

“The Monasticism of My Community is Jihad”: A Debate on Asceticism, Sex, and Warfare in Early Islam

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Abstract

This article explores Muslim attitudes towards asceticism in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries by examining the famous Prophetic hadith: “Every community has its monasticism, and the monasticism of my community is *ḡihād*.” The hadith serves as a lens for assessing several broader phenomena, including early Muslim views of Christian monasticism, the rejection of celibacy in Islamic culture, and the promotion of a new code of sexual ethics in the post-conquest Middle East—what this article terms the “second sexual revolution of Late Antiquity.” It concludes by presenting several accounts of Christian monks who converted to Islam and joined the *ḡihād*, as well as Muslim soldiers who converted to Christianity and became monks.

Keywords

Monasticism, *ḡihād*, asceticism, Abbasids, Ibn al-Mubārak, ‘Uṭmān b. Maẓ‘ūn, sexuality in Islam, celibacy, conversion, Christianity under Muslim rule

* I first learned about these traditions from Fritz Zimmermann in Oxford and conducted my initial research on them under Michael Cook in Princeton. Over the years, the article benefited from the feedback of Peter Brown, Alexander Treiger, Lev Weitz, Luke Yarbrough, and John Zaleski; audiences at Princeton University and the School of Oriental and African Studies (London); and the anonymous readers commissioned by *Arabica*. They have greatly improved the final product. All remaining mistakes are my own.

Résumé

Cet article analyse les attitudes des musulmans vis-à-vis de l'ascétisme aux deuxième/huitième et troisième/neuvième siècles en examinant le fameux hadith du Prophète : « Chaque communauté a sa forme de monachisme et le monachisme de ma communauté est le *ġihād* ». Le hadith sert comme fenêtre pour évaluer plusieurs phénomènes plus larges, dont les points de vue des premiers musulmans sur le monachisme chrétien, le rejet du célibat dans la culture islamique et la promotion d'un nouveau code d'éthique sexuelle dans le Moyen Orient après la conquête – ce que cet article désigne par l'expression « seconde révolution sexuelle de l'Antiquité tardive ». Il conclut en présentant plusieurs récits de moines chrétiens qui se convertirent à l'islam et pratiquèrent le *ġihād*, ainsi que des soldats musulmans qui se convertirent au christianisme et devinrent moines.

Mots clefs

Monachisme, *ġihād*, ascétisme, Abbassides, Ibn al-Mubārak, 'Uṭmān b. Maẓ'un, sexualité en islam, célibat, conversion, christianisme en islam

Introduction

Interactions between Muslims and Christians shifted between two modes through much of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries. On the one hand, theirs was a testy relationship circumscribed by polemic and fierce competition for converts. On the other hand, Muslims and Christians lived side-by-side throughout much of the region, intermarrying, sharing neighborhoods, and engaging in commerce together.¹ What is more, as time went on, the ranks of the Muslim community swelled with converts from Christian backgrounds,

1 For introductions, see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press ("Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the ancient to the modern world"), 2008; Jack Boulos Victor Tannous, "Syria between Byzantium and Islam: Making Incommensurables Speak", PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2010, p. 379-569; now Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press ("Divinations"), 2015, p. 142-182.

bringing with them their former cultures and religious beliefs.² It was an encounter shaped by hostility and amicability in equal parts.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that Muslims sometimes struggled to differentiate themselves from their non-Muslim subjects. This was especially true in places like Egypt or Syria, where Muslims remained a demographic minority for generations after the conquests. We can sense the risks and anxieties surrounding this state of mixture in a hadith made famous by Meir Jacob Kister: "Whoever imitates a (non-Muslim) people is one of them" (*man taṣabbaha bi-qawm fa-huwa minhum*).³ One way Muslims resisted the threat of "imitation" was by embracing practices perceived as opposite to those of Christians and other non-Muslims. Thus, a related group of hadith exhorted Muslims to "do things differently" (*ḥālifūhum*) than those around them.⁴ This applied to a range of quotidian concerns, including hair styles, dress, handshaking, and horseback riding. Though mundane, these prescriptions were meant to endow the early Muslims with a distinct social identity, and furthermore, to reinforce the political hierarchy between rulers and ruled. These were part of a wider campaign aimed at shielding Muslims from the potentially damaging effects of assimilation, lest they disappear in a sea of larger, older, and more deeply rooted communities in the Near East and Central Asia.

Among the most important perceived areas of imitation between Muslims and Christians was asceticism. The first generations of Muslims were deeply impressed by the Christian monks they encountered across the newly conquered territories and assimilated many of their ideas and practices. Not everyone, however, was pleased by these contacts. They were even less pleased by

2 Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 33-42.

3 M.J. Kister, "Do Not Assimilate Yourselves . . .': *Lā tashabbahū*", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 12 (1989), p. 321-371; I borrow the phrase "state of mixture" from the Pahlavi term *gumēzišn*, meaning the state of human history in which different groups (Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians) exist together in uneasy tension; highlighted recently in Richard Payne, *State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*, Oakland, University of California Press ("The transformation of the classical heritage", 56), 2015.

4 Ḥabīb Zayyāt, "Simāt al-naṣārā wa-l-yahūd fī l-islām", *Al-Machreq*, 43 (1949), p. 161-252; Albrecht Noth, "Problems of Differentiation between Muslims and Non-Muslims: Re-Reading the 'Ordinances of 'Umar' (*al-Shurūṭ al-'Umarīyya*)", in *Muslims and Others in Early Islamic Society*, ed. Robert G. Hoyland, Aldershot-Burlington, Ashgate ("The Formation of the classical Islamic world", 18), 2004, p. 103-124; Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press ("Cambridge studies in Islamic civilization"), 2011, p. 58-98; Luke Yarbrough, "Origins of the *ghiyār*", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 134 (2014), p. 113-121.

the emergence of a renunciant streak in Islam that risked blurring the line with monasticism (even if Muslim ascetics drew on varied influences, both endogenous and exogenous to Islam).⁵ Thus, at the precise moment when Islamic asceticism was coming into its own in the early Abbasid period, there emerged an opposition—led mostly by proto-Sunnī scholars—determined to fend off what it regarded as the most blatant forms of Christian influence, in particular, celibacy. The hadith which circulated from the mid-eighth century onward as a result of this debate on asceticism, sex, and warfare constitute the subject of the following essay. It is concerned with some of the oldest forms of Muslim renunciant piety which came to be practiced at the start of the Abbasid period, before the emergence of classical Sufism in the fourth/tenth century and beyond.

This article has two goals. The first is to use a select group hadith on the themes of monasticism and *ḡihād* to investigate attitudes towards asceticism in early Islamic tradition, more broadly. On the one hand, Muslims of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries looked upon monasticism as an emblem of pure, undiluted monotheism, but on the other, as a symbol of a corrupt and decadent Christian church. The second is to explain how and why early Muslims fused the practice of *ḡihād* with this ambivalent understanding of Christian monasticism. Furthermore, it is to show how this synthesis of heroic warfare and heroic asceticism helped Muslim ascetics to differentiate themselves from their Christian competitors at a time of heightened conversion and social mixing.

