

Knowledge, its transmission, and the making of Muslim societies

One day, goes a story concerning al-Shafi'i (d. 820), the founder of one of the four Sunni schools of law, his pupils brought him a slave-girl. Frustrated, after waiting in vain for the eminent jurist throughout the night, she complained to the slave-dealer that he had sold her to a 'crazy man'. Hearing this al-Shafi'i declared 'crazy is he who knows the value of knowledge, and who then squanders it, or hesitates so that it passes him by.'¹ This story, and many like it, emphasise the centrality of the search for knowledge in good Muslim lives.

At the heart of this search was the Muslim concern to command all that could be known of the Quran, the life of the Prophet, and the skills to make the guidance they represented socially useful. This was knowledge man needed to gain salvation.

Nevertheless, the high value placed on learning also came to include knowledge which might give men power in the world, such as the rational sciences, medicine, technology, always providing that it did not run counter to Islamic purposes.

Thus, learning for Muslims was an act of worship. It was, moreover, a supremely important one. 'An hour of learning', went the saying, 'is worth more than a year of prayer.' This emphasis had two outcomes of major significance in Islamic history. First, wherever Muslims went in the world there was a central core of knowledge in which all could share, although they might interpret it differently, and a central core of religious duties, which all should perform, although there might be minor differences of emphasis. Second, Muslims themselves, whether the

¹ Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), p. 3.

state was concerned to play a role or not, took responsibility for preserving knowledge in their generation and transmitting it to the next.

1. The formation of Islamic knowledge

The core of Islamic knowledge was shaped in the first five Muslim centuries. In the era that followed this core was to be further elaborated, but not significantly changed. To this day traditional Muslim scholars use many of the texts written by the great scholars of the Islamic middle ages, and often do so in ways that do not differ greatly from those of their medieval forebears. The elements that went to make this most influential body of knowledge came together as a consequence of the Arab conquests of the seventh century. Just as the material wealth of the early Islamic world derived from the Arab achievement in uniting the great economic regions of the Mediterranean Basin and Asia so its wealth in knowledge derived from the opportunities it created for the mingling of a new complex of Semitic, Hellenistic, Iranian and Indian strands of culture.

a. Revelation, Tradition and the Law

At the heart of Islamic knowledge lay the Quran, which Muslims believed to be the word of God revealed to man through the Prophet Muhammad. From its opening chapter, which the faithful use as Christians might the Lord's Prayer, the Quran reminded Muslims of the central reality of God in human life:

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds,
The Beneficent, the Merciful,

Master of the day of Requital.

Thee do we serve and Thee do we beseech for help.

Guide us on the right path,

The path of those upon whom Thou has bestowed favours,

Not those upon whom wrath is brought down, nor those who
go astray.²

Humans had a fundamental choice. They could submit to God and follow the commandments, or they could turn away from him, follow human desire, and take the consequences. Man is left in no doubt as to the awesome nature of the Last Day, the pleasures of paradise and the horrors of hell. Much guidance is given about what men should believe in religion and how they should behave in worship, about what rules they should follow with regard to their fellow men and the gratitude to God which should infuse their daily lives.

Muslims refer to the Quran as the 'noble' or the 'glorious'; its Arabic is regarded as being without compare. Copying the Quran has been an act of piety performed by rich and poor alike. Learning the Quran has been the normal starting point of Muslim education, whether or not the young children concerned could understand its Arabic. Although the revealed word was first written down in full under the third caliph, 'Uthman, and copies were sent to the major cities, the classical way in which it was transmitted was orally. Early Arabic script left possibilities for variant readings; in time seven traditions of recitation, distinguished by only minor differences, came to be regarded as canonical. As the written text of the Quran became available so

² Maulana Muhammad Ali,

the work of interpretation and exegesis began. Inevitably the commentaries that were the outcome were subject to the sectarian controversies of the time. The first attempt to make an overarching critical study was produced in thirty volumes by the historian and theologian, al-Tabari (d. 923). Over three centuries later the task was done again by al-Baydawi (d. 1286). To the present day his work has remained the standard for Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

The second source of knowledge was the record of the sayings and doings of the Prophet. Given that the Prophet was the model of the perfect Muslim life, it was only natural that believers should wish to know all he said and did. The collective memory of these sayings and doings came to be known as the *Sunna*, the 'beaten path' or 'custom' of the Prophet. Individual statements of the *sunna* were known as *Hadith* (Tradition) which might go thus:

Ibn Umar reported that the Messenger of Allah said:

Whoever imitates a people, he belongs to them.

As time went on the *Hadith* multiplied till they numbered hundreds of thousands; they came to be invented to support legal, political and theological positions of the day. In the ninth and tenth centuries, therefore, men travelled throughout the Muslim world to collect *Hadith*. After analysing them to see on the one hand whether their chain of narration from the time of the Prophet was sound and on the other whether their content was in harmony with the Quran, already authenticated *Hadith* and reason, they were classified as either sound (*sahih*), acceptable (*hasan*)

or weak (*daif*). Six collections of *Hadith* came to have canonical status, of which those of Bukhari (d. 870) and of Muslim (d. 875) were the most esteemed. Bukhari winnowed the multiplicity of Hadiths down to 2,762. Subsequently different movements built different collections of Hadiths. The Shias, for instance, accepted only those traditions transmitted through Ali and his followers.

Western scholars and some Muslim modernists have tended to cast doubt on the authenticity of some long-accepted traditions. Nevertheless, the traditions have played a major role in forming the character of Muslim communities and in developing like behaviour through much of the Sunni world. When Muslim communities have felt particularly under threat, moreover, it is to the traditions they have, more often than not, turned for renewed direction.

The guidance of the Quran and *Hadith* was encapsulated in practical form for Muslims in the law. This is usually referred to as the *shari`a* which meant originally in Arabic 'the path leading to the water', that is the path to the source of life. The *shari`a* grew from the attempts of early Muslims, as they confronted immediate social and political problems, to derive systematic codes of behaviour from the word of God and the example of the Prophet. Four main schools of legal interpretation developed; the Hanafi, which grew up in the Abbasid capital of Baghdad and was founded by Abu Hanifa (d. 769); the Maliki, which grew out of the practice of the Medinan judge Malik bin Anas (d. 795); the Shafi`i, which developed under the leadership of a disciple of Malik, al-Shafi`i (d. 820); and

the Hanbali, founded by Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855) in Baghdad. The first three schools all had formal differences of emphasis and technique; Hanafis, for instance, allowed more room for *ijtihad*, personal reasoning, than the others, while the Shafi`is were concerned to distinguish their use of *Hadith* from the more limited practice of the Malakis. All agreed, however, on important matters; all recognised each other's systems as equally orthodox. The Hanbali school, on the other hand, developed as a traditionalist reaction against what it regarded as the speculative innovations of the earlier established schools. Until the fifteenth century the influence of the Hanbalis tended to be limited to Iraq and Syria. The Hanafis, on the other hand, were strong throughout mainland Asia, the Shafi`is in lower Egypt, the Hijaz, Southeast Asia and East Africa, and the Malikis in the rest of Muslim Africa.

`Ulama, that is scholars, those with *`ilm* or knowledge, developed these systems roughly thus. They treated the Quran as containing the general principles by which all matters should be regulated, and when the Quran was unclear they sought clarification in the *Hadith*. The foundations of the *shari`a*, then, were the unambiguous commands and prohibitions to be found in these sources. When points of law arose, on which the Quran and *Hadith* offered no firm guidance, most *`ulama* turned to *qiyas*, which meant arguing by analogy and applying to the problem the principles underlying a decision which had already been reached on a comparable issue. As the years passed, *`ulama* increasingly came to agree on points of law, and the principle of *ijma*, or consensus of the community, came into play. *`My community'*, went

a very important *Hadith*, 'will never agree upon an error.' So, if the community as embodied in its legal experts came to agree on a point, that agreement gained the authority of revelation itself and the development of new ideas on the subject was forbidden. Steadily, more and more of the law was underpinned by *ijma*, and the area in which personal reasoning might be deployed was increasingly diminished. By the mid-tenth century most scholars had declared the 'gate of *ijtihad*' shut. Henceforth, if a man questioned the meaning of a text in such a way as to challenge the interpretation supported by *ijma* he committed *bida*, an act of innovation, which was as near as Islam came to the Christian concept of heresy.

The *shari`a* was comprehensive. It embraced all human activities, defining both man's relations with God and with his fellow men. In the first role it prescribed what man should believe and how by ritual acts he should express his belief; in the second it covered those areas which in European codes might come under the heading of civil, commercial, penal, personal law and so on. No formal legal code was created at this time, nor subsequently, the *shari`a* being more a discussion of how Muslims ought to behave. In the process human actions were classified on a five-point scale: obligatory, meritorious, indifferent, reprehensible, forbidden. The *shari`a* told man all he needed to know about how to live righteously in this world and how to be prepared for the next.

The *shari`a* defined the constitution of the Muslim community. This said, it was never to be applied in full. For one thing, it was impossible to enforce a system which included

moral obligations as well as hard-and-fast rules. For another, it would always be subject to the realities of political power. Rulers could not afford to permit the interpreters of the law a completely free hand in the legal arena. They were unlikely to think it wise, even if they had the power, to impose the *shari`a* over local *`urf* or *`adat* customary law. Nevertheless, the *shari`a* was to be a potent ideal. All who accepted Islam accepted in principle the idea that the knowledge it represented should be spread as widely as possible so that it might fashion the lives of men.

b. Greek and other knowledge

A second strand was the great heritage of the ancient world in science, technology, the humanities and the arts of government, which was drawn into the new Islamic civilisation. One element was from the former Sasanian lands and found in large part in the Pahlavi language. There was the store of Iranian expertise contained in the *adab* literature - guides on the arts of government, the duties of various offices, and etiquette in the presence of rulers. There was the technical literature in fields ranging from arms and horsemanship through to agriculture and irrigation. There was scientific literature, notably in the fields of medicine, astronomy and maths; not least amongst the last mentioned was the Indian system of numerical notation which in Arab hands was to begin its transformation to those in widespread use today. Of course, there were works of Iranian literature such as the fables of the *Kalila wa Dimna* and stories which were to be included in the Arabian Nights. The impact of

this literature was such that under the Abbasids some, the Shu`ubiyya, tried to assert the superiority of Iranian culture over Arab, and Iranian ideas of kingship over Islamic ideas of caliphate. By the end of the ninth century the specific religious threats had been met by theologians and the more general challenges of Iranian culture had been countered by men such as al-Jahiz (d. 869) and Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) who succeeded in synthesising Arab and Iranian traditions by producing a literature which bore an Iranian impress in style and subject but was firmly held within a frame of Arab and Islamic ideas.

