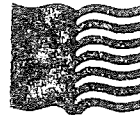


Performing Religion:  
Actors, contexts, and texts  
Case studies on Islam

Edited by  
Ines Weinrich



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The Quest for Sufi Transmissions  
as Links to the Prophet:  
Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1791) and his  
Encyclopedic Collections of Sufi *salāsīl*

Stefan Reichmuth

Introduction

Since the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Islamic centuries, Sufis have often attempted to link their devotional activities to the model of the Prophet and his Companions. An early collector of Sufi biographies like al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) counts them in his “Classes of Sufis” (*Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*) among God’s Friends (*awliyā*), who in each generation were usually sent by Him after His Prophets to keep their community on track in words and deeds.<sup>1</sup> As the devotional attachment to the Prophet gained in importance in later medieval times, when he had come to be widely seen as the centre of the created cosmos and as a living reality for the believers, the significance of Sufi leaders for religious life increased in equal measure.<sup>2</sup>

By then it had become accepted practice among Sufis to go beyond the exclusive educational attachment to one Sufi shaykh and his community, and to look for affiliations to other masters and their ways. This search for different masters as sources of blessing (*baraka*, *tabarruk*) and guidance (*irshād*), and the collection of the garments (*khirqā*), which were usually awarded by them as tokens of performative initiation into their circle, came to be regarded as meritorious in Sufism after the establishment and subdivision of the Sufi *ṭuruq*.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, and increasingly from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, we see a new type of Sufi manual emerging. These manuals describe a variety of Sufi “ways” with their specific garments and practices of *dhikr*, and also list their different chains of affiliation which were collected by the authors and often traced back by them to pious Successors or Companions, or even to the Prophet himself. In these treatises, a genre which became increasingly common in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the collection of Sufi chains of transmission (*salāsīl*) shows obvious parallels with the practice established for the Prophetic Tradition

<sup>1</sup> Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān Muḥammad al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya 1423/2003, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Fritz Meier, “The Mystic Path”, in: *The World of Islam. Faith. People. Culture*, Bernard Lewis, ed., London: Thames and Hudson 1976, 123 f.; Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, Leiden: Brill 2000, 176 f.

<sup>3</sup> Sg. *ṭarīqa*, originally denotes the Sufi “way”. It was later also used for the organized Sufi community headed by a shaykh, as such often translated as “order” or “brotherhood”.