By exploring these themes, we can peer into one of the major changes in the moral texture of an entire region, what I shall refer to as the “second sexual revolution of Late Antiquity.” It was a revolution ushered in by the advent of Islam, which took root in the first/seventh, second/eighth, and third/ninth centuries, and which implicitly challenged the “first sexual revolution” of the period, brought about by the rise of Christianity generations earlier. Scholars rarely examine Muslim sexual ethics within the ecology of the late ancient world in

5 For general introductions to asceticism and Sufism, see Geneviève Gobillot, “Zuhd”, *EI*²; Louis Massignon and Bernd Radtke, “Taṣawwuf”, *EI*²; Jacqueline Chabbi, “Remarques sur le développement historique des mouvements ascétiques et mystiques au Khurasan, III^e/IX^e siècle-IV^e/X^e siècle”, *Studia Islamica*, 46 (1977), p. 5-72; Leah Kinberg, “What is Meant by *Zuhd*”, *Studia Islamica*, 61 (1985), p. 27-44; Christopher Melchert, “The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.”, *Studia Islamica*, 83 (1996), p. 51-70; Alexander Knysch, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, Leiden-Boston, Brill (“Themes in Islamic studies”, 1), 2000; Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press (“The New Edinburgh Islamic surveys”), 2007.

which they emerged, and therefore, tend not to be surprised by this transformation. But by the standards of the day, this shift was dramatic and decisive, especially in regions where Christians made up a majority of the population. What we are talking about is nothing short of the replacement of one set of principally male moral codes throughout much of the Middle East—about the virtues of permanent continence for the spiritual elite (that is, monks) and of sexual chastity for everyone else (that is, the laity and married clergy)—with a completely different set of values—about the virtues of virility and fertility for all believers. The second sexual revolution made widespread a distinctly unmonkish ideal of how sex and piety should fit together, an ideal that was intimately bound up in the valorization of warfare. This, in turn, implicitly challenged the hard-won consensus of the Christian church. The hadith on monasticism and *ḡihād* offer a snapshot of this transformation in real time, of the great debates it provoked among religious elites, as well as the quiet but profound changes it wrought for common people across the region.

I Traditions about Monasticism and *Ḡihād*

The traditions on monasticism (Ar. *rahbāniyya*, *siyāḥa*) and *ḡihād* are not unknown to scholars, having been studied in a preliminary fashion by Ignaz Goldziher, Louis Massignon, and Thomas Sizgorich, among others. Until now, however, they have never been examined systematically or with an eye to their historical context.⁶ The first Muslim scholar to transmit these hadith on a large scale was ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181/ 797), a famous *mutaṭawwi‘* (volunteer soldier) who combined a life of combat, scholarship, and prayer along the borders of the Abbasid caliphate. Near the beginning of his *Kitāb*

6 For prior discussion, see Arent Jan Wensinck, "Rahbāniyya", *ET*²; *id.*, *Concordances et indices de la tradition musulmane*, Leiden, Brill, 1933-1969, II, p. 312; Sidney H. Griffith, "Monasticism and Monks", in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur‘ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2001-2006, III, p. 405-407; Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, eds and transl. Samuel Miklos Stern and Christa Renate Barber, London, Allen and Unwin, 1966-1971, II, p. 357; Fritz W. Zimmermann, "Islam", in *The Study of Spirituality*, eds Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold, London, SPCK, 1986, p. 499; Sara Sviri, "Wa-rahbāniyyatan ibtada‘ūhā: An Analysis of Traditions Concerning the Origin and Evaluation of Christian Monasticism", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 13 (1990), p. 196, 200; Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, transl. Benjamin Clark, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1997, p. 99; Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press ("Divinations"), 2009, p. 180-186.

al-Ġihād—which, as Christopher Melchert has recently argued, was probably not compiled by Ibn al-Mubārak himself, but by one of his disciples—he included the following traditions:⁷

Muḥammad – Saʿīd b. Raḥma – Ibn al-Mubārak – al-Qāsim b. al-Faḍl – Muʿāwiya b. Qurra, who said: “He (*i.e.* the Prophet) used to say: ‘Every community (*umma*) has its *raḥbāniyya*, and the *raḥbāniyya* of my community is *ḡihād*’”⁸

Muḥammad – Ibn Raḥma – Ibn al-Mubārak – Sufyān – Zayd b. ʿAmmī – Abū Iyās – Anas b. Mālik – the Prophet, who used to say: “Indeed, every community has its *raḥbāniyya*, and the *raḥbāniyya* of this community is *ḡihād* in the path of God”⁹

Muḥammad – Ibn Raḥma – Ibn al-Mubārak – Ibn Lahīʿa – ʿUmāra b. Ġaziyya told me: “Indeed, *siyāḥa* was mentioned by the Prophet, and the

7 ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Ġihād*, ed. Nazīh Ḥammād, Tunis, Dār al-tūnisiyya li-l-našr, 1972, p. 35-36, n^o 15-17; Christopher Melchert, “Ibn al-Mubārak’s *Kitāb al-Jihād* and Early Renunciant Literature”, in *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Qurʾān to the Mongols*, eds Robert Gleave and István T. Kristó-Nagy, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015, p. 49-69, on the monasticism traditions, see p. 61; on Ibn al-Mubārak more generally, see now Feryal Salem, *The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunnī Scholasticism: ʿAbdallāh b. al-Mubārak and the Formation of Sunnī Identity in the Second Islamic Century*, Leiden-Boston, Brill (“Islamic history and civilization”, 125), 2016.

8 Muḥammad = Abū l-Ḥusayn Muḥammad al-Abnūsī, *Baġdādī, fl. ca 455/1063* (Ibn al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Ġihād*, p. 27).

Saʿīd b. Raḥma = Saʿīd b. al-Muġīra al-Ṣayyād, alias Abū ʿUṭmān al-Maṣṣīṣī, Mopsuestian, no death date (al-Mizzī, *Tahdīb al-kamāl fī asmāʾ al-riġāl*, ed. Baššār ʿAwwād Maʿrūf, Beirut, Muʾassasat al-risāla, 1980-1992, XI, p. 75-76, n^o 2359).

Ibn al-Mubārak al-Tamīmī, Ḥurāsānī, d. 181/797 (*ibid.*, XVI, p. 5-25, n^o 3520).

Al-Qāsim b. al-Faḍl al-Azdī, Baṣran, d. 167/783-784 (*ibid.*, XIII, p. 410-414, n^o 3812).

Muʿāwiya b. Qurra al-Muzanī, Baṣran, d. 113/731-732 (*ibid.*, XVIII, p. 210-217, n^o 6065).

