachings have survived.

Sarī al-Saqaṭī was a great renowned scholar respected by politicians, generals of the army and other scholars. His Sufism was based on the *sharī‘a*, a key element in the *ṭarīqa* of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir.

#### 8. ABŪ AL-QĀSIM AL-JUNAYD (D. 908 OR 909 OR 910)

Al-Junayd was born and raised in Baghdad, the Abbasid capital. His father died while he was still a boy and he was brought up by his maternal uncle, the above-mentioned Sufi master, Sarī al-Saqaṭī. In his youth he studied *ḥadīth* and *sharī‘a* under the eminent jurist Abū Thawr (d. 855). He also studied theology and ethics and, according to al-Hujwīrī, he was “perfect in every branch of science.”<sup>43</sup> It has

been stated that he followed the legal school of Sufyān al-Thawrī. On completion of his studies he attended the gatherings of the Sufi Master al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857). He insisted that the Sufi knowledge must always relate back to the Qurʾān and the *sunna*. He said, “Whoever has not learned the Qurʾān by heart, and has not learned law, before embarking on Sufism, is a man who has no right to lead.”<sup>44</sup> Al-Junayd was the most important theoretician of Sufism and is acknowledged by the Sufis as their *imām* (leading spokesman in this usage). His teachings cover such subjects as *maʿrifa*, *tawḥīd* (unification), *mīthāq* (the Primordial Covenant), *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ*.

*Maʿrifa* is the direct awareness of spiritual realities in the heart through the science of states (*ʿilm al-aḥwāl*) and the science of the innermost consciousness (*ʿilm al-asrār*). Al-Hujwīrī recorded the following incident depicting one of al-Junayd’s capabilities by virtue of his knowledge of these sciences. He related that one of al-Junayd’s disciples, who bore him a grudge, returned one day with the intention of testing him. Al-Junayd asked him if he wanted a formal or a spiritual answer. The disciple wanted both. Al-Junayd said that the formal answer was that if he had tested himself he would not have needed to test him. Al-Junayd’s spiritual answer was that he deposed the disciple of *wilāya* (saintship). The disciple’s face immediately changed colour and he shouted that the light of certainty (*yaqīn*) had gone from his heart. He then earnestly begged to be forgiven and abandoned his foolish self-conceit. Al-Junayd said to him, “Did you not know God’s saints possess mysterious powers? You cannot endure their blows.” He cast a breath at the disciple, who forthwith resumed his former purpose and repented for criticizing the Shaykhs [Masters].<sup>45</sup>

Al-Junayd described *tawḥīd* as the “isolation of the Eternal from that which was created.”<sup>46</sup> He indicated that the understanding of *tawḥīd* is contingent on the annihilation of the self. He said a person

is veiled from God by his or her own self and that one cannot reach God through oneself; it is by God alone that one reaches Him.

*Mithāq* is described in the following passage from the Qur’ān:

“When your Lord took out all their descendents from the loins of the children of Adam and made them testify against themselves, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘We testify that indeed You are!’”<sup>47</sup>

Al-Junayd explains:

In this verse God tells us that He spoke to them when they did not exist, except so far as they existed in Him. This existence is not the same type of existence as is usually attributed to God’s creatures; it is a type of existence which only God knows and only he is aware of. God knows their existence. Embracing them, He sees them in the beginning when they were non-existent and unaware of their future existence in this world. The existence of these is timeless.<sup>48</sup>

To know about the kind of existence referred to here requires that one experience *fanā’*, annihilation in God, the cessation of personal actions, attributes and essence.<sup>49</sup> The knowledge that the Sufi attains during *fanā’* is, as we saw earlier, in the vision or, to use Ibn al-‘Arabī’s expression, in Divine Self-disclosure. Al-Junayd outlined the tenets of Sufism, which, if followed, could lead to the experience of *fanā’*. Briefly, these tenets are:

- Conformity with the *sharī‘a* as revealed by God in the Qur’ān and practised by the Prophet ﷺ.
- Taking on a shaykh (master) of instruction.
- Engaging in *nawāfil ‘ibāda*, that is worship over and above what is obligatory, for example *dhikr* (invocation and remembrance of God).
- Rejecting stray thoughts, especially those coming from Satan, through *wara’* (scrupulousness), *taqwā* (being aware and in awe

of God) and *ṣidq* (truthfulness).