More important was the impact of Greek culture which came to the Islamic world not in its classical form but as it had come to be elaborated in the late antique world. The Hellenistic traditions of Athens were sustained by Nestorian Christians working under Sasanian patronage at their educational centre of Jundishapur in southern Iran. The Hellenistic traditions of Alexandria were sustained successively in Antioch in Syria, Merv in Khorasan and Harran in Mesopotamia. Theological debate in the eighth and ninth centuries led to curiosity about Greek thought and both traditions were transferred to Baghdad. A great programme of translation of works from Greek, and also from Syriac into which many Greek works had been translated, was established under Hunayn Ibn Ishaq (d. 873) and notably high standards were maintained in the publication of accurate and reliable editions. By the eleventh century at least eighty Greek authors had been translated, many major figures such as Aristotle, Plato, Galen and Euclid being represented by several works. Among the subjects covered were philosophy, medicine,

maths, physics, optics, astronomy, geography and the occult sciences of astrology, alchemy and magic. Like the later Hellenes the Muslims were not interested in the Greek traditions of literature and history.

The most important area of knowledge transferred from the Hellenistic tradition was philosophy with its emphasis on reason, logic and the laws of nature. This knowledge was used for theological purposes by the Mutazilites, 'those who keep themselves apart'. Confronted by Christian Trinitarian, Manichaeic dualistic and anthropomorphic conceptions of God they were determined to assert His absolute unity and transcendence. Thus God had no attributes which belonged to his essence; the attributes mentioned in the Quran had only a metaphorical force.

It followed from this that the Quran was not part of the essence of God, but created, a message inspired by God in Muhammad. It followed, too, that God did not pre-determine men's lives; men were morally free and responsible for their own actions. Such views became the politically dominant views under the Caliph Mamun (813-33), and those dissenting, who included the founder of the Hanbali school of law, were persecuted.

Many Muslims were unhappy that the truth of Islam should depend on reason. The Quran and the example of the Prophet were the only firm basis of the faith. Men must submit to God, not claim to know better than Him. So the attributes of God had to exist because they were stated in the Quran. So the Quran was uncreated because it had been revealed by God and not inspired in His Prophet. So man's actions were predestined because God was Lord of all His creation.

Thus, in the eighth and ninth centuries two contrary theological positions developed: one in which God's presence in the universe came to be understood through reason and one in which it was to be understood only in so far as he had revealed himself to man. An all-important bridge was built between these conflicting positions by al-Ashari (d. 935). A pupil of the leading Mutazilite theologian of Basra, Al-Ashari was converted to the scripturalist position as a result of dreams he experienced during the fast of Ramadan. He now asserted the literal truth of the Quran but, in his bridge-building mode, justified his position with reason. Reason, however, could operate only up to a certain point beyond which faith had to take over. So God was One: He had eternal attributes, but these were not Him, nor were they apart from Him. So the Quran was 'uncreated' but might become created when transmitted to men. So God willed all things, good and evil, but man acquired responsibility as the instrument of these actions. Differences remained amongst the followers of al-Ashari, for instance, about the precise nature of the uncreatedness of the Quran. But through history al-Ashari's synthesis of reason and revelation remained the classic Sunni theological position.

al-Ashari's achievement set limits to the rationalist enterprise in the mainstream of Islamic thought, but it in no wise put an end to philosophical speculation. Indeed, Islamic civilisation, as it responded to Greek thought in the early centuries, produced a majestic series of philosophers: al-Kindi (d. 870), who was known as the 'philosopher of the Arabs'; al-Farabi (d. 950), who came from Turkistan; Ibn Sina (d. 1184), who

worked as both physician and official; Ibn Tufayl (d. 1195), who worked as physician and vizier at the Almohad court; and Ibn Rushd (d. 1195), who succeeded Ibn Tufayl at the Almohad court. Amongst the ideas that men such as these asserted were that philosophical truth was universally valid, that religious symbolism was an inferior way of conveying truth, that reason was the surest path to truth and that God was the first cause in which essence and existence were one. Such ideas were bound to be unacceptable to the vast majority of the faithful. Philosophical knowledge was doomed to subsist on the margins of Muslim civilisation and to have a greater influence on medieval Europe than on the Muslim world from which it came.³

c. Mystic knowledge

The third strand of knowledge was mysticism or Sufism as it is generally called. Whereas the *shari`a* dictated the formal relations of a Muslim towards God and his fellow men, Sufism taught the Muslim how to know God in his heart. Sufis lived their lives and ordered their thoughts in ways designed to make possible a direct and personal experience of God.

Sufism grew as a distinct strand of Muslim devotion, which was inspired by the Quran, the religious practices of the Prophet and the early Muslim community. It did so in part as the Arab Muslims came into contact with the Christian and the other mystic traditions of the lands they conquered, and in part in reaction to the moral laxness and worldliness of the Umayyad court at Damascus. The term `Sufi' is probably derived from the Arabic

³ Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 192-

suf, meaning wool, which referred to the simple woollen clothes worn by mystics in contrast to the rich apparel of the worldly.

In the beginning the basis of Sufi feeling was fear of God and of judgment. 'the believer awakens grieving and goes to bed grieving'. declared Hasan al-Basri (d. 725) the famous early mystic, 'and this is all that encompasses him, because he is between two fearful things: the sin which has passed, and he does not know what God will do with him, and the allotted term which remains, and he does not know what disasters will befall him...' But, by the second Islamic century, the doctrine of love had become prominent. 'I love Thee with two loves,' the woman saint, Rabi'a (d. 801) declared to God, 'love of my happiness, and perfect love, to love Thee as is Thy due.'⁴ Sufis, however, did not remain satisfied with this intense gospel of love. By the third Islamic century they had begun to develop the doctrine of the 'inner way' or the spiritual journey towards God. There were different stages of the way corresponding to the different levels of Sufi experience. The mystic was first a seeker, then a traveller, and then an initiate. He progressed along the way through processes of self-abnegation and enhanced awareness of God. The nearer he came to God, the more God spoke with his lips, controlled his limbs and moved the desires of his heart until he reached the final stage when self was annihilated and totally absorbed in God.

By this time two broad tendencies had developed, one ecstatic the other sober. Both tendencies resigned themselves to God's will by embracing poverty. The ecstatic tendency ignored

the Quran and the Law in moving to the final stages when the self was annihilated and totally absorbed in God. Typical of this tendency was al-Hallaj (d. 920) who carried his Sufi message through Northern India and Central Asia. In manifesting his union with God he declared 'I am the Truth' and was brutally executed in Baghdad for his pains. The sober tendency was typified by al-Junayd (d. 911) who was known as the 'peacock of the poor'. He insisted that mere self-annihilation was not enough. The self still had to persevere in the real world and that could only be done by living in conformity with the Quran and the Law.

Side by side with these varying ways of approaching God there were attempts to develop a metaphysical and philosophical understanding of God and his relationship to man. The metaphysical theories posited a transcendent God whose spiritual radiance was implanted in man. To discover the divine essence that lay within them men had to overcome their worldly nature. Again with the translation of Greek and Syriac works into Arabic Sufis adopted the intellectual mysticism of Plotinus (d. 270). For these men the universe emanated from God in stages of spiritual and then material manifestation. Man was able by developing inner knowledge to ascend through the stages of material and then spiritual manifestation to the ultimate vision of God.

By the tenth and eleventh centuries social and political rivalries mingled with different strands of knowledge in Islam to express a series of tensions. The decline of the Abbasid

4 H.A. R. Gibb, *Islam*, 2nd impression, (London, 1975), p. 90.

caliphate had led to the rise of Shia regimes throughout the Middle East. While the Twelver Shias were largely unconcerned with proselytisation, the Isma`ilis were great missionaries: the Isma`ili Fatimid rulers of Egypt sponsored missions from North African through to Central Asia and Afghanistan. Shia power, moreover, was not just a challenge to Sunni dominion and understandings of authority in Islam, it also created circumstances in which Hellenistic knowledge could flourish. The defence of Sunni Islam was taken up most vigorously in Baghdad and by followers of the Hanbali school of law, who permitted no place for the rational sciences in developing their understandings of Islam. The Hanbalis were at the heart of the second tension; they were no less concerned about the influence of rational schools of theology, such as the Ashari, amongst the Sunni community. For them Hellenistic learning was unnecessary as a support to revelation and the example of the Prophet. This tension, however, grew greater as the Asharite theologians in their struggle to check the influence of philosophy increasingly came to use philosophical methods in displaying their theology. Then, the claims of some Sufis, in particular those of the ecstatic variety, to achieve knowledge of God through direct personal experience were a further source of tension; they challenged the upholders of the *shari`a*, lawyers and theologians alike. Such claims devalued the role of law in Muslim society. They were, moreover, justified by a Hellenistic theosophical metaphysics; they were often associated with a belief in the miraculous prowess of saints as instruments of God's will or both; they had growing support amongst the Muslim population at

large.