9 For Muḥammad, Ibn Raḥma, Ibn al-Mubārak and Abū Iyās (= Muʿāwiya b. Qurra), see above, n. 8.

Sufyān = Sufyān b. Saʿīd al-Ṭawrī, great hadith scholar, Kūfan, d. 161/778 (al-Mizzī, *Tahdīb*, XI, p. 154-169, n^o 2407; cf. Hans-Peter Raddatz, “Sufyān al-Thawrī”, *EI*²).

Zayd b. al-Ḥawārī al-ʿAmmī, Baṣran, no death date (al-Mizzī, *Tahdīb*, X, p. 56-60, n^o 2102).

Anas b. Mālik al-Anṣārī, servant to the Prophet from boyhood, Medinese, died at Kūfa, d. ca 91/709 (*ibid.*, III, p. 353-378, n^o 568; Arent Jan Wensinck and James Robson, “Anas b. Mālik”, *EI*²).

Messenger of God said: 'For us, God has replaced that with *ġihād* in the path of God and *takbīr* (i.e. crying "God is Great!") atop all the hills'"¹⁰

Ibn al-Mubārak included a related tradition in his *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, a collection of hadith dealing with the theme of asceticism:¹¹

Abū 'Umar b. Ḥayyawayh – Yaḥyā – al-Ḥusayn – 'Abd Allāh – Ismā'īl b. 'Ayyāš – 'Aqīl b. Mudrik – Abū Sa'īd al-Ḥudrī, who said that a man came to him and said: "[What] am I enjoined to do, O Abū Sa'īd?" So Abū Sa'īd said to him: "You have asked what I myself once asked the Prophet before you, and he said: 'I enjoin you to fear God, for He is the master of all things. You should practice *ġihād*, for it is the monasticism (*raḥbāniyya*) of Islam; you should constantly remember God (*ḍikr Allāh*); and you should read the Koran. For in this way, your soul shall be in the company of heaven while your memory [is preserved] among men on earth. You should also practice silence except in [matters of] truth, for in this way, you shall overcome Satan.'"¹²

In the centuries after Ibn al-Mubārak's death, variations on these hadith also appeared in the collections of a number of other prominent Sunnī scholars,

10 For Muḥammad, Ibn Raḥma and Ibn al-Mubārak, see above, n. 8.

Ibn Lahī'a = 'Abd Allāh b. Lahī'a l-Ḥadramī l-U'dūlī, chief *qāḍī* of Egypt, Egyptian, d. ca 174/790-791 (al-Mizzī, *Tahḍīb*, xv, p. 487-503, n° 3513).

'Umāra b. Ġaziyya l-Anṣārī, Medinese, d. 140/757-758 (*ibid.*, xxi, p. 258-261, n° 4195).

11 'Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Zuhd wa-l-raqā'iq*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A'zamī, Beirut, Muḥammad 'Afīf al-Zuġbī, 1971, p. 289.

12 Abū 'Umar b. Ḥayyawayh, d. 382/992-993 (Ibn al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, p. 20-21).

Yaḥyā = Abū Muḥammad Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad, Baġdādī, d. 318/930-931 (*ibid.*, p. 19-20).

Al-Ḥusayn = al-Ḥusayn b. al-Ḥasan al-Sulamī, companion of Ibn al-Mubārak, Meccan, d. 246/860-861 (al-Mizzī, *Tahḍīb*, vi, p. 361-363, n° 1304).

'Abd Allāh = Ibn al-Mubārak (see above, n. 8).

Ismā'īl b. 'Ayyāš al-'Ansī, studied in Baghdad, Ḥimṣī, d. ca 181/797-798 (*ibid.*, 111, p. 163-181, n° 472).

'Aqīl b. Mudrik al-Sulamī, Syrian, no death date (*ibid.*, xx, p. 239-240, n° 3999).

Abū Sa'īd al-Ḥudrī = Sa'd b. Mālik al-Anṣārī, Medinese, d. 64/683-684 or 74/693-694 (*ibid.*, x, p. 294-300, n° 2224).

including Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855),¹³ Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889),¹⁴ Ibn Abī ‘Āšim (d. 287/900),¹⁵ Abū Ya‘lā l-Mawṣilī (d. 307/919),¹⁶ al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971),¹⁷ al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī (d. 405/1014),¹⁸ and al-Bayhaqī (d. 458/1066).¹⁹ Although the *isnāds* of these hadith vary from one to the next, it is clear that they first circulated in places like Baṣra, Damascus, Ḥimṣ, and Egypt starting in the early- to mid-second/eighth century. The majority were transmitted directly from Ibn al-Mubārak, which is significant for understanding their historical context and meaning, as we shall see below.

II The Meaning of the Terms *Rahbāniyya* and *Siyāḥa*

The first step in understanding these traditions is to grasp their key terms: what did the second/eighth-century scholars mean by *rahbāniyya*, *siyāḥa*, and *ġihād*, and how did these relate to one another? The word *rahbāniyya* derives from the Arabic root R.H.B, meaning “fear.” A minimalist translation of *rahbāniyya*, therefore, is “the state of living in fear,” but the most widespread meaning in the medieval period was “monasticism” or “the monastic state.”²⁰

- 13 Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, eds Šu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt and ‘Ādil Muršid, Beirut, Mu‘assasat al-risāla, 1995-2001, XXI, p. 317, n° 13807 (*isnād* per n. 8-9); XVIII, p. 297-298, n° 11774 (*isnād* per n. 12).
- 14 Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, Riyadh, Maktabat al-ma‘ārif li-l-naṣr wa-l-tawzī‘, 1996, p. 377, n° 2486 (*Kitāb al-Ġihād, Bāb fī l-naḥy ‘an al-siyāḥa*) (Damascene *isnād*); cf. Ibn al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, p. 290, n° 845, and below, n. 18.
- 15 Ibn Abī ‘Āšim, *Kitāb al-Ġihād*, ed. Abū l-Raḥmān Mus‘īd b. Sulaymān al-Rāšid al-Ḥumayd, Medina, Maktabat al-‘ulūm wa-l-ḥukm, 1989, I, p. 189, n° 34 (*isnād* per n. 12).
- 16 Abū Ya‘lā l-Mawṣilī, *Musnad Abī Ya‘lā l-Mawṣilī*, ed. Ḥusayn Salīm Asad, Damascus, Dār al-ma‘mūn li-l-turāt, 1984-1987, VII, p. 210, n° 1449/4204 (*isnād* per n. 9).
- 17 Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muġam al-kabīr*, ed. Ḥamdī ‘Abd al-Maġīd al-Salafī, Beirut, Dār iḥyā’ al-turāt al-‘arabī, 1984-1993, VIII, p. 168, n° 7708 (Ḥimṣī *isnād*); the hadith states that *rahbāniyya* is the “*ribāṭ* in the heart of the enemy[’s territory],” referring to the frontier fortresses from which the *mutaṭawwi‘a* would wage *ġihād*; cf. Nasser Rabbat, “Ribāṭ,” *ET* 2.
- 18 Al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *al-Mustadrak ‘alā l-ṣaḥīḥayn*, Cairo, Dār al-ḥaramayn li-l-ṭibā‘a wa-l-naṣr wa-l-tawzī‘, 1997, II, p. 91-92, n° 2453 (Damascene *isnād*, per n. 14).
- 19 1. Al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1993-1994, IX, p. 271, n° 18506 (Damascene *isnād*, per n. 14). 2. Al-Bayhaqī, *Šu‘ab al-imān*, ed. Abū Ḥāġar Muḥammad al-Sa‘īd b. Basyūnī Zaġlūl, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1990, IV, p. 14, n° 4226 (*isnād* identical to above).
- 20 E.g. Ḥalīl b. Aḥmad (d. ca 160/776), *Kitāb al-Ayn*, eds Mahdī l-Maḥzūmī and Ibrāhīm al-Sāmarrā’ī, Baghdad, Wizārat al-ṭaqāfa wa-l-i‘lām, 1980-1985, IV, p. 47-48; al-Azhari