- *Khalwa*, meaning withdrawal from the world in the concentration of invocation of the *al-ism al-a‘zam* (the Supreme Name – i.e. Allah) under the supervision of an authorized master.

Al-Junayd explains that after *fanā’*, God restores the personal attributes and actions to the Sufi. He or she is then in the station of *baqā’*, that is subsistence in God. Al-Junayd said that when the Sufi returns to this world after having “reached the zenith of spiritual achievement vouchsafed by God, he becomes a pattern for his fellow men.”<sup>50</sup> Those who have achieved the stage of *baqā’* are the elect of the élite of mankind. From the epistemological perspective, mankind is divided into three groups: the common, the élite and the elect of the élite. Al-Junayd refers to the elect of the élite as the most excellent of the believers (*ṣafwa min al-‘ibād*) and the pure ones (*khulāṣa min al-khalq*).<sup>51</sup> He goes on to say that God has made them “leaders in the right path” and refers to them as “unfurled flags” and “lighthouses erected for guidance” for humanity.<sup>52</sup> Al-Junayd wrote that they:

“are those who guide in the crises of religion and theirs is the light, which leads in the darkness of ignorance, the brilliance of their knowledge shining through darkness. God has made them the symbol of His mercy for His creatures and a blessing for those of humanity who so choose. They are the instruments whereby He instructs the ignorant, reminds the negligent, guides the seeker aright ...”<sup>53</sup>

Individuals of this group are fearless defenders of justice standing up against whoever deviates from the law whether they are rulers, scholars, judges or even Sufis. They are able to do this because they look “on this world fully conscious of its transience and aware of its imminent disintegration.”<sup>54</sup> They see the world from the perspective of God and are content with His decree. Al-Junayd was, however,



opposed to writing about Sufism for public distribution or from speaking publicly about Sufism. His teaching of Sufism was done privately and his writings on it were in the form of correspondence with fellow Sufis and not intended for the general public.<sup>55</sup>

Al-Junayd displayed all the characteristics that are so highly regarded by Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir in his *ṭarīqa*. It can be rightly said that Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s Sufism is modeled on that of al-Junayd.

#### 9. ABŪ BAKR AL-SHIBLĪ (861-946)

Al-Shiblī grew up in Baghdad, where his father had been the chamberlain of the Abbasid Caliph al-Muwaffaq (r. 870-891), and he himself became the governor of Nihawand. His uncle was the governor in Alexandria. He was a scholar and jurist (*faqīh*) in the school of Mālik. He transmitted *ḥadīth* with *isnād* (chains of authority) and memorized the *Muwatṭa’* of Mālik. He was unique in his age for both outward knowledge and spiritual states. When al-Shiblī attended a class of the scholar Abū ‘Imrān, he (Abū ‘Imrān) rose for him and sat him at his side. One of the companions of Abū ‘Imrān wanted to embarrass al-Shiblī by showing him up as ignorant. He asked him: “Abū Bakr [al-Shiblī], when a woman’s menstrual blood resembles the blood of false menstruation, what does she do?” He gave him eighteen answers. Abū ‘Imrān went to him and kissed his hand. He said, “Abū Bakr, I know twelve, and six I have never heard before!”<sup>56</sup> Aḥmad ibn ‘Aṭā’ is reported to have said, “I heard al-Shiblī say, ‘I wrote *ḥadīth* for twenty years and I sat with the *fuqahā’* [jurists] for twenty years.’”<sup>57</sup>

His conversion to Sufism began when he attended an assembly of the Sufi Master Khayr al-Nassāj (d. 934). Out of respect for al-Junayd’s status al-Nassāj sent al-Shiblī to him for his *sulūk*. Al-Shiblī entered the Sufi path by giving away all he possessed and throwing into the Tigris River seventy satchels of books in his own

handwriting. He also gave away sixty thousand dinars (gold coins), country estates and urban real estate that his father had left him. He then became a disciple of al-Junayd. The spiritual state of Al-Shiblī surpassed that of all the Sufis of his time, as acknowledged by his master al-Junayd who said of him, “Do not look at al-Shiblī with the eye by which you look at others... Every people has a crown and the crown of these people [i.e. the Sufis] is al-Shiblī.”<sup>58</sup> Al-Shiblī is renowned for his contemplation of God (*mushāhada*). Al-Hujwīri says of contemplation:

By contemplation the Sufis mean spiritual vision of God in public and private, without asking how or in what manner... There are really two kinds of contemplation. The former is the result of perfect faith, the latter of rapturous love, for in the rapture of love a man attains to such a degree that his whole being is absorbed in the thought of his beloved and he sees nothing else. Muḥammad b. Wāsi’ says: ‘I never saw anything without seeing God therein,’ i.e. through perfect faith. The vision is from God to His creatures. Shiblī says: ‘I never saw anything except God,’ i.e. in the rapture of love and the fervour of contemplation. One sees the act with his bodily eye and, as he looks, beholds the Agent with his spiritual eye; another is rapt by love of the Agent from all things else, so that he sees only the Agent.<sup>59</sup>

Al-Shiblī is recorded as being in a state of rapturous love for God at most times, except when it was time for prayer and when he was questioned, as at the time when he attended the scholar Abū ‘Imrān’s class. It also appears that there were times that those fellow Sufis who cared for his welfare would confine him to a mental asylum whilst he was in a state of rapture. Al-Shiblī is reported to have said that he and al-Ḥallāj were of one belief but his “madness” saved him and al-Ḥallāj’s sanity destroyed him.<sup>60</sup>

Al-Shiblī was an Islamic scholar and jurist. His Sufism displayed all the characteristics on which Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir has grounded his own Sufic teaching.

#### 42. ‘ABD AL-QĀDIR AL-SUFI

This brief survey of the first nine masters of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s *ṭarīqa* has shown that their teachings were firmly grounded on the same premises on which Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir has established his *ṭarīqa*. The three key characteristics,<sup>61</sup> which underpin Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s vision of Sufism and which we have seen confirmed in the teachings of the early masters, are all integrated in the one who properly establishes the *‘amal ahl al-Madīna* (the practice of the first three generations of Muslims in Madīna). We will see how the *‘amal ahl al-Madīna* animates the three major strands which characterize Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s work: that of eliminating the split between the inner and outer aspects of the human personality; that of possessing the methodology for determining correct behaviour (*uṣūl al-fiqh*); and that of affirming the relationship between political power and precept, which in this context means belief.

In his *Book of ‘Amal*, a collection of transcripts of discourses given between 27 October 2007 and 12 January 2008 at the Nizamia Mosque in Cape Town, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir explained that the foundational element of Sufism is *birr* – action which is just. The command to act justly comes from Divine Revelation and, in carrying out that command, an individual demonstrates that he or she does not associate any other power with God’s power.<sup>62</sup> Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir said, “We began our journey into the matter of *‘amal* (behaviour/action) with a deliberate turning-upside-down of Imam al-Ghazālī’s famous definition: *‘ilm al-mu‘āmala* (the science of behaviour) precedes *‘ilm al-mukāshafa* (the science of unveiling). The purpose of this reversal lay in the claim that the process and procedure of right action was itself dependent on a prior *rūḥānī* (spiritual) illumination.”<sup>63</sup>

We may infer from this that for Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir just action

in obedience to the Divine command leads to *fanā'* and Divine unveiling (*mukāshafa*). It is a process that begins with revelation (*wahy*) and ends with unveiling. The ontological significance of this view is that the nature of the universe and matter is essentially spiritual. This view inhibits the bifurcation of reality into inner and outer domains, making secularism and structuralism untenable. Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir's teaching shows that *birr* functions at three different levels, namely: *futuwwa* (the individual functioning at the level of community), *jamā'a* (the community functioning within the context of broader society), and *umma* (the whole Muslim community as one entity functioning within the world).

#### *BIRR AT THE LEVEL OF FUTUWWA – THE INDIVIDUAL*

*Futuwwa*, which connotes high morality, fraternity, chivalry, altruism, honour and virtue is, according to Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir, a fundamental characteristic of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. God says of the Prophet ﷺ: "A Messenger has come to you from among yourselves. Your suffering is distressing to him; he is deeply concerned for you; he is gentle and merciful to the believers." (9:128-9) The Prophet ﷺ advised people to want for their brother or sister what they want for themselves, to remove injurious obstacles from the road, to treat neighbours with kindness, to show hospitality to guests, to avoid suspicion, not to be inquisitive about others, not to spy on others, not to envy others, not to maintain hostility against another, not to bid against another, not to oppress others, not to humiliate others, not to look down upon others and finally to respect the blood, wealth and the honour of others.<sup>65</sup>

Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir says that the Sufi master Abū Ḥafṣ al-Nishaburi defined *futuwwa* as teaching by action not word.<sup>66</sup> And Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī said concerning it: "The one who looks into the imperfections of others is prevented from seeing his own imperfections. The one who keeps sight of his own faults

no longer sees the faults of others.”<sup>67</sup> Such nobility of character is attained by accomplished Sufis who have traversed the difficult Sufi path. Interestingly, in the past, the name *futuwwa* was used interchangeably for professional and artisanal guilds and Sufi *ṭarīqas*. In this context, the Sufi master al-Kalābādhī’s advice to his disciples was: “Do not be concerned with your subsistence, it is guaranteed for you. But rather be concerned with the work that has been assigned to you.”<sup>68</sup> The work assigned to human beings, the purpose of human life, is to serve God.<sup>69</sup>

Spiritual illumination manifests outwardly as *futuwwa* and, in this way, the inner and outer aspects of the human personality become integrated so that there is no split between them. However, historically “there is no escaping that ... a polarization took place between formal scholarship and *bāṭini* [inner] knowledge.”<sup>70</sup> Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s teaching aims at eliminating this split. The outer sciences of Islam are the *sharī‘a*, including the Qur’ān, the *sunna*, incorporating *ḥadīth*, and *‘ilm al-‘aql*, that is all the sciences related to the intellect. The inner sciences are *ma‘rifa* (*‘ilm al-ahwāl* and *‘ilm al-asrār*), *fanā’*, and *baqā’*. The inner and outer sciences supplement one another and this relationship was, in the Prophetic model, not subject to separation. Outward (physical) actions impact on a person’s inner spirituality and vice versa.

Islam teaches that humans cannot be seen as separate objects in a material world; a human being’s individual reality and the social environment in which that human being lives form one unified reality. The human being’s individual and social reality are inseparable. They are the same phenomenon viewed from different perspectives. The overall renewal of society depends on the renewal of the individual and the renewal of the individual depends on the renewal of society. In other words, the renewal of society correlates directly to the renewal of the individual. “*Allah never changes a*

*people's state until they change what is in themselves.*"<sup>71</sup>

So it is clear that when *birr* is practised at the individual level the split between the inner and outer aspects of human personality is eliminated. This is a key goal that Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir has focused on in his *ṭarīqa*.

#### BIRR AT THE LEVEL OF JAMĀ'Ā – THE COMMUNITY

Whilst emphasizing that the inner sciences are of great importance, Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir pointed out, in a series of talks in 1980 in San Antonio, USA, that inner spiritual development has no worth if the *sharī'a* of Islam is abandoned. It is not only correct moral behaviour at an individual level that is required by the *sharī'a* but such behaviour at the social level as well. If people's socio-economic and political duties are fulfilled, the society will be transformed. Harmony and social stability depends on the methodology (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) used to determine just behaviour (*birr*). With the aim of harmonizing the inner and outer dimensions of human existence, Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir proposes the re-establishment of *'amal ahl al-Madīna* (the practice of the first three generations of Muslims in Madīna). In his seminal work, *Root Islamic Education*, based on these talks in San Antonio, he argues that the prime example of a society in which the inward and outward sciences had been unified was that of Madīna in the first days of Islam, the city in which the human social contract was "at its healthiest and most balanced".<sup>72</sup> This phenomenon was recorded by Mālik ibn Anas in his book *Al-Muwatṭa'*. Madīna was a nomocracy (law-governed society) governed by the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, God's caliph (representative) on earth, in accordance with His revelation, the Qur'ān.