That these tensions did not open up an unbridgeable gulf between those immersed in the different strands of knowledge has much to do with the achievement of one man, the greatest figure in medieval Islam, indeed, the most influential figure after Muhammad, Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111). As a relatively young man al-Ghazzali had been appointed to the senior professorship at the Nizamiyya College in Baghdad. He was brilliant, but, as he tells us in his moving autobiography, *The Deliverance from Error*, 'my teaching was concerned with branches of knowledge which were unimportant and worthless, ... my motive in teaching ... was not sincere desire to serve God but that I wanted an influential position and widespread recognition.'⁵ He had a physical and mental breakdown, left his post and lived the life of a Sufi. During his scholarly life al-Ghazzali examined the main strands in the thought of his time and produced a synthesis that has lain at the centre of Sunni Islam to this day. He explored the arguments of the Isma`ili Shias and refuted them one by one. He explored the potential contributed of the rational sciences to religious understanding, most particularly in his attack on Ibn Sina, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, and demonstrated that while they were of great value in mathematics and logic, they could never enable men to know a transcendent God. Thus, al-Ghazzali reaffirmed the rational theology of al-Ashari in which reason was firmly subject to revelation. Finally, and very much as a result of his own personal crisis, he explored the possibilities of building a bridge between Sufism and *shari`a*

⁵ W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali* (Oxford, 2000),

Islam. In building that bridge he demonstrated that God was not to be discovered by intellect alone, but by personal experience.

The Muslim must expect to know not just that knowledge which God had revealed to him but also to know God in his heart. al-Ghazzali's religious vision was published in his most important work the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. He was given the title 'Renewer of Islam'.

By al-Ghazzali's death at the beginning of the twelfth century the basic shape of normative Islamic knowledge had been fashioned from the interaction between the knowledge revealed to man by God and the actions of His Prophet and the great heritage of knowledge in the Middle East derived from pre-Islamic sources.

At the apex of Islamic knowledge stood the Quran and *Hadith*, whose guidance was embodied in the *shari`a*. These were serviced by the twin strands of rational and mystical knowledge, whose insights helped to make the *shari`a* of value both to individuals and to society, but were not permitted to trespass beyond the bounds set by revelation. This is what has been termed the 'Sunni-*Shari`a*-Sufi' consensus. Around this consensus, however, which was in itself a very broad 'church', there were other Islamic possibilities. There was the gnostic vision, which was present in Sufism, Isma`ili Shiism and philosophy, and which saw the purpose of life not in fulfilling God's word on earth but in purification of the soul and detachment from earthly things. There was popular Islam, which was most frequently represented in the worship of saints whom it was believed could intercede for man with God and whose cults often mingled with pre-Islamic

beliefs and customs. There were the Shias, whose practices differed from those of the Sunnis in few respects, but for whom the vital issue was loyalty to the family of Ali. These various traditions of Islamic knowledge and understanding represent, in the words of Ira Lapidus, 'a repertoire of cultural and religious ideas which remain operative in Islamic lands to the present day'.⁶

2. The transmission of knowledge to c. 1800

Islamic knowledge was made available to society and transmitted to the generations to come by `ulama and Sufis. It is important for those from a non-Muslim background to realise that these transmitters were not priests and performed no sacerdotal functions; in theory at least normative Islam tolerated no intermediaries between man and God. It is also important to realise that in most Muslim societies `ulama existed less because a state willed their existence than because society valued the functions they performed. We now consider `ulama and Sufis as transmitters of the knowledge which shaped both the outward form and the inner nature of Muslim societies down to the European irruption in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

a. the `ulama and the transmission of formal knowledge

The `ulama were to be found in almost every corner of the Islamic world. They bore different titles in different regions: Mulla in the Persian-speaking lands of Iran, Central Asia and northern India, Shaykh in the Arabic-speaking Central Islamic

⁶ Lapidus, *Islamic Societies*, p. 237.

lands, Kiyayi on the Indonesian islands, and Mallam or Karamoko in West Africa. They performed a wide range of functions. They might administer mosques, schools, hospitals and orphanages; they might also be courtiers, diplomats or leading bureaucrats. Their first task, however, remained the preservation and transmission of the shari`a. As scholars they defended their understandings of it, as qadis they administered it on behalf of the state, as muftis they expounded it on behalf of the community for whom they issued *fatawa* (sing. *fatwa*), or legal decisions, free of charge. They reminded Muslims of their obligations under it in their sermons and instructed their children in it in their schools.

`Ulama might have a range of sources of support. Some lived off land grants or salaries from the state, but the majority were supported by the community - by the endowments of the pious, by the donations of the grateful or by the proceeds of the crafts or trades in which they were engaged. In some areas where the state had periods of notable strength, as in the Ottoman empire, numbers of `ulama might come under state control, forming a kind of bureaucracy. In other areas, where the state was often weak, as in Indonesia or West Africa, they existed largely free from state control. Of course, during this long period there could be great shifts in the relationship between the `ulama and a particular state. Nowhere was this more obvious than in Safavid Iran, to which Shia `ulama were transplanted in order to bolster Safavid rule only to achieve such power in Iranian society that they came to challenge the authority of the state. This said, the `ulama embraced a wide range of distinction and function from those of the patrician families of Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad,

or those of the great clerical families of West Africa such as the Jakhanke of Senegambia who can be traced back to the thirteenth century or the Saghananughu who can be traced back to the fourteenth century, to the leader of prayers in a small-town mosque or to the village school teacher.

Such men, who were both important and often prominent in their communities, were inevitably a focus of criticism. In fourteenth-century Cairo their pretensions were satirised by street players wearing outsize turbans and sleeves.⁷ Under the Ottomans, we are told of `ulama who loved the world, were constantly going to Istanbul to lobby for appointments, and became rich, becoming the subject of satire, and stoning by the mob.⁸ Shaykh Sa`di of Shiraz (d.1292) made the fall of a qadi into illicit sex and drink the theme of one of the stories in his *Gulistan*, which was famously depicted in a Mughal miniature of c. 1630.⁹ That such comments should take place at all is an indication of the esteem in which `ulama were generally held. `Verily', declared the Prophet, `the men of knowledge are the inheritors of the prophets.'

`Ulama taught in the reception rooms of their houses, in the courtyards of mosques and shrines, and also in madrasas or specially constructed colleges. Indeed, through much of the medieval Muslim world the madrasa, a term directly derived from a verb meaning `to study', was the focus of education. The madrasa seems first to have developed as a specific institution in Khurasan. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries it came to

⁷ Berkey, *Transmission of Knowledge*, pp. 182-83.

⁸ H.A.R. Gibb and Harold Bowen, *Islamic Society and the west: a Study of the Impact of Western Civilization on Moslem Culture in the Near East*, Vol.

be established in Iraq and Syria as part of an assertion of Sunni tradition in a region long threatened by Shia power. At the end of the twelfth century there were at least thirty madrasas in Damascus and a similar number in Cairo.

By this time the madrasa had become a major Islamic institution. Some foundations from this medieval period exist to the present day such as al-Azhar in Cairo, which was established in 972, or the Bu Inaniya in Fez, which was established in the mid-fourteenth century. So too in its arrangement of student and teachers rooms around a courtyard had the madrasa come to represent a classic form of Islamic architecture to set alongside the mosque and shrine. Magnificent relics of this form can be seen in the monumental madrasas, which fill three sides of the Registan Square in Samarqand, or in the semaniye madrasas, the apex of the Ottoman education system, which form part of the Sulaymaniye complex in Istanbul. Nevertheless, the number, and sometimes the magnificence of madrasas in many parts of the Muslim world should not lead one to believe that teaching and learning were highly formal or institutionalised processes. There were no examinations at entrance, no degrees on leaving. Moreover, salaries for teachers and stipends for students, as recent research on medieval Cairo reveals, were often low priorities for those making endowments. The madrasa were primarily a location in which teaching took place. The arrangements were normally informal; they were a person-to-person affair.

At the heart of the person-to-person nature of teaching was

the fact that it was essentially oral. This was the way in which the Prophet had first transmitted the messages he received from God to his followers. Learning the Quran by heart and then reciting it out aloud was the first task of Muslim boys and girls. The methods of learning and of transmitting the Quran laid their impress on the transmission of all other knowledge. 'The Quran', declared the great fourteenth-century historian, Ibn Khaldun, in a fine chapter on the art of teaching in his *Muqadimmah*, 'has become the basis of instruction, the foundation of all habits that might be acquired later on.'¹⁰ Thus, when a teacher taught a text in the madrasa curriculum, he would dictate it to his pupils, who might write it down, and frequently commit it to memory - many pedagogical texts were written in rhyme to assist this process. Subsequently, there might be an explanation of the text depending on its nature. The study of the book as completed by the pupil reading back the text with the explanation. If this was done to the teacher's satisfaction, the pupil would be given an *ijaza* (meaning to make lawful), which was a licence to teach that text. The personal and oral nature of the process of transmission is captured in the words of a tenth-century *ijaza* from the author of a text:

I entrust my book to you with my writing from my
hand to yours. I give you authorization for the poem
and you may transmit it from me. It has been produced
after being heard and read.¹¹

⁹ Toby Falk ed., *Treasures of Islam* (Syracuse, N.J., 1985), p. 144.

¹⁰ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqadimmah: an Introduction to History*, trans., Franz Rosenthal, ed., by N.J. Dawood (Princeton, 1967), p. 421.

¹¹ An *ijaza* given by al-Mutarriz to his pupil, Abu Ja`far al-Tabari, the great historian and commentator on the Quran. J. Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*, trans., G. French, ed., R. Hillenbrand (Princeton, 1984), p. 36.

The pupil would also see in his *ijaza* a list of all the names of those who had transmitted the text going back to the original author. He would know that he was but the most recent link in a continuing chain of oral transmission.

It might reasonably be asked why a culture which placed high value on the book, which saw great libraries amassed and in which students were urged to buy books and many opportunities for silent reading existed, should place such emphasis on oral transmission. The reason was that Muslims were fundamentally sceptical of the written word, and particularly the written word studied without supervision, as a reliable means of communication. 'When a student has to rely on the study of books and written material and must understand scientific problems from the forms of written letters in books', declares Ibn Khaldun, 'he is confronted by ... [a] veil ... that separates handwriting and the form of the letter found in writing from the spoken words found in the imagination.'¹² To approach the true meaning of the text, which the author intended when he first published the text by reading it out loud, the student had himself to read it out aloud. To have authority over the transmission of the text the student had to read it out aloud to the satisfaction of a teacher who himself had authority over the text.