At first glance, it may strike us as odd that monasticism was understood as a form of fear. After all, the *monachos* in Greek was “the solitary” (a meaning also expressed by the Latin *monachus*, the Syriac *ihūdāyā*, and the Ethiopic *monakos*).²¹

Scholars have offered several theories about the etymology of the term *rahbāniyya*—tracing it back to a Middle Persian loanword²² and a Syriac honorific, according to two well-known proposals.²³ It seems to me, however, that the most straightforward etymology is via the Syriac *dehlat Alāhā*, or “fear of God.” This term, which has Biblical roots (cf. Prov 9, 10, Act 10, 2; 13, 16; 13, 26; etc.),²⁴ was often used to express “piety” or “religion” more generally, much like *thrēskeia* in Greek or *dīn* in Arabic.²⁵ Thus, to label someone a “God fearer”

(d. 370/980), *Tahdīb al-luġa*, eds ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn and Muḥammad ‘Alī l-Naġġār, Cairo, al-Mu‘assasa l-miṣriyya l-‘amma li-l-ta’lif wa-l-anbā’ wa-l-naṣr, 1964-1967, VI, p. 290 ff.; cf. Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, Beirut, Librairie du Liban, 1968, III, p. 1168.

- 21 Greek: Geoffrey William Hugo Lampe (ed.), *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford-New York, Clarendon Press, 1961, p. 878-880. Syriac: Robert Payne Smith (ed.), *Thesaurus syriacus*, Oxford, E. Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1889, I, p. 855 (*dayrāyā*, “one who lives in a monastery”), 1588-1589 (*ihūdāyā*, “one who lives alone”). Ethiopic: Wolf Leslau (ed.), *Comparative Dictionary of Ge‘ez (Classical Ethiopic)*, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1987, p. 104 (*barrāh*, “desert-dweller”), 160 (*falāsi*, “exile, stranger, wanderer”), 183 (*gadāmāwi*, “wilderness-dweller”), 350 (*manakos*, from Gk.), 633 (*zaguḥāwi*, “the one who is enclosed”).
- 22 Shlomo Pines, “The Iranian Name for Christians and the ‘God Fearers’,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities*, 2 (1968), p. 143-152; which discuss the relationship between the Middle Persian *tarsāg*, “fearer, Christian,” and the Arabic *rāhib*, “fearer, monk.” The article is thought-provoking, but the proposed transmission via Middle Persian is circuitous and historically dubious. Why would pre-Islamic Arabs have looked to Zoroastrian Persian-speakers to describe a phenomenon which existed all around them in Late Antiquity? Cf. Theodor Nöldeke, “Review of Friedrich Schulthess, *Homonyme Wurzeln im Syrischen. Ein Beitrag zur semitischen Lexicographie*. Berlin, 1900,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 54 (1900), p. 163. For general discussion of the etymology, see Holger Michael Zellentin, *The Qur’ān’s Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2013, p. 222-228.
- 23 François de Blois, “*Naṣrānī* (Ναζωραῖος) and *ḥanīf* (ἐθνηχός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 65 (2002), p. 9 n. 49, which asserts a connection between Ar. *ruhbān* (“monks”) and Syr. *rawrbānē* (“lords,” pl. of *rabbā*).
- 24 For the most comprehensive study of the topic, see Folker Siegert, “Gottesfürchtige und Sympathisanten,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, 4 (1973), p. 109-164; cf. Lampe, *Greek Patristic Lexicon*, p. 1486-1487; Payne Smith, *Thesaurus syriacus*, p. 862-866.
- 25 On “fear of God” in late antique Syriac Christianity more broadly, see Adam H. Becker, “Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and ‘Fear’ as a Category of Piety in the Sasanian

(*daḥel Alāhā*) in Syriac was to call him a very pious person (and indeed, some Christians even referred to Muḥammad and the first Muslims in this way).²⁶ To my knowledge, the term never acquired a specifically monastic connotation in Syriac, as “fearer” (*rāhib*) later did in Arabic. Despite this, it is not difficult to see how monks came to be known as “fearers” in late antique Arabic culture, since these spiritual athletes were the most “afraid” of God’s people.²⁷

Aside from these etymological observations, the other significant point is that the term *rahbānīyya* is Koranic, though it appears only once in Kor 57, 27. On the basis of the late antique legal text known as the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, Emran El-Badawi and Holger Zellentin have recently cast doubt on whether the Koranic term *rahbānīyya* originally referred to monasticism specifically or to an office of clerical leadership more generally.²⁸ Whatever the word meant in its original context, nearly all Muslim exegetes of later generations interpreted it narrowly as “monasticism,” and it is this understanding that influenced the development of hadith literature in the second/eighth century and beyond. The syntax of the Koranic verse has been examined elsewhere, so a few summary remarks here will suffice.²⁹ Given the unclear quality of the grammar,

Empire: The Case of the *Martyrdom of Gregory* and the *Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh*,” *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 2 (2009), p. 300-336. I thank Jack Tannous and Nicholas Marinides for their advice on this matter.