In the *Muwatṭa'*, Mālik ibn Anas provides a composite picture of life in Madīna, including the judgments of the caliphs, governors and scholars up until the time of its compilation in the middle of

the second century AH (Islamic dating). The *Muwatta'* is a book primarily about action (*'amal*). For Mālik the actions of human beings are the text. As Yasin Dutton points out, this view “allows us a fundamentally different perspective on Islamic legal history where the true expression of the law is seen as being preserved not in a corpus of texts but in the actions, or *'amal*, of men.”<sup>73</sup> A similar assessment is made by Abdalhaqq Bewley who says that for the Madinans the Qur’ān and *Sunna* were a matter of direct transmission. They had been conscientiously and scrupulously preserved and passed down as a lived reality through the two generations after the Prophet and his Companions. “The textual sources were, for them, sounding boards or yardsticks against which their ongoing practice should be measured to make sure that there was no deviation and the road remained clearly delineated.”<sup>74</sup>

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir points out that correct outward behaviour should not cause one to wither inwardly. He has repeatedly brought to attention Mālik ibn Anas’ statement about combining the practice of Sufism and obedience to the law.<sup>75</sup> In *Root Islamic Education* Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir describes three jurists who followed the *'amal ahl al-Madīna*. Being jurists, they were knowledgeable of the outer sciences and of how their legal decisions impacted on society and governance. Yet their *'amal* (actions) elevated them spiritually and precipitated for them the opening of inner knowledge. One of these jurists was Abū Sa‘īd Ṣaḥnūn.

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir describes Ṣaḥnūn as a man of the highest integrity and reliability. He was *ḥāfiẓ* (expert) in knowledge and a thoroughly accomplished *faqīh* (jurisprudent). He was scrupulous and utterly uncompromising in his defence of the truth. He was ascetic (*zāhid*) with regards to things of this world. He wore rough garments and ate coarse food but was generous in times of hardship as well as at times of ease. He never accepted gifts from

the sultans but would give his companions large sums of money. Along with these outward qualities Ṣaḥnūn was, at the same time, a man with a very soft heart. He cried very much out of his fear of God. He was modest and humble, noble in his conduct, and had excellent manners. “His heart was sound. It did not have the least enmity toward other people. ... When Ṣaḥnūn remained silent it was for the sake of Allah. And when he spoke it was for the sake of Allah. When he had the desire to speak he would remain silent and when he had the desire to remain silent he would speak.”<sup>76</sup> The behaviour and character of Abū Saʿīd Ṣaḥnūn is the same as that of the Sufis reviewed in this chapter except that in Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s words:

This is a protected *taṣawwuf* because it is not accessible, touchable, visible or speakable. It is buried in the hearts of great men of knowledge of *kitab wa sunna* [Qur’ān and the normative practice of the Prophet ﷺ]. And if we take this path, there is no need for anything visible on the face of the earth that you can call Sufism ...<sup>77</sup>

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir describes this as “the pure *salafī* phenomenon”<sup>78</sup> meaning that it was the behaviour of the Prophet, his Companions, the generation after them (*tābiʿīn*) and the generation after them (*tābiʿī at-tābiʿīn*) in Madīna. This is the *ʿamal ahl al-Madīna* and Mālik ibn Anas lived it and recorded it. This brief discussion of the Madīnan phenomenon shows that the people of Madīna possessed the methodology for determining correct behaviour which enabled them to practice *birr* at the social level. According to Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir the implementation of *ʿamal ahl al-Madīna* is an urgent necessity for the betterment of society in the world today.

#### *BIRR AT THE LEVEL OF THE UMMA – HUMANITY*

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir quotes the following Qur’ānic verse which



summarizes very succinctly how he views the world. “*It is He who made the earth a stable home for you and the sky a dome, and formed you, giving you the best of forms, and provided you with good and wholesome things. That is God your Lord. Blessed be God, the Lord of the worlds.*”<sup>79</sup> Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir explains that “*the best of forms*” means that human beings are imbued with *fiṭra* which is defined as an inborn natural predisposition and which exists at birth in all human beings. The destinies of all things in the universe, including human beings, are predetermined by their life-form.<sup>80</sup>

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir comments that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) tried to move the modern imagination towards seeing biological phenomena as entities moving through time and “thus taking their meaning from their full realization in nature, from seed to decay”.<sup>81</sup> This way of defining a human being incorporates everything about us, our life-cycle, our habitat, our familial and social relations, our livelihood and our capacity for language. Whilst forms in the mineral, vegetal and animal kingdoms submit to their destinies unconsciously and involuntarily, human beings are consciously able to play their part in preserving the natural order and balance of the universe.