Two enduring features of Islamic culture illuminate the importance of person-to-person transmission. One is the literary form of the *tazkirah* or collective biography. This might cover the scholars or a particular time, place or family. It would record, after family details, who a man's teachers were, what he

¹² Ibn Khaldun, *Muqadimmah*, p. 431.

learned, and whom he taught. His own contributions to knowledge would be listed along with anecdotal evidence bearing on his reliability as a transmitter of knowledge. Such biographies, which record the person-to-person transmission of the central messages of Islam have been kept to the present day. The second feature is the enormous respect given to the teacher in the Islamic tradition. 'know that ... one does not acquire learning nor profit from it', declared a thirteenth-century educational manual 'unless one holds in esteem knowledge and those who possess it. One [must also] glorify and venerate the teacher.'¹³ The situation was little different at the beginning of the twentieth century. 'The pupil should walk several paces behind his teacher', declared a leading north Indian scholar, 'he should strive to be the first to do his teacher's bidding ... and should they differ his teacher's word was final.'¹⁴

When a student began to sit at the feet of teachers in a madrasa, he would have already have learned some Arabic, and, if fortunate, would have memorised the Quran. In the madrasa the student would study books of Arabic grammar and syntax, *Hadith*, Quran commentary, rhetoric, the law and jurisprudence. Occasionally there was a little arithmetic, which 'ulama needed if they were to give a fatwa on inheritance; there might also be some works in medicine or Sufism. Theology, and its supporting subjects of logic and philosophy, was not acceptable to all. Madrasas in the Hanbali, Maliki and Shafi'i traditions either

¹³ F.E. Von Grunebaum and T. M. Abel, trans. And eds., *Az Zarnuji: Ta`lim al-Muta'llim at-Ta`alum: Instruction of the Student: the Method of Learning* (New York, 1947), p. 32.

¹⁴ Statement by Mawlana `Abd al-Bari, the leading scholar in the early twentieth century of the Farangi Mahall family of Lucknow (India), *Altaf al-Rahamn Qidwai, Qiyam-i Nizam-i Ta`lim* (Lucknow, 1924), p. 86.

banned it altogether or offered it a fitful toleration; only madrasas in the Hanafi and Shia legal traditions found it generally acceptable.

By 1500 great classical texts had become established in most of the fields of madrasa knowledge. There was, for instance, the *Hidaya*, the basic work of Hanafi law written by Shaykh Burhan al-Din al-Marghinani (d.1196). There was also the widely accepted Quran commentary of al-Baydawi. As time went classical works such as these gained in authority; few new books were introduced. `Ulama tended to confine themselves to writing commentaries and supercommentaries on the classical version until it was all but overwhelmed by layers of annotation. Sometimes, as in the case of the commentaries of those two great rivals at the court of Timur, Sa`ad al-Din Taftazani (d. 1389) and Mir Sayyid Sharif Jurjani (d. 1413), such works helped to make classical texts highly accessible to madrasa students. Indeed, they remained in use down to the twentieth century.

The tendency of this educational system was conservative. It was understandable. `Ulama knew that they had received the most precious favour from God in the Quran and the life of Muhammad; they also knew that up to the day of judgment there would be no further guidance for man. It was their foremost duty to strive to pass on this gift in as pure a form as possible alongside the skills to interpret it for the benefit of the community. The further they got from the time of the Prophet, the greater was the chance that part of God's precious favour would be corrupted or lost. There was no likelihood of Muslims discovering more of the truth, only a danger that they might

preserve less of it. Rote learning played an important part in the process of preservation and transmission, although at the higher levels scholars were concerned to emphasise the importance of understanding. Much of the knowledge, too, was normative. Men learned how things ought to be.

There was much in the educational system, too, which was elitist and had tendencies towards the 'closed shop'. There seems to have been an enduring fear amongst the 'ulama of late medieval Cairo that a democratization of education might lead to a lowering of standards. They inveighed against those colleagues who made much of their fine clothes and huge turbans for fear that emphasis on finery rather than learning might enable the ignorant to parade themselves as scholars. They inveighed against their colleagues who were so unprofessional as to repeat themselves, fall asleep in class, or be just plain wrong; such poor performance made it difficult to distinguish between the merely lazy and the fundamentally unqualified.¹⁵ Nevertheless, there were also 'ulama who believed that all Muslims should have access to madrasa learning. 'To lock the door of a madrasa', declared Ibn al-Hajj (d. 1336-37) 'is to shut out the masses and prevent them from hearing the [recitation of] knowledge ... and being blessed by it and its people [i.e. the 'ulama]'.¹⁶ This was not a good thing. If the ulama kept knowledge from the common people, they would not benefit from it themselves.

It is evident, despite the fear of some 'ulama for their elite professional standing, that knowledge and the special privilege of transmitting it, did seep into the wider community.

¹⁵ Berkey, *Transmission of Knowledge*, pp. 182-88.

Sixteenth-century Timbuktu, for instance, was not only a great centre of learning but also one in which there is reason to believe there may have been universal male literacy; well over 150 Quran schools served a population of roughly 70,000.¹⁷ In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Cairo the many madrasas were well-integrated into the local community. Madrasa functionaries, for instance, Quran readers, muezzins and porters, took lessons as well as students, and so did the common townsfolk. At no point, however, were the people so involved in the transmission of knowledge as in the public recitations of *Hadith*. On these occasions, which were manifestations of piety as well as of learning, ordinary Muslims were able to acquire *ijazas* and become transmitters of precious knowledge which reached back through the Prophet's companions to Muhammad himself.¹⁸ Even women were able to play their part. al-Sakhawi (d.1497) offers 1075 biographies of women amongst over 11,000 in his collective biography of the notables of his time. Of these 400 had some form of religious education. Amongst the various fields of knowledge women were most prominent in *Hadith*, where they were able to rival men. Remarkable in the field was Aysha, daughter of Muhammad ibn al-Hadi of Damascus. Such was her learning that the noted scholar of *Hadith*, ibn Hajr al-Asqalani (1372-1449), listed her amongst his teachers with pride, and such was her reputation that a seventeenth-century historian rated her the most reliable transmitter of her time.¹⁹

16 Berkey, *Ibid.*, p. 202.

17 Elias N. Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: the role of Muslim scholars and notables 1400-1900* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 23.

18 Berkey, *Transmission of Knowledge*, pp. 200-01.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 175-79.

The ulama were not only an elite within their own society. Many formed part of an international elite. This was so because learning was a truly international affair in which much was shared across the Islamic lands. As one might expect many books tended to be shared within regions dominated by a particular school of law. So, for instance, the Maliki `ulama of Timbuktu used many of the same books as those of Morocco and Egypt.²⁰ So, too, did the Hanafi `ulama of the Ottoman Empire, Central and South Asia, where the helpful texts of Taftazani and Jurjani were especially popular. Moreover, because of the greater openness to the rational sciences of the Hanafis and the Shias, there was a considerable commonality of texts in this field between the Shia `ulama of the Safavid empire and the Sunni `ulama of the Mughal empire.²¹ Then, of course, there were works used through the Sunni world regardless of law school. This was naturally the case with the six canonical collections of Hadiths, but so it was too with great works of synthesis such as al-Ghazzali's *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, which was used from Spain through to Southeast Asia,²² or Ibn Suyuti's (d. 1505) Quran commentary Jalalain, which was as popular in West Africa as it was in North India.²³

A shared world of books, of course, meant a shared world of debate and reference. When in 1637 `ulama fell out in the Sumatran sultanate of Atjeh over the appropriate attitude to

20 Saad, *Timbuktu*, pp. 74-81.

21 Francis Robinson, 'Ottomans-Safavids-Mughals: Shared Knowledge and Connective Systems', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol 8, Pt 2, 1997, pp. 151-84.

22 Peter Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Response* (London, 2001), p. 185; Ibn Khaldun, *Muqadimmah*, pp. 352, 358, 360.

23 Saad, *Timbuktu*, p. 76; Robinson, 'Ottomans-Safavids-Mughals', p. 182.

adopt to the works of Ibn al-`Arabi (d. 1240) echoes of the dispute reached Medina where one of the leading scholars of the day, Ibrahim al-Kurani, wrote a magisterial work to resolve the points at issue.²⁴ Notable in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the export of knowledge and understanding in the rational sciences from Iran into India, and then the subsequent export of outstanding Indian scholarship in the field to Egypt and West Asia where it helped to generate a revival of studies in the field.²⁵

`Ulama had wide-ranging connections throughout this world of shared knowledge. There were the connections of family within a region, the descendants of Ghulam Allah, who from at least the fifteenth century spread throughout the Upper Nile valley,²⁶ or the Farangi Mahal family of Lucknow, who from the late seventeenth century spread throughout India.²⁷ There were the connections of families across regions, for instance, those of the Majlisi family, which from the seventeenth century came to spread from the cities of Iraq and Iran through to Murshidabad and Bengal,²⁸ or those of the Aydarus family, which expanded from South Arabia in the sixteenth century to the point in the eighteenth century when it had important branches throughout the Indian ocean rim from the islands of Southeast Asia through India

24 A.H. Johns, 'Islam in the Malay World: An Explanatory Survey with some references to Quranic Exegesis', in R. Israeli and A.H. Johns eds., *Islam in Asia: Volume II, South and Southeast Asia* (Boulder, Co., 1984), pp. 115-61, and Riddell, *Islam in the Malay-Indonesian World*, pp. 125-32.

25 Robinson, 'Ottomans-Safavids-Mughals', p. 163.

26 P.M. Holt and M.W. Daly, *A History of the Sudan from the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*, 3rd ed., (London, 1979), p. 33.