- 26 In the *Chronicle of Zuqnīn*, written ca 775 CE: Jean-Baptiste Chabot (ed.), *Chronicon anonymum Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum*, Louvain, L. Durbecq (‘Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium’, 104; ‘Scriptores syri’, 53), 1949-1989, II, p. 149; cited in Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, p. 107.
- 27 Given this, it may not be a coincidence that early Arabic translations of the Bible rendered the term *duḥḥālā* (cf. Ps 9, 21; Jer 32, 21) as *tarahhub*, which medieval Muslim lexicographers regarded as a synonym for *rahbānīyya*, or “monasticism”; see Payne Smith, *Thesaurus syriacus*, p. 863. I owe this insight to Alexander Treiger.
- 28 Emran El-Badawi, “From ‘Clergy’ to ‘Celibacy’: The Development of *Rahbānīyyah* between the Qur’ān, *Ḥadīth* and Church Canon”, *Al-Bayān*, 11 (2013), p. 1-14; Holger M. Zellentin, “*Aḥbār* and *Ruhbān*: Religious Leaders in the Qur’ān in Dialogue with Christian and Rabbinic Literature”, in *Qur’ānic Studies Today*, eds Angelika Neuwirth and Michael A. Sells, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, p. 262-293.
- 29 Massignon, *Essay*, p. 100-104; Sviri, “Origin and Evaluation”; Christian C. Sahner, “Islamic Legends about the Birth of Monasticism: A Case Study on the Late Antique Milieu of the Qur’ān and Tafsīr”, in *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, ed. Robert G. Hoyland, Princeton, The Darwin Press (“Studies in late antiquity and early Islam”, 25), 2015, p. 393-435; cf. Edmund Beck, “Das christliche Mönchtum im Koran”, *Studia Orientalia*, 13/3 (1946), p. 17-25; Paul Nwiya, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique: nouvel essai sur le lexique technique des mystiques musulmanes*, Beirut, Dar el-Machreq éditeurs, 1970, p. 52-56; Jane Dammen McAuliffe,

I include two possible translations of the thorny clause, *ǧaʿalnā fī qulūb allādīna ttabaʿūhu raʿfa^{tan} wa-raḥma^{tan} wa-rahbāniyya^{tan} ibtadaʿūhā*:

Then We caused Our messengers to follow in their footsteps; and We caused Jesus, son of Mary, to follow and gave him the Gospel. [1. And We put in the hearts of those who followed him (*i.e.* Jesus) compassion, mercy, and the monastic state; they invented them—We did not prescribe them to them—only out of a desire to please God. Yet they observed them as they ought truly to have been observed] [2. And We put in the hearts of those who followed him (*i.e.* Jesus) compassion and mercy; and the monastic state they invented—We did not prescribe it to them—only out of a desire to please God. Yet they observed it not as it ought truly to have been observed].

As the translations above indicate, the crucial clause leaves open two possibilities: either *rahbāniyya* was a divine institution which was later corrupted by man (in which *rahbāniyya*, *raʿfa*, and *raḥma* form a triplet, and together supply the direct object *-hā* of *ibtadaʿū*) or *rahbāniyya* was a human institution which was corrupted from the start (in which *rahbāniyya* stands apart from *raʿfa* and *raḥma* and alone supplies the direct object *-hā* of *ibtadaʿū*).

Most medieval Muslim scholars settled for an in-between solution. As Sara Sviri and I have shown in separate articles, these exegetes often presented the verse within a larger narrative about the decadence of the religion of the prophet Jesus—which they understood as a manifestation of the pure monotheism of the pre-Islamic *ḥunafāʾ*. According to this reading, *rahbāniyya* emerged as a perversion of this original "Jesus religion" (*dīn ʾĪsā*). The exegetes contrasted the "bad monasticism" of *rahbāniyya* with the "good monasticism" of Jesus' real followers, who "went into seclusion" (*wa-ʿtazalū*) in order to flee the persecution of the mainstream church. They preserved this "Jesus religion" in hermitages, caves, and desert abodes, spending their days atop columns and wandering the earth (*nasīḥu fī l-arḍ*). Thus, we find in the early interpretive tradition a condemnation of mainstream, worldly monasticism (*rahbāniyya*) alongside praise for non-mainstream, solitary asceticism. As we shall see, the ambiguous status of monasticism inherent in the verse influenced the hadith of the early Abbasid period.

Qurʾānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 260-284.

The Koran criticizes worldly monks elsewhere, too, and as Zellentin and El-Badawi have shown, this discourse has deep roots in late antique literature.³⁰ Kor 9, 31, for example, accuses Christians of taking their priests and monks as lords instead of God. Kor 9, 34, meanwhile, assails priests and monks for devouring the riches of their communities. In both cases, the text is concerned with Christian clergy who exploit their spiritual authority for material gain. Thus, even if early Muslims sometimes held favorable views of monasticism, they looked negatively upon *rahbāniyya* as such.

It is important to note that Abbasid-era hadith use the term *siyāḥa* interchangeably with *rahbāniyya*. *Siyāḥa* derives from the Arabic root S.Y.Ḥ, which is connected to the idea of “journeying” or “flowing” (hence the term for “tourism” in modern Arabic). In Prophetic hadith, however, *siyāḥa* had a narrower religious meaning: wandering the earth as a form of ascetic exercise.³¹ The *sā’ih*, therefore, was the one who walked in the wilderness out of devotion to God. The connection between *siyāḥa* and monasticism in Arabic may derive from classical Ethiopic, in which the participle *sayəḥ*—from the verb *seḥa*, “to foretell or divine”—was one common word for “monk.”³² The Koran uses a related term several times, as in Kor 9,112, in which the believers are praised as “wanderers” (*sā’ihūn*; cf. Kor 9, 2). Kor 66, 5, meanwhile, characterizes good wives as those who “submit, believe, obey, perform penance, worship, and wander” (*mu’minātⁱⁿ qānitātⁱⁿ tā’ibātⁱⁿ ‘ābidātⁱⁿ sā’ihātⁱⁿ*). As Christopher Melchert has recently shown, the medieval exegetical tradition understood these terms—*sā’ihūn* and *sā’ihāt*—to mean “those who fast.”³³ He has explained the shift as reflecting the concerns of proto-Sunnī scholars in the late

30 Emran Iqbal El-Badawi, *The Qur’ān and the Aramaic Gospel Traditions*, New York, Routledge (“Routledge studies in the Qur’an”), 2014, p. 114-143; Zellentin, *Qur’ān’s Legal Culture*, p. 203-228; see also above, n. 28.

31 Wensinck, *Concordances*, III, p. 44-45; Hanna E. Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur’an*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, p. 1118; Ḥalil b. Aḥmad, *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, III, p. 272-273; al-Azharī, *Tahḏīb*, V, p. 173-174; Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, IV, p. 1482. For a general introduction, see Houari Touati, *Islam and Travel in the Middle Ages*, transl. Lydia D. Cochrane, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 157-169.

32 Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge’ez*, p. 522.