This ability is made possible by the human capacity for language.<sup>82</sup> Language makes it possible for human beings to think and reflect on themselves and the part they play in maintaining the balance and order in the universe. Via this capacity for language, God speaks to human beings. His speech comes in the form of *wahy* (revelation/inspiration) and the recipients of *wahy* are called Prophets. The poet and philosopher Muḥammad Iqbal regarded *wahy* as “a universal property of life” affecting plants, animals and human beings, “varying in character according to the needs of the recipient, or the needs of the species to which the recipient belongs”.<sup>83</sup>

God's *wahy* or revelation to the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ took the form of the Qur'ān and it outlined what humans need to do in order to attain direct knowledge of Him. The term *fiṭra*, for Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir, also incorporates the inborn natural predisposition in the human to know God. To know God requires that you first be in harmony with the destiny of your life-form. In Qur'ānic terminology this harmonization is called service or worship (*'ubūdiyya*). In this schema, action, in other words behaviour, precedes knowledge of God. This means that a particular way of behaving is a prerequisite for reaching God. As the Prophet Muḥammad said, "Religion is behaviour (*al-dīn al-mu'āmalā*)."

The Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ lived by the Qur'ānic laws and established a society that was based on them. Everything that he did was in accordance with the guidance of the Qur'ān, making him, as the Qur'ān tells us, an exemplar worthy of imitation: "*You have an excellent model (uswatun ḥasana) in the Messenger of God.*"<sup>84</sup> The *umma* of Islam is the whole worldwide body of Muslims as one distinct community, about whom God says in the Qur'ān, "*In this way We have made you a middlemost community (umma), so that you may act as witnesses against mankind and the Messenger as a witness against you.*"<sup>85</sup> This verse can be interpreted as meaning that the Muslim *umma* is a justly balanced society setting the standard for mankind. This, of course, is made possible through the Prophet ﷺ being the exemplary standard for society as a whole.

But humankind, Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir asserts, has rejected the guidance of the Qur'ān and adopted humanism as an alternative doctrine.<sup>86</sup> The human being is now considered the centre of reality and the measure of all things, and reality itself is interpreted exclusively in terms of human experiences and values. Empiricism and rationalism have become the primary sources for the acquisition of knowledge. For Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir humanism

“is nothing more than the stoic and useless philosophy of loss.”<sup>87</sup>  
He says:

Men cannot arrive at knowledge and wisdom, let alone understanding, by thinking a way out of the human situation. Philosophy, a man-made construct, by its nature becomes more dark, more inaccessible, and more metaphoric. The philosopher, his life continuing, is forced to metaphors of hope: the light at the end of the tunnel; the bright clearing in the dark forest.<sup>88</sup>

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir says that humanism should be replaced by the establishment of Qur’ānic teachings and Prophetic practice. He explains that God has set up “Ascending Steps” of *birr* (just behaviour) that lead to the highest *ma’rifā* (gnosis). These are the Ascending Steps – a reference to Qur’ān 70 – that the Sufis ascend on their *sulūk* (travelling on the Path) taking them to the highest spiritual stations. The Ascending Steps are actions, examples of which are contained in the following verses of the Qur’ān: “*What will convey to you what the steep ascent is? It is freeing a slave or feeding on a day of hunger an orphaned relative or a poor man in the dust; then to be one of those who believe and urge each other to steadfastness and urge each other to compassion. They are the Companions of the Right.*”<sup>89</sup> The “Companions of the Right,” are those Muslims, whose precepts, which in this case means beliefs, propel them to just actions (*birr*). The establishment of justice at the level of *umma* has been a recurring theme in Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s teachings.

What has been made apparent by this overview of Prophetic practice and the first nine masters of the *silsila* of the Qādirī-Shādhilī-Darqāwī *ṭarīqa* is that: (i) Sufism originated from Islam; (ii) the *sharī‘a* and Sufism are inextricably connected; and (iii) politics constitutes an essential element of the *sharī‘a* and, therefore, political activism is germane to Sufism. These three characteristics

also define Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s vision of Sufism. He further shows how all three are integrated in the one who establishes the *‘amal ahl al-Madīna* (the practice of the People of Madīna in the first three generations of Islam). The methodology of *‘amal ahl al-Madīna* animates the three major strands which characterize Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s work, which are: (i) eliminating the split between the inner and outer aspects of human personality; (ii) possessing the methodology for determining correct behaviour (*uṣūl al-fiqh*); and (iii) affirming the relationship between precepts and political power.