27 Francis Robinson, *The `Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (London, 2001), pp. 103-20.

28 J.R.I. Cole, 'Imami Shi`ism from Iran to North India, 1722-1856: State, Society and Clerical Ideology in Awadh' (Phd. Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1984), pp. 90-101.

to East Africa.²⁹ No less important were the travels of the `ulama and the connections of teachers and pupils which resulted.

Indeed, `ulama took very seriously the exhortation in *Hadith* that they should travel in pursuit of knowledge. al-Ghazzali, for instance, studied in Tus, Jurjan and Nishapur, and travelled as a scholar to Baghdad, Mecca, Damascus, Egypt and back to his native Tus. `Ulama, as we might expect, travelled from Timbuktu to the great centres of learning in Egypt and West Asia, but equally a noted scholar, such as al-Maghili of Tlemcen, thought it worth his while to travel to the West Sudan. Great schools, such as Ibrahim al-Kurani's school of *Hadith* at Medina, attracted pupils from all over Asia, from the Hijaz, the Fertile Crescent, Anatolia, India and the Indonesian islands. No recorded life reveals more dramatically how much was shared through the Islamic world than that of the great traveller, Ibn Battuta (1304-1369), who between 1325 and 1354 journeyed its length and breadth - the equivalent of well over forty modern countries - worked as a qadi from time to time, lived well, and dangerously, and survived to dictate a humane and engaging account of his adventures.

b. The Sufis and the transmission of spiritual knowledge

Sufis, or the `friends of God' as they were known, were more ubiquitous than the `ulama. The latter tended to flourish in cities and in areas and at times when there was state power willing to support the law. Sufis, on the other hand, reached into all levels of society and to all parts of the world where Muslims lived. The style and methods of the Sufis, moreover, were

²⁹ John Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (Boulder,

particularly well adapted to those areas, often on the frontiers of Islam, where kin and tribal organization were paramount.

From the tenth century groups of disciples had begun to gather round particular Sufi shaykhs in order to learn how to follow his (or occasionally her) particular *tariqa* or way of travelling towards direct experiential knowledge of God. Sometimes they came together in *khanqahs*, or Sufi hospices, in which they might live an ordered devotional life and which were often dedicated to charitable and missionary work. Whether part of a *khanqah* community or not all disciples performed the central ritual of their *tariqa*, which was their shaykh's *dhikr* or special way of remembering God. This might involve repeating the name of Allah to focus the mind away from earthly things, or using breath control techniques to intensify the concentration. Often there was a collective ritual in which adepts by means of chant, music or dance sought ecstatic religious experience. Once a disciple had placed himself in the hands of a shaykh he had to obey him at all costs, even if it meant going against the *shari`a*; he was to be, as the saying went, 'like a corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead.'

Central to the transmission of mystical knowledge across time and space were the connections of shaykhs and disciples. Particularly important in this regard were the shaykh's *khalifas*, or successors, gifted disciples, who were designated to pass on the shaykhs teaching and to make disciples of their own. They became part of their shaykh's *silsila*, or chain of transmission, which went back through him and his predecessors to the saint who

had founded their mystical way. Often *khalifas* became saints themselves.

On being initiated into a mystical way the disciple would swear an oath of allegiance to his shaykh, receive from him a *khirqā* or cloak, and be told the special protective prayer, *hizb al-bahr*, of the founder of the way. The disciple would also receive a certificate which would show the chain of transmission of spiritual knowledge, starting with the Prophet, and moving down through a companion, usually `Ali, and then through one or two of the great mystics of the early Abbasid period, down to the saint who founded his way, and then down to his shaykh. The newly initiated mystic would know, in the same way as a pupil who received an *ijāza* to transmit *Hadith*, that he had become a repository of precious knowledge that went back to the foundation of the Muslim community.

The focal point for the followers of a particular Sufi way was the shrine of the founding saint. More often than not this was managed by the saint's physical descendants whose functions may well have come to be more ceremonial than spiritual. Such men administered the fabric of the shrine, its Sufi community, its endowments and its charitable works. The shrine of the founder of a major Sufi order, say that of `Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166) in Baghdad, whose chains of succession spread throughout much of the Islamic world, was a focus of international pilgrimage. Lesser shrines were the focus of regional and local cults. As in the case of the madrasa, the rectangular shrine, often surmounted by a dome and surrounded by a compound with a *khanqah* and cells in which disciples might

stay, became a feature of Islamic architecture. The custom of visiting the shrines of saints, moreover, became a feature of Islamic devotional life. Some Muslims did so because they felt that the resting places of those who were close to God were propitious for prayer, others because they wished to beg the saint to intercede for them with God. Each year the shrine would hold a major rite, known as the *`Urs*, or wedding; it celebrated the moment when the saint's soul became united with God. A major feature of the rituals on this day would often be the recollection of the stages, in some traditions in devotional songs, by which spiritual knowledge passed down from the Prophet to the saint.

From the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Sufis came to be organised in orders which came to number in their hundreds. The differences between them stemmed in part from variations in their rituals and their ways of remembering God and in part from the extent to which they followed the *shari`a* or permitted deviations from it. Overall they represented relatively loose affiliations, indeed, loose enough for Naqshbandi Sufis in one part of the world to follow practices which might be deeply disapproved of by Naqshbandis in another. Nevertheless, the connections of spiritual brotherhood across the world, which these loose affiliations offered, were key channels along which Islamic knowledge travelled and by means of which it might, when the need arose, be reshaped and revitalized.

Some orders achieved influence across the Islamic world. The Suhrawardiyya, for instance, who were notably careful in observing the sharia and who looked back to the Baghdadi Sufis,

Abu Najib al-Suhrawardi (d. 1168) and his nephew Shihab al-Din (d. 1234), spread their influence from West Asia to the east Indian province of Bengal. The Shadhiliyya, who found the roots of their tradition in the Spanish sufi Abu Madyan Shuayb (d. 1197), not only broadcast their message from Morocco through North Africa to West Asia but also inspired several modern revivalist movements, as well as becoming the favoured home of European and American recruits to Sufism. The Naqshbandiyya, who derive their name, although not their specific way from Shaykh Baha al-Din Naqshband (d. 1389) whose mausoleum lies just outside Bukhara, expanded throughout most of Asia and from the eighteenth century were both the inspiration for the most vigorous movements of Islamic assertion and the channels along which they spread. The Qadiriyya, however, who were descended from the Baghdadi saint `Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, came to be the most widespread order. In West Africa in recent centuries they too have been associated with movements of Islamic assertion.

The influence of many orders, while still of great importance, has been restricted to a particular region. In India, for instance, the most influential order was the Chishtiyya, who made a point of eschewing those with political power. India, however, was also host to many irregular orders, such as the Malamatis and the Qalandars, whose practices were influenced by indigenous customs and not bound by the *shari`a*. In West Asia the Rifaiyya were remarkable for their *dhikr*, which made a loud and harsh sound - hence their sobriquet the 'Howling Dervishes', and their strange practices such as fire eating and biting the heads off live snakes. In Anatolia and the Ottoman

empire, there were the Bektashiyya, the favoured order of the Janissaries, who made confessions to their shaykhs, observed a Christian-like ritual involving bread, wine and cheese, and believed in a quasi-Trinity of God, Muhammad and Ali. There were also the Mawlawiyya, who were inspired by the great mystical poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) and who, on account of their *dhikr* of a constantly turning dance, have come to be known in the West as the 'Whirling Dervishes'.

Alongside the consolidation of the Sufi orders there also developed a mystical understanding of enormous importance to the development of Islam. The author was Ibn al-`Arabi, a Spanish Sufi educated in Seville. On a pilgrimage to Mecca he had a vision of the divine throne in which he was told that he stood foremost amongst the saints. This inspired his masterwork *The Meccan Revelations* in which he developed his doctrine of the unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*). God was transcendent. Yet, he argued, because all creation was a manifestation of God, it was identical with Him in essence. It followed that God was necessary for men to exist but equally man was necessary for God to be manifest. In expounding his doctrine Ibn al-`Arabi turned frequently to the famous tradition which conveys a message from God but is not included in the Quran: 'I was a hidden treasure and wanted to be known, thus I created the world that I might be known.' Moreover, in expressing his vision of the relationship between the divine Being and the material universe he generated both a rich symbolic vocabulary and produced a masterly synthesis of Sufi, philosophic and neo-Platonic thought.

For centuries Ibn al-`Arabi has been accused of pantheism by

scholars, Muslim and Christian alike. His works have been banned in parts of the Islamic world. Nevertheless, in recent years Western scholars have come to accept that he always maintained God's transcendence and that his vision rested firmly on the Quran. What concerns us, however, is his impact on the subsequent development of Sufism and Muslim religious understanding.

It should be clear, first of all, that such was Ibn al-`Arabi's achievement and authority that he set the agenda for Sufi discourse, which from now on focused on his concept of the unity of being and on the problems of reconciling his vision of God's relationship to the material world with that of the Quran. Not least among the vehicles of his ideas was poetry. And this was as much the case for poetry in Arabic or the African languages as it was either for poetry in the high Persian tradition, that of a Rumi, a Hafiz or a Jami, or for poetry in the regional languages of Asia, that of a Yunus Emre (d.1321) in Anatolia, a Bullhe Shah (d. 1754) in the Indian Punjab and a Shah `Abd al-Latif (d. 1752) in Indian Sind. The outcome of such widespread absorption of the idea of the unity of being was to lessen the importance of observing the *shari`a*. If everything was God, it made it less important to strive to put into practice on earth His revelation. Ecstatic union with Him would be enough. But, if some might regard this as the downside of Ibn al-`Arabi's impact on the development of Islamic history, they could not fail to see that it also had an upside. The greater tolerance and flexibility which Ibn al-`Arabi's vision brought to Muslim approaches to non-Muslim traditions, whether he intended the outcome or not, helped Sufis throughout the world build bridges

between Islam and a myriad local religious traditions.