33 E.g. al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī min kitābihi Ġāmi‘ al-bayān*, eds Baššār ‘Awwād Ma’rūf and ‘Iṣām Fāris Ḥurristānī, Beirut, Mu’assasat al-risāla, 1994, IV, p. 164; VII, p. 329; cf. Muḥammad Murtaḏā l-Zabīdī, *Tāǧ al-ʿarūs*, ed. ‘Abd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāǧ, Kuwait City, Maṭba‘at ḥukūmat al-Kuwayt, 1965-2001, VI, p. 492.

eighth century, who wished to promote “an ethical model within reach of the average believer, which ruled out wandering.”³⁴

Indeed, for all the praise *ṣiyāḥa* garnered in the Koran, it attracted increasing criticism over time. Specifically, the peripatetic, anti-social aspect of *ṣiyāḥa* drew the anger of many medieval Muslim scholars. In their dictionary entries for the term *ṣiyāḥa*, for example, the lexicographers al-Ġawharī (d. ca 393/1002) and Ibn al-Aṭīr (d. 606/1210) glossed the famous hadith, “There is no *ṣiyāḥa* in Islam,” by stating that Muslims were forbidden from quitting the cities (*al-amṣār*), going around the earth, living in deserts, and abandoning the communal prayers.³⁵ Thus, even if the *sāʾih* was admired for his ascetic discipline, his habit of renouncing the world was considered problematic in later periods when extreme forms of piety were coming under fire. In a sense, the critique of *ṣiyāḥa* in medieval Muslim culture echoed that of late antique writers such as Cyril of Scythopolis (d. ca 559 CE), who wrote of wandering monks: “Just as a plant that is constantly replanted cannot bear fruit, a monk does not bear fruit if he moves from place to place.”³⁶

III Early Muslim Attitudes towards Christian Monasticism

The next step in understanding the hadith of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries is to situate them in a wider social context: how did Muslims in the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods regard the monks they encountered

34 Christopher Melchert, “The Interpretation of Three Qur’anic Terms (*Ṣiyāḥa*, *Ḥikma* and *Ṣiddiq*) of Special Interest to the Early Renunciants”, in *The Meaning of the Word: Lexicography and Qur’anic Exegesis*, ed. Stephen R. Burge, Oxford-London, Oxford University Press-Institute of Ismaili Studies (“Qur’anic studies series”, 13), 2015, p. 89-116, here: p. 96. On the conflation of *ṣiyāḥa* and *tarahhub* (“monasticism”) in connection with fasting in a later Sufi text, see Josef van Ess, *Die Gedankenwelt des Ḥārīt al-Muḥāsibī*, Bonn, Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität Bonn (“Bonner orientalistische Studien. Neue Ser”, 12), 1961, p. 115-119; I thank John Zaleski for this reference.

35 Cited in al-Zabīdī, *Taǧ al-ʿarūs*, VI, p. 491.

36 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, transl. Richard M. Price, with John Binns, Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications (“Cistercian studies”, 114), 1991, p. 26 (translation slightly modified). On the phenomenon in Late Antiquity more broadly, see Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press (“The transformation of the classical heritage”, 33), 2002.

as they settled throughout the Near East?³⁷ Their earliest impressions were no doubt colored by the words of the Koran, which as we have seen, were sometimes extremely negative, though at other times, surprisingly positive. For instance, Kor 5, 82 praises Christians as friends, for they possess “priests and monks who do not behave arrogantly” (*qissīsīn wa-ruhbān^{an} wa-annahum lā yastakbirūna*). Inspired by this verse, images of “good monks” became widespread in early Muslim literature. The most famous of whom was Baḥīrā, a monk from Syria who met Muḥammad when he was only a boy and predicted that he would one day become a mighty prophet.³⁸ The episode was designed to represent Islam’s eclipse of Christianity in salvation history. A similar motif appears in al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 310/923) *History*, where we find a monk predicting the site of the construction of Baghdad for the city’s founder, the Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 136/754-158/775).³⁹

Stories of encounters between Muslims and monks abound from the time of the conquests onward. In a sense, this should not surprise us, since monks were ubiquitous in practically every corner of the nascent caliphate with significant Christian populations. The Syriac chronicler John bar Penkaye (fl. late 7th c.), for example, writing only a few decades after the conquest of his native Mesopotamia, remarked that Muslims had received a “special commandment from God concerning our monastic station, that they should hold it in honor.”⁴⁰ Likewise, the East Syrian catholicos Išo’yahb III (d. 659 CE) wrote in a letter to a fellow bishop, “For also these Arabs (Syr. *ṭayyāyē*) to whom at this time God has given rule over the world, behold (how) they are toward us. Not only, as you know, do they not oppose Christianity. Rather, they are givers of praise to our faith, givers of honor to our Lord’s priests and holy ones, and givers of aid to churches and monasteries.”⁴¹ This curious affection for monks is echoed in

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- 37 For an introduction to the subject, see Bradley Bowman, “The Status of Christian Monasteries in the Early Islamic Period: An Examination of Early Muslim Attitudes toward Monastic Communities and Its Relevance to the Formative Period of Islam”, PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2013.
- 38 Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, transl. A. Guillaume, London-New York-Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 79-81. There is an extensive scholarly discussion of this episode; see esp. Barbara Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā: Eastern Christian Apologetics and Apocalyptic in Response to Islam*, Leiden-Boston, Brill (“The History of Christian-Muslim relations”, 9), 2009.
- 39 Al-Ṭabarī, *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari cum aliis*, ed. Michael Johan de Goeje, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1879-1901, III, p. 276.
- 40 Sebastian Brock, “North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century: Book XV of John Bar Penkāye’s *Ris Melle*”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 9 (1987), p. 57.
- 41 Išo’yahb III, *Ep. 14C*, cited in Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, p. 60.

a Syriac disputation text of the eighth century, in which a Muslim *amīr* proclaims that Christian monks will "enjoy the kingdom" after their deaths.⁴²

Such asides may help contextualize contemporary Muslim reports that the Prophet made special provisions for the protection of monks when his armies conquered new areas.⁴³ Elsewhere, we find stories of caliphs conversing with monks, of Muslims consulting monastic libraries, and of monks collecting donations made by Muslim pilgrims to their foundations.⁴⁴ The most famous genre connected to Christian ascetics were the "books of monasteries" (*kutub al-diyārāt*).⁴⁵ The best known of these—by the Fatimid *belle-lettrist* al-Šābuštī (d. ca 388/988)—details the author's journeys to monasteries across Iraq, Syria, northern Mesopotamia, and his native Egypt. These sources describe amusing and occasionally racy gatherings at which Muslims enjoyed song, drink, and the company of handsome Christian youths in monastic surroundings. The *diyārāt* books developed alongside a related genre known as *ḥamrīyyāt*, or wine poetry, sometimes set inside Christian monasteries. One such poem ascribed to the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd b. Yazīd (r. 125/743-126/744) and

42 David G.K. Taylor, "The Disputation between a Muslim and a Monk of Bēt Hālē: Syriac Text and Annotated English Translation", in *Sonderdruck aus Christsein in der islamischen Welt: Festschrift für Martin Tamcke zum 60. Geburtstag*, eds Sidney H. Griffith and Sven Grebenstein, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2015, p. 237.

43 Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rīḥ madīnat Dimašq*, ed. Šalāḥ al-Dīn Munaḡḡid, Damascus, Maṭbū'at al-maḡma' al-'ilmī l-'arabī, 1951, I, p. 391; cited in Ofer Livne-Kafri, "Early Muslim Ascetics and the World of Christian Monasticism", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 20 (1996), p. 107, n. 20.

44 1. 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz conversing with a monk: Abū Nu'aym al-Aṣḫānī, *Ḥilyat al-awlīyā'*, ed. Muḥammad Amīn al-Ḥānḡī, Maktabat al-Ḥānḡī-Maṭba'at al-sa'āda, Cairo, 1932-1938, IV, p. 91; cited in Livne-Kafri, "Early Muslim Ascetics," p. 108.

2. Muslims in monastic libraries: Abū Nu'aym al-Aṣḫānī, *Ḥilya*, II, p. 375.

3. Donations by Muslims to Christian monasteries: Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, Beirut, Dār Šādir, 1977, II, p. 500; cited in Souleiman Mourad, "Christian Monks in Islamic Literature: A Preliminary Report on Some Arabic *Apophthegmata Patrum*", *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies*, 6 (2004), p. 84, n. 16.

45 Al-Šābuštī, *Kitāb al-Diyārāt*, ed. Kurkīs 'Awwād, Baghdad, Maktabat al-muṭannā, 1966; cf. Clifford Edmund Bosworth, "al-Shābushtī", *ET*²; Hilary Kirkpatrick, "Monasteries through Muslim Eyes: The Diyarāt Books", in *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in 'Abbāsīd Iraq*, ed. David Thomas, Leiden-Boston, Brill ("The History of Christian-Muslim relations", 1), 2003, p. 19-37; Elizabeth Campbell, "A Heaven of Wine: Muslim-Christian Encounters in Monasteries", PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2009; Thomas Sizgorich, "Monks and their Daughters: Monasteries as Muslim-Christian Boundaries", in *Muslims and Others in Sacred Space*, ed. Margaret Cormack, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press ("Religion, culture, and history series"), 2013, p. 193-216.

discussed by Elizabeth Key Fowden is staged in a monastery in the Gūṭa Oasis outside Damascus, where the caliph is said to have led a pantomime Eucharist while he and his guests feasted.⁴⁶

Amidst this, it is the figure of the black-clad, wraith-like monk which left the deepest impression in early Muslim literature. These were Muslims *avant la lettre*: men who had obeyed the summons to *islām* long before the Prophet Muḥammad preached *Islam*. Such figures were considered icons of the spiritual life generally, so much so that Muslims renowned for their piety were given the moniker “the monk,” as with Abū Bakr b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, who was called the “*rāhib* of Medina and Quraysh.”⁴⁷ Solitary ascetics were also a source of wisdom for Muslims, as exemplified by the spiritual aphorisms ascribed to monks in early Islamic literature, like the ones collected and analyzed by Suleiman Mourad.⁴⁸ Solitary monks also featured in biographies of Muslim ascetics (Ar. *zuhhād*). Ibrāhīm b. Adham al-Balḥī (d. 161/778-779), for instance, apparently refined his ascetic routine through conversations with a monk named Abba Sim‘ān, according to Sufi hagiography.⁴⁹ And at Nineveh in northern Iraq, there are reports that the city walls were filled with Christian monks and Muslim ascetics living side by side.⁵⁰

46 Elizabeth Key Fowden, “The Lamp and the Wine Flask: Early Muslim Interest in Christian Monks”, in *Islamic Crosspollinations: Interactions in the Medieval Middle East*, eds Anna Ayşe Akasoy, James E. Montgomery and Peter Ernst Pormann, Exeter, Gibb Memorial Trust, 2007, p. 15.

47 Abū Nu‘aym al-Aṣḫānī, *Ḥilya*, II, p. 187; cf. Abū ‘Āmir al-Rāhib in Michael Lecker, *Muslims, Jews, and Pagans: Studies on Early Islamic Medina*, Leiden-New York-Köln, E.J. Brill (“Islamic history and civilization”, 13), 1995, *passim*.

48 Mourad, “*Apophthegmata patrum*”, *passim*.

49 Abū Nu‘aym al-Aṣḫānī, *Ḥilya*, VIII, p. 29-30; cited in Tor Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles: Studies in Early Islamic Mysticism*, transl. Birgitta Sharpe, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1987, p. 12-13; Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief*, p. 174; for background, see Russell Jones, “Ibrāhīm b. Adham”, *ET*²; Deborah Gerber Tor, *Violent Order: Religious Warfare: Chivalry, and the ‘Ayyār Phenomenon in the Medieval Islamic World*, Würzburg, Ergon (“Istanbuler Texte und Studien”, 11), 2007, p. 46-48. For a recent collection of such anecdotes, see Yūḥannā Ṣādir, *Ruhbān ‘arab fī ba‘ḍ siyar al-mutaṣawwifīn al-muslimīn*, Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, 2005; Christopher Melchert, “The Islamic Literature on Encounters between Muslim Renunciants and Christian Monks”, in *Medieval Arabic Thought: Essays in Honour of Fritz Zimmermann*, ed. Rotraud Hansberger, Muhammad Affi al-Akiti, and Charles Burnett, London-Turin, The Warburg Institute-Nino Aragno Editore (“Warburg Institute Studies and texts”, 4), 2012, p. 135-142.

50 Chase F. Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (“Cambridge studies in Islamic civilization”), 2000, p. 66.

IV The Rejection of Extreme Asceticism

If we wish to understand the significance of the hadith on monasticism and *ḡihād*, we must resist the impulse to see asceticism as something "out there," far beyond the confines of the early Muslim community. Rather, we must see renunciant piety as something taking root at the very heart of the Muslim *umma* starting in the first/seventh century and maturing during the course of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries. Indeed, we find general parallels to late antique ascetic practices among the first believers (including the Prophet himself), who engaged in intensive fasting, penance, almsgiving, and prayer.⁵¹ In fact, some ascetic practices in early Islam show such clear parallels to older ones in Christianity that the possibility of direct influence is impossible to ignore. These include ritualized crying (Ar. *bukāʾ*) and the remembrance of God (Ar. *dhikr Allāh*; cf. Greek *mnēmē Theou*), to name but two examples.⁵² Scholars have also identified tantalizing parallels between the writings of certain Christian mystics—such as Isaac of Nineveh (d. ca 700 CE) and the monks of Bēth Qaṭrāyē—and those of early Sufis.⁵³ This is not to suggest that