Sufis had a key role in transmitting the message of Islam into regions and into societies where `ulama were unlikely to move with confidence or ease. Indeed, in areas of the wider Islamic world they were often the first bearers of the faith. We know relatively little of their role in the central Islamic lands. However, we know rather more of their achievement in North Africa, Anatolia, the Balkans, Central and South Asia. Here they filtered into lands freshly conquered by Muslim armies or worked their way along international trade routes and prepared the ground for the consolidation of Islam. It is not possible to consider the firm establishment of Islam in Central Asia or in the Sind and Bengal regions of India without considering the role of Sufis. Further afield Sufis were also crucial. In some, although not all, parts of sub-Saharan Africa the founding myths of Islam go back to the arrival of wandering holy men. In Java they refer to the work of nine saints; in Sumatra to the arrival of a Sufi on a ship sent by the `king of Mecca'.³⁰

In transmitting their messages to non-Muslim societies Sufis, bolstered by the apparently latitudinarian thought of Ibn al-Arabi, tended not to insist on a strict application of the sharia. For one thing they did not have the power to do so; for another they were usually concerned to minimise conflict with local religious traditions. Their policies, in fact, were normally to seek points of contact and social roles in the host community. They shared their knowledge of religious experiences

³⁰ Nehemia Levtzion ed., *Conversion to Islam* (New York, 1979); R. M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur 1300-1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton, 1978); and R.M. Eaton, *the Rise of Islam and the Bengal*

with men of other spiritual traditions. They operated as intermediaries and buffers between men and women and all the uncertainties of life beyond their control. By accommodating themselves to local needs and customs they gradually built a position from which they might draw their clients into an Islamic milieu and educate them in Islamic behaviour. In the process they insinuated their ideas into the very interstices of human lives, as indicated by the following verses created by a Sufi for women of India's Deccan to sing as they ground corn:

The *chakki's* [grindstone] handle resembles *alif*,

which means Allah,

And the axle is Muhammad, and is fixed there.

In this way the truth-seeker sees the relationship

Ya bism Allah, hu hu Allah.

We put grain in the *chakki*

To which our hands are witnesses.

The *chakki* of the body is in order

When you follow the *shari`at*.

Ya bism Allah, hu hu Allah.

Trans. R. Eaton³¹

Sufis manned the frontline in the transmission of Islamic knowledge, both to the masses in long-conquered societies and to largely non-Muslim societies as a whole. On that frontline the shrines of the saints were the fortresses and outposts. Here Sufis tendered religious services to the 'natives' and in the process fostered manifold expressions of what has come to be known as 'popular Islam'. Thus, worship of trees, fish or

crocodiles might become associated with particular shrines and pre-Islamic cults relating to St. George or Khwaja Khidr might be incorporated into local Muslim beliefs; shrines, and also mosques, were often built on former Christian or Hindu holy places. Thus, too, a range of superstitious practices might be tolerated, for instance, the lighting of candles, the sweeping of the tomb, or the tying of a piece of cloth to the shrine to remind the saint of a request. Relics there were a-plenty. Most shrines had the relics of a saint, his cloak, rosary or turban. One or two places, not necessarily saint's shrines, might have relics of the Prophet, hairs from his beard or casts of his footprint. At such points the practice of Islam tended to reflect more the beliefs and customs of the societies it embraced than the behaviour and attitude laid down in the *shari`a*.

That Sufis through much of the Islamic world should permit such practices could be a major source of tension with the `ulama. The latter were bound to feel ill-at-ease when they witnessed the flouting of the *shari`a*. Some `ulama of the Hanbali school of law refused to have anything to do with Sufis at all. Most notable amongst their number was Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah of Damascus (d. 1328). When Ibn Battuta, who accepted most Sufi practices, heard him preach in 1326, he thought he had `a kink in his brain'.³² Soon afterwards, moreover, the Mamluk government seemed to agree and placed him in prison where he died of a broken heart. Nevertheless, from the seventeenth century onwards there was increasing sympathy for his uncompromising attitude to

³¹ Eaton, *Bijapur*, p. 163.

³² H.A.R. Gibb, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta A.D. 1325*, I, (New Delhi, 1993), pp.135-37.

Sufism. And today he is regarded as embodying the spirit of the Muslim revival and his books are much reprinted. This said, the tension between the bearers of the two great shaping forces of Islam should not be overestimated. Many `ulama were Sufis, many Sufis were deeply learned in the *shari`a*. It was widely felt that the best learned and holy men were those who had achieved a judicious balance of the two forms of knowledge.

No less a source of tension was that between the transmitters of the two great Islamic traditions of knowledge and the wielders of political power. The tension was expressed in part in the conflicting attitudes of different groups of Sufis and `ulama towards princes. 'My room has two doors,' declared the great Chishti saint Nizam al-Din Awliya, whose order laid especial emphasis on avoiding princes; 'if the sultan comes through one door, I will leave by the other.'³³ Yet there were Sufi orders, like the Suhrawardiyya and the Naqshbandiyya, which had a particular interest, for some of their history at least, in political power. Moreover, `ulama have always tended to support political order, however much they may have disapproved of individual princes, because such order was necessary to administer the *shari`a*.

On occasion the tension could be expressed in the actual breakdown of relationships between the transmitters and princes. It was such a breakdown which led the Mughal emperor, Jahangir, to throw Naqshbandi shaykh, Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624) into gaol after he had crowed over the death of the emperor's father, Akbar, whom he described as 'one of the tyrants of the age' who

³³ Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya*

had 'tortured many 'ulama' because of their strict compliance with the *shari`ah* and their unflinching obedience to the prophets.'³⁴ It was such a breakdown, too, that led the leading scholar of late-seventeenth century Iran, Muhammad Baqir Majlisi (1627-98), to have tens of thousands of wine bottles in the Shah's cellars publicly smashed.³⁵ But ultimately the two sides had a considerable degree of interdependence; Muslim princes often needed the legitimation of Sufi and 'ulama support no less than the transmitters needed the support of state power for their knowledge.

c. 'Ulama, Sufis, their Islamwide connections and revival

When in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Muslim power began to decline, tensions between the transmitters of knowledge and the wielders of political power came to be exacerbated. Scholars and mystics responded by re-assessing the knowledge appropriate to their societies. There was a return to first principles, the Quran and *Hadith*, and increasing scepticism of the value of the rational sciences, which by the nineteenth century extended to much of the scholastic inheritance of the middle ages. There was also growing criticism of activities at Sufi shrines, in particular saint worship and anything that suggested that saints or the Prophet might intercede for men with God. Alongside this, as might be expected, Ibn al-'Arabi's Sufi vision came increasingly to be questioned, although his vocabulary retained a powerful hold over all discourse; the

(Delhi, 1991), p. 105.

³⁴ Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi: An Outline of his Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of History* (Montreal, 1971), p. 33.

arguments of Ahmad Sirhindi, who had countered Ibn al-`Arabi's doctrine of the `unity of being' with one of `unity of witness', replacing the concept that `all was God' with one that `all was from God', became more widely accepted. Associated with the process were scholars who had always restricted their sources of authority to the Quran and *Hadith*, not least among them the adherents of the Hanbali school of law, who had always resisted both Sufism and the rational sciences. Of particular influence were the works of Ibn Taymiyya. Among those influenced was the extreme example of this new position, Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab, the Arabian reformer whose name became a metaphor for Islamic puritanism. These new emphases in the repertoire of Islamic knowledge were of great importance. They meant a shift from an Islam which was integrationist to one which was increasingly exclusive. They also meant a shift from an Islam which was `other worldly' to one which increasingly concerned to put God's guidance into practice on earth.³⁶

This new emphasis in knowledge and on action was conveyed through much of the Islamic world by Sufis. This might seem odd as the new emphasis attacked many Sufi practices and in its extreme manifestation Sufism itself. Sufis, however, responded creatively to the reforming challenge; they absorbed the emphasis on the Quran and Hadiths as authorities within their Sufi framework, reduced the significance of ecstatic practices in their rites and reviewed the role of metaphysical tendencies in their beliefs. A notable feature of this reformed Sufism was a

³⁵ Roger Savory, *Iran under the Safavids* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 241.

³⁶ For an overview of this shift, see Francis Robinson, `Other-Worldly and This-Worldly Islam and the Islamic Revival' in this volume.

new attention to the life of the Prophet manifest in growing numbers of ceremonies celebrating his birthday and of biographies of his life. Some in emphasising how they followed the path of the Prophet gave themselves the title *Tariqa Muhammadiyya*.³⁷ Not all Sufis were swept into these new forms of thought and behaviour. Nevertheless, the overall outcome was a sufi revival in which old orders were revitalised and new ones founded.