- 51 Fred McGraw Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Princeton, The Darwin Press ("Studies in late antiquity and early Islam", 14), 1998, 64-97; Claude Gilliot, "Le Coran avant le Coran : quelques réflexions sur le syncrétisme religieux en Arabie centrale", in *Le Coran : nouvelles approches*, ed. Mehdi Azaiez with Sabrina Mervin, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2013, p. 165-177.
- 52 On pious crying in Islam, see Fritz Meier, "Bakkā", *EI*². Anastasius of Sinai (d. ca 700 CE; one of the earliest Christian writers on Islam) referred to pious crying as a "gift of God granted by the Holy Spirit" and claimed that Jews and Arabs did not possess the Holy Spirit because they did not cry: Anastasius of Sinai, *Anastasii Sinaitae Quaestiones et responsiones*, eds Marcel Richard and Joseph A. Munitiz, Turnhout-Leuven, Brepols-Leuven University Press ("Corpus christianorum. Series Graeca", 59), 2006, p. 102; I thank Nicholas Marinides for this reference. On remembrance of God in Islam, see Louis Gardet, "*Dhikr*", *EI*²; Mary Hansbury, "Remembrance of God and its Relation to Scripture in Isaac III Including Insights from Islamic and Jewish Traditions", in *The Syriac Writers of Qatar in the Seventh Century*, eds Mario Kozah, Abdulrahim Abu-Husayn, Saif Shaleen Al-Murikhi and Haya Al Thani, Piscataway, Gorgias Press ("Gorgias Eastern Christian studies", 39), 2015, p. 93-121 (with further references).
- 53 This constitutes the subject of a forthcoming doctoral dissertation by John Zaleski at Harvard University; for a preliminary effort to explore these themes, see Serafim Seppälä, *In Speechless Ecstasy: Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature*, Helsinki, Finnish Oriental Society ("Studia orientalia", 98), 2003; Georg Günter Blum, *Die Geschichte der Begegnung christlich-orientalischer Mystik mit der Mystik des Islams*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz ("Orientalia biblica et christiana", 17), 2009; cf. Tor Andrae, "Zuhd und Mönchtum", *Le monde oriental*, 25 (1931), p. 296-327.

Muslim asceticism—known according to various names, including *zuhd* and *taṣawwuf*—were wholly dependent on Christian models. There was much that differentiated Islamic asceticism from late antique Christian precedents, not to mention inputs from Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, and innovations within Islam itself.⁵⁴ Rather, it is to stress that Islamic asceticism evolved in conversation with and in reaction to existing Christian practices.

Here we arrive at the most significant social context for the hadith on monasticism and *jihād* from the second/eighth century. Despite the obvious affinities between Islamic and Christian practices, there was one aspect of Christian asceticism that did not sit well with many Muslims of the period, and this was permanent celibacy, as Ignaz Goldziher and Tor Andrae noted long ago.⁵⁵ This was especially true of the nascent Sunnī scholarly community of the early Abbasid period, who rejected the excesses of the early renunciant tradition and advocated for a more “mild” approach to asceticism, as Nimrod Hurvitz has aptly termed it.⁵⁶ Almost all Christian ascetics in Late Antiquity and beyond renounced sex, while most of their Muslim counterparts—except for extreme renunciants—did not (this despite the passing justification for celibacy found in the Koran).⁵⁷ As Muḥammad is alleged to have said in a famous hadith preserved in the collection of Ibn Māğah (d. 273/887): “Marriage is my *sunna*, and whoever does not act in accord with my *sunna* has nothing to do with me!” This statement mirrors an even more categorical proscription from the collection of Abū Dāwūd: “There is no celibacy (*al-ṣarūra*) in Islam!”⁵⁸

One of the main vehicles for articulating anti-celibate attitudes in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries were stories about the companion ‘Uṭmān b. Maẓ‘ūn (d. ca 3/624-625). According to Muslim lore, ‘Uṭmān was the

54 For a recent argument against Christian influence, see Feryal, *Emergence of Early Sufi Piety*, esp. p. 142-143.

55 Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, p. 122-123; Andrae, *Garden of Myrtles*, p. 41-50.

56 Nimrod Hurvitz, “Biographies and Mild Asceticism: A Study of Islamic Moral Imagination,” *Studia Islamica*, 85 (1997), p. 41-65.

57 Kor 18, 46: “Wealth and children are the attractions of this worldly life, but lasting good works have a better reward with your Lord and give better grounds for hope”; a sentiment offset by the much larger number of verses in the Koran advocating for marriage and family; e.g. Kor 4, 1-4; 25, 74, etc.

58 Ibn Māğah, *Sunan*, ed. Muḥammad Fu‘ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī, Cairo, Dār ihyā’ al-kutub al-‘arabiyya, 1952-1953, I, p. 592, n° 1846; cf. Wensinck, *Concordances*, VI, 554 ff; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, p. 266, n° 1729; Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, IV, p. 1672, specifically “absence of intercourse with women.” For more on this, see El-Badawi, “From ‘Clergy’ to ‘Celibacy.’”

thirteenth man to convert to Islam, later taking part in the Hijra to Ethiopia.⁵⁹ According to some stories, the Prophet was quite fond of 'Uṭmān and mournfully participated in his funeral rites. At the same time, the Prophet harshly rebuked 'Uṭmān for his ascetic adventures (he was reportedly so extreme in his asceticism that he refused to drink wine even during the Ġāhiliyya when it was not yet forbidden). This censure, in turn, fills much of the extant biographical literature. The exegete Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. ca 150/767) recounted the following story about 'Uṭmān while explaining Kor 5, 87, a verse which warns against the dangers of excessive religiosity:⁶⁰

"O ye who believe! Do not forbid the good things which God has made licit for you!" Regarding clothing and women, this verse was revealed to ten men, among them 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, 'Umar [b. al-Ḥaṭṭāb], Ibn Mas'ūd, 'Ammār b. Yāsir, 'Uṭmān b. Maẓ'un, al-Miqdād b. al-Aswad, Abū Ḍarr al-Ġifārī,⁶¹ Salmān al-Fārisī, Ḥudayfa b. al-Yamān, Sālim the *mawlā* of Ḥudayfa, and another man. They had gathered in the home of 'Uṭmān b. Maẓ'un and then said: "Come on, so that we may deny ourselves food, clothing, and women!" Indeed, some of them castrated themselves (*yaqṭa' ba'duhum maḍākīrahu*), donned tattered cloths (*al-masraḥ*),⁶² built cells (*al-ṣawāmi'*), so as to take up the monastic life in them and cut themselves off (from the community).

Later, the angel Gabriel discovered what the group had been doing and reported this to the Prophet. The Prophet, in turn, notified 'Uṭmān's wife, Ḥawla bt Ḥakīm, who was shocked by the discovery. Muḥammad then left her with a stern warning for 'Uṭmān: "Clothing, food, and women are our *sunna*—so

59 For background, see Arent Jan Wensinck, "'Uṭmān b. Maẓ'un", *ET*²; Gilliot, "Le Coran avant le Coran," p. 165-177; Ibn Sa'd, *Biographien Muhammads, seiner Gefährten und der späteren Träger des Islams*, ed. Eduard Sachau, Leiden, Brill, 1904-1940, III/ii, p. 286-291 (including 'Uṭmān's aversion to alcohol).

60 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. 'Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Šihātah, Cairo, al-Hay'a l-miṣriyya l-'amma li-l-kitāb, 1979-1989, I, p. 498-500.

61 Elsewhere, the Prophet quotes the *raḥbāniyya-ḡihād* tradition to Abū Ḍarr al-Ġifārī, along with other ascetical advice