This new Sufi spirit was carried through much of Asia by the Naqshbandiyya who inspired notable movements in Indonesia, China, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Networks of Naqshbandi scholars, moreover, played important roles in much of India and the Middle East. The new Sufi spirit was carried through much of Africa by orders flowing directly or indirectly from the Khalwatiyya, who had much influence in Egypt in particular amongst the `ulama of Cairo's al-Azhar. There were, for instance, the Tijaniyya, whose influence spread to the Maghrib, the Nilotic and central Sudan, the Sammaniyya, whose influence also spread to the Nilotic Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia, the Sanusiyya, who spread from their headquarters in the Libyan desert through much of the Sahara, and the Sahiliyya, who became the dominant force in Somalia. Not infrequently these and other Sufi movements raised calls for jihad. On occasion such jihads led to the successful founding of Islamic states as in the case of the Sultanate of Sokoto, which was established in the early-nineteenth century by `Uthman dan Fodio in northern Nigeria, or as in the Mahdist state, which was established in the late-nineteenth century by Muhammad Ahmad in

³⁷ Annemarie Schimmel, *and Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill, 1985), p. 216-238.

the Nilotic Sudan.³⁸

Recent scholarship has revealed many of the connections of `ulama and Sufis which helped to underpin this Islam-wide movement of revival and reform. The role of leading scholars of *Hadith* in Medina such as Ibrahim al-Kurani and Muhammad Hayya al-Sindhi has been noted. Among their pupils were many figures in the eighteenth-century revival: `Abd al-Rauf al-Sinkili (1617-90) of Sumatra, Shah Wali Allah of Delhi, Mustafa al-Bakri (d. 1749) of Cairo, Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab, Shaykh Muhammad Samman (1717-95) and at one remove `Uthman dan Fodio. The way in which the pupil-teacher connections of the Mizjaji family of the Yemen might overlap with those of the Medinan teachers of *Hadith* has been explored; it reveals that they include several of the figures above as well as Muhammad Murtada al-Zabidi (d.1791), an Indian pupil of Shah Wali Allah who became a great figure in late-eighteenth century Cairo. Many revivalist scholars were also members of the Naqshbandi order. It is possible, for instance, to demonstrate that Ma Ming Hsin (d. 1781), who spread the 'New Sect' teaching amongst the Chinese Naqshbandiyya from 1781, had studied under a member of the Mizjaji family no less than it is possible to show how Mawlana Khalid Baghdadi (1776-1827), after studying under the successors of Ahmad Sirhindi in Delhi, stimulated Naqshbandi activity throughout Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, Anatolia and the Balkans, some of which continues down to the present. Probably at no previous time in Islamic history were the connections of `ulama and Sufis across the world as many and as vigorous as they were in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless,

³⁸ Francis Robinson, *Atlas of the Islamic World since 1500* (Oxford, 1982),

their interactions were complex. We are well-advised to be cautious when ascribing meaning to these connections and to be aware of the importance of local circumstances in stimulating developments. This said the movement of ideas and also of mood, along the connections of `ulama and Sufis does illustrate the very real way in which these connections were the arteries and veins of the Islamic world along which the lifeblood of knowledge and fresh vitality flowed.³⁹

3. Responses to the challenge of the West and Western learning since 1800

The success of the West and the expansion of its sway over much of the Muslim world in the modern era transformed the context in which Islamic knowledge existed. Now there was the questioning and subversive presence of Western knowledge which year by year became more accessible and competed for a place in Muslim minds. Thus, European scientific achievement and the secular philosophies of the Enlightenment came to challenge belief in God and the ideas that He created the world, that He revealed Himself to man, and that through following His revelation man might gain salvation. Such knowledge also came to challenge much of the vast store of learning which Muslims had cherished down the centuries for the support of revelation and for the service of the community.

However, not only did Western knowledge become steadily more widely available in the Muslim world, it also came to have

pp. 118-29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, and Nehemia Levtzion and John O. Voll eds., *Eighteenth-Century Renewal and Reform in Islam* (New York, 1987).

the support of the state: Islamic knowledge came to be uncoupled from power. To a greater extent this happened as a consequence of colonial rule. The British, the French, the Dutch, the Russians developed the structures of the modern state in their empires and made it the means both to provide Western systems of education and to replace much of the *shari`a* with Western law codes. To a lesser extent the growth of state support for Western knowledge also came as a consequence of resistance to the possibility of colonial rule. Thus, the *Tanzimat* reformers of the Ottoman empire in the nineteenth century or the Pahlavis of Iran in the twentieth strove to make their states strong enough to keep the foreigner out. The independence of Muslim states from the mid-twentieth century, moreover, made little difference. The process of entrenching Western knowledge in Muslim societies continued, their states usually adopting an ethnic or secular identity rather than an Islamic one. Admittedly, some token state support might be available for Islamic learning, but if it existed in any force it did so because society wished it.

To this challenging environment for Islamic knowledge should be added economic, social and technological changes sparked off by the West. The penetration of Western trade and capital into Muslim societies stimulated large commodity trades, and, as Muslims learned to buy Western finished goods, the destruction of local industries. Associated social changes saw the emergence of new elites to manage the new economic and political structures - technocrats, bureaucrats, bankers, intellectuals, industrial workers, all people who belonged to an existence outside the old urban communitarian world of the artisan workshop, the bazaar

trader, the caravanserai and the quarter, which had long supported the work of `ulama and Sufis. Associated technological changes saw the introduction of steam and electrical power, the telegraph, telephone, wireless and television communications.

In this rapidly changing context Muslims found that they must review the body of Islamic knowledge inherited from the past and see how they might make it relevant to the present. They discovered that the application of technology to the transmission of Islamic knowledge transformed access to it. They came to note, moreover, the increasing marginalisation of `ulama and Sufis from the activities of Muslim societies as a whole. It should be understood that in each society responses to the new context differed according both to the nature of Western imperialism and to the particular balance of social, economic and political forces within it.

a. Responses to Western knowledge

There were three broad strands of response: reformism, which re-evaluated but did not change in essence Islamic knowledge inherited from the past; modernism, which aimed to reconstruct that knowledge in the light of Western knowledge and the new economic and political realities; and Islamism, which was no less respectful of the new economic and political realities but wished to make them, and Western knowledge, subordinate to their utopian understanding of revelation. Within and beyond these broad strands, it must always be remembered, there were many competing voices.

Reformism carried the spirit and the principles of the

eighteenth-century movement of revival and reform into the period of European domination. In the process it developed a form of 'Protestant Islam'. Without worldly power to create an Islamic society, responsibility for doing so was transferred to the individual Muslim conscience. Reformists knew, and it was often a heavy burden of knowledge, that they must will God's purpose on earth. The dissemination of knowledge of God's word and of the life of His messenger were at the heart of the reformist effort. Typical vehicles were the Deoband movement founded in north India in 1867, which by its centenary claimed to have established 8934 schools, or the Muhammadiyah of Indonesia founded in 1912, which by 1938 had founded 1700 schools, or the Nurcular, who learned their message of personal discipline and moral responsibility from the writings of the Turkish Naqshbandi shaykh, Said Bediuzzaman Nursi (1873-1960). Reformists attacked the presence of logic and philosophy in the madrasa curriculum; the historic victories of al-Ashari and al-Ghazzali were no longer seen to be enough. Only amongst the Shias, and particularly in Iran, did the flame of Islamised Hellenic learning to continue to burn brightly. Reformists, too, in their concern to shape the human conscience, continued the assault on Ibn al-'Arabi's doctrine of the unity of being, on Sufi practices which suggested intercession for man with God, and on the host of local customs which intermingled with Islamic practice. To compensate for the loss of the emotional and spiritual dimensions of the faith which went with successful attacks on Sufism yet more attention was paid to the life of the Prophet. His biography came in the twentieth century to be a prolific genre of devotional

literature. Thus the reformists allowed only a sanitised proportion of the inheritance of Islamic knowledge from the Middle Ages to continue into the present. At the same time, they paid varying attention to what the new learning from Europe had to offer; the Deobandis would have nothing to do with it while the Muhammadiyah found a place for modern science. Reformism was typically the response of the `ulama more often than not supported by traditional mercantile elites.⁴⁰ Modernism was concerned to face up to the reality of Western knowledge and Western dominance. At the least modernists wanted Muslims to command Western science and technology, which they perceived to be the source of Western strength. At the most they wished to review Islamic knowledge as a whole, including its founding pillars, the Quran and *Hadith*, in the light of Western learning. Leading figures amongst the modernists were Sayyid Ahmad Khan of India, Namik Kemal of Turkey (1840-88), Shaykh Muhammad `Abduh of Egypt, and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Not all these men had the same approach to Western and Islamic knowledge, but they knew that the way of the `ulama was that of certain decline. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries many modernists were attracted to Pan-Islamic responses to the West, but, after World War I brought the final onset of Western domination, they came to focus their attention increasingly on the nation-state. For the Indian modernist, Muhammad Iqbal, this was a nation-state to be

40 Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1920* (Princeton, 1982); Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzamn Said Nursi* (New York, 1989); M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, 3rd. ed. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 215-16 ff., but note that what is referred to as `modernism' in the Indonesian context would normally be regarded as `reform' elsewhere; Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree* (Gadjah Mada, 1983).

built on Islamic principles, a Pakistan, but for the vast majority modernism became secularism and the future was envisaged in secular states, the Turkey of Ataturk or the Iran of Reza Shah, in which religion was a private affair. Modernists, therefore, had little place for the medieval inheritance of Islamic knowledge. In the schools they established, and even more in the educational systems fostered by secular Muslim states, Western languages and some of the Western humanities came to be studied alongside Western science and technology. Modernism was typically the response of Muslim ruling elites. For many these elites in seeking Western material strength ran the grave risk of throwing out the Islamic baby with the bathwater.⁴¹

It is not surprising that reformism and modernism attracted criticism. 'To make speeches through hate may be inflamed, to compose writings through which hearts may be wounded', complained the modernist Altaf Husayn Hali of the ways of the reforming 'ulama, 'This is the way of our theologians.'⁴² 'Give up your literature', announced the Indian satirical poet, Akbar Allahabadi (1846-1921), to the products of secular education, 'forget your history, break all your ties with shaykh and mosque - it could not matter less. Life's short. Best not worry overmuch. Eat English bread, and push your pen, and swell with happiness.'⁴³

It was in part because neither reformism nor modernism produced satisfactory answers to the problem of what was appropriate knowledge for a Muslim society that Islamist answers

⁴¹ Lapidus, *Islamic Societies*, pp. 557-71.

⁴² Christopher Shackel and Javed Majeed, *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam* (Delhi, 1997), p. 169.

came to be proposed. Islamists started from the principle that all human life, and therefore all knowledge, must be subordinated to the guidance sent by God to man. As one Islamist said of the essence of that guidance; the shari`a offers a complete scheme of life 'where nothing is superfluous and nothing wanting'.⁴⁴ Notable leaders of islamism have been Sayyid Abul A`la Mawdudi of Pakistan, Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) of Egypt, Ali Shari`ati and Ayat Allah Khomeini of Iran; notable organisations are the Jama`ati Islami of South Asia and the Muslim Brotherhood of the Arab World. Islamists have little difficulty with most of Western knowledge, although Darwinian evolution which contradicts the Quranic story of the creation, literally understood, has been a sticking point. They are alarmed, however, by the failure of the reformists to face up to the meaning of Western knowledge and are horrified by the way in which the modernists and the secular nationalists seem to have capitulated to it in its entirety. The dominance of the views of the latter, whom they characterise as suffering from 'Westoxification' or 'Occidentosis', over the educational systems of most Muslim states, is the great object of their attention. They have striven to Islamise the scholarly disciplines of the West; thus has been born, for instance, Islamic economics and Islamic sociology. Islamists represent, by and large, new elites who are competing for power. They have no desire at all to bring back into service the Islamic learning of the Middle Ages but rather aim to place Western learning in an Islamic mould and direct it to Islamic ends.

43 Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, 'The Satirical Verse of Akbar Ilahabadi (1846-1921)', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 8, I, p. 29.

44 S.A.A. Mawdudi, *the Islamic Law and Constitution*, 9th ed., (Lahore,

Over the past two hundred years the proper relationship of revealed knowledge to all the knowledge available in Muslim societies has been hotly disputed. If the trend for much of the period has been for Western learning increasingly to command centre stage, recent years have seen this position challenged by new champions of Islam. This said, there has been one clear loser in this age of revolution: it is the mystical understanding of the faith. Reformists have subjected much of Sufism to withering fire. Modernists and secularists have fostered the wintry climate of post-Enlightenment knowledge. For Islamists, Sufis are an irrelevance. The new Muslim understandings of the past two centuries, and the new Muslim mastery of self and the environment, have rendered the world a less enchanted place; the realm in which the spiritual knowledge of Islam could flourish has shrivelled.

b. The revolution in the availability of knowledge and its consequences

Side by side with the uncoupling of Islamic knowledge from power in many societies, there has been a revolution in its transmission. This change began with the adoption of print during the nineteenth century. In some societies, for instance, Egypt, the process was tentative; leading scholars saw printing as a danger to religion and social order. In others, and particular where, as in India, Muslims were acutely aware of the threat to their faith from colonial rule, it was more positive. Reformist ulama seized upon print technology as a key means to spread their understanding of Islamic knowledge widely through society so that

it might be defended both against the corruptions of local cults and the seductions of Western learning. By the end of the nineteenth century in north India over 700 newspapers and magazines in Urdu, the main Muslim language, had been started; four to five hundred books were being published every year, many of them on religious matters.

The adoption of print was just the first stage in the democratization of Islamic knowledge. Further stages came with the translation of the Quran, *Hadith* and other major Islamic texts into many of the languages of the Muslim peoples of the world. For the first time many Muslims have come to be able to read these texts in languages they understand. This development has been accompanied by the adoption of other forms of media technology and mass communication, radio, television, film, tape cassettes; it is now, for instance, well known that the telephone and the tape cassette were crucial to bringing the voice of Ayat Allah Khomeini to the Iranian people in the months immediately preceding the Iranian revolution. These new technologies of communication have opened up new forums of interaction and made new forms of contact among Muslims possible: they are the arenas in which the great disputes over knowledge take place; they are the vehicles through which new Islamic understandings, and especially those of the *ʿ*ulama, have been taken to the margins of the Islamic world; they are the means through which official versions of Islam are broadcast to the peoples of those states where Islam has once more come to be aligned with power.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ For the impact of print and its wide ramifications see *ʿ*Islam and the Impact of Print in South Asia' in Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (Delhi, 2000), pp. 60-104.

The rapid spread of print culture was to bring about a decline in the oral transmission of Islamic texts and a weakening of that person to person transmission of the central messages of the faith which reached back to the time of the Prophet. The process of change was already far advanced in Mecca in the 1880s. 'All students now bring to lecture printed copies of the text which is being treated', observed the Dutch orientalist, Snouck Hurgronje, on his visit in 1884-5, 'which circumstance has entirely changed the mode of instruction.'⁴⁶ Arguably changes of religious understanding accompanied the penetration of the printed text into the believer's world; processes barely perceptible in the era of manuscripts were greatly intensified. Always remembering that these processes were also influenced by other aspects of the modern transformation of Muslim societies, we should note: the emergence of a new historical consciousness - Muslims came less to see their faith as one in constant decline since the time of the Prophet and more one which might achieve greater stages of perfection on earth; the growth of an understanding of Islam as a system of beliefs and practices to which a commitment might or might not be made rather than part of the natural warp and weft of life; the tendency to see the Quran less as ritual object and more as the subject of contemplative study; and the change in the image of the Prophet from Perfect Man to perfect person on which different groups of Muslims might impose their ideal vision. This said, oral transmission of religious guidance continues to have greater meaning for the Muslim than it does for the Christian. In all Muslim societies

46 C. Snouck Hurgronje, J.H. Monahan trans., *Mekka in the Later Part of the*

the memorisation and recitation of the Quran remains a highly prized feat. Moreover, it is unlikely that print will ever have quite the impact it has had on the West; already the electronic media, which help to sustain some forms of oral transmission, make rapid headway. It is worth noting, too, the approach of the Tablighi Jama`at, or Missionary Society, which was founded in India in the 1920s and is the most widely followed organisation in the Muslim world. This society insists that its missionaries learn texts by heart and communicate them person to person.⁴⁷

The coming of print, and the process of translation, brought much greater freedom of access to religious knowledge. Muslims now could study with relative ease the great religious texts outside the framework of the madrasa and the authoritative interpretations of the ulama. Moreover, they increasingly did so from a basic education in Western learning. Not surprisingly this new freedom of access led to the new freedom of interpretation represented by the Modernist and Islamist strands, as well as a host of sectarian positions. But, if print and translation helped to liberate Muslims from the monopoly of the `ulama, it also helped to dissipate religious authority. Now, there were many new voices claiming to speak for Islam, voices which drew force from their acceptance of the realities of Western strengths in knowledge and power. The authority embedded in interpretations of texts handed down over hundreds of years has come to be much reduced.

Inevitably, the changing position of Islamic knowledge in

19th Century (Leiden, 1970), p. 192.

47 Yoginder Sikand, *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi-Jama'at (1920-2000): A Cross-country comparative survey* (Hyderabad, 2002).

Muslim societies, as well as its changing nature, has led to shifts in the position of the classical transmitters of learning. The position of Sufis declined with that of Sufism. Increasingly they are to be seen less as the cherishers of the glories of spiritual understanding at the heart of the Islamic tradition than as so many confidence tricksters fleecing the ignorant and deluding the gullible. Their devotional practices, moreover, have come to be less for the service of God, as in the case of the whirling dance of the Mawlawiyya of Turkey or the mystical songs (qawwali) of the Sufis of South Asia, than for that of the television programme or the tourist office. Only where Sufis were able to provide some substantial function for modern Muslim societies have they remained overtly, or covertly, at the centre of affairs, as for instance in the case of the Muridiyya who have maintained a leading position in Senegal through their dominance of the peanut business, or in those of the Naqshbandiyya and the Qadiriyya in the Caucasus who kept the flame of Islam alight under Soviet rule.

`Ulama, too, were pushed towards the margins of society as their functions as teachers and lawyers were supplanted by the secular systems of the modern state. Their decline, however, does not equal that of the Sufis. For many Muslims in the twentieth century the `ulama have remained symbols of a Muslim backwardness from which they wished to escape. Nevertheless, they still command residual respect in many societies. They may be treated as state employees, as in Turkey, or given places of honour on state occasions - the rector of al-Azhar was sitting next to Egypt's president, Anwar Sadat, at the official parade where he

was shot in 1981. Nevertheless, it would be pointless to deny that for much of the twentieth century the `ulama have been moving steadily down the paths of marginalisation trodden by the Christian clergy of the Western world since the Enlightenment. But, as for Sufis, there have been specific circumstances where the `ulama have been able to remain at the centre of affairs. This is notably the case of the Shia `ulama in the Lebanon, in Iraq and in Iran, where they have been the most effective representatives of their communities against oppression.

As `ulama have come to be pushed to one side, their role as transmitters and interpreters of Islam to their societies has come to be challenged, if not supplanted, by scholars from outside the madrasa world. Many Muslim thinkers whose writings are prime sources of Islamic understanding for their societies are of this ilk: Iqbal and Mawdudi of Pakistan and al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb of Egypt fit this category, as does Khurshid Ahmad, the economist from Pakistan, Hasan Turabi, the lawyer from the Sudan, Rashid Ghannoushi, the teacher from Tunisia, and Mehdi Bazargan, the engineer from Iran. The personnel who carry forward the missionary and educational programmes of the notable Islamic organisations of the latter part of the twentieth century, for instance, the worldwide Tablighi Jama`at, the populist Muslim Brotherhood, the elitist Jama`ati Islami, the Islamic Tendency movement of Tunisia or the Islamic Salvation Front of Algeria, are almost entirely lay educated. They have, moreover, in common with many other Islamic organisations born in recent years, strong support amongst student organisations, which they often dominate.

Since 1800 Western learning has confronted the Islamic world with very much the same problem that Hellenistic learning presented it from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. There is, however, one substantial difference. al-Ashari and al-Ghazzali met the rational and philosophical challenges of Hellenistic learning from a position of Muslim dominance; modern Muslims have confronted the challenges of Western science from a position of weakness. In spite of this they have shown considerable creativity in their responses. They have striven to move Islamic civilisation forward in the world while keeping it rooted in revelation. As the `ulama and Sufis have seemed to fail to meet the challenge, new types of scholar have emerged from the community to provide answers. All these scholars, whether old or new, have interacted with each other across the Islamic world, so Muhammad `Abduh was influenced by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Sayyid Qutb by Mawdudi. As yet, however, there has been no widely accepted consensus which would enable Muslims once more to regard the pursuit of learning as an act of worship. The issue of the proper relationship of revealed and earthly knowledge remains acute. What is important is that it remains the subject of vigorous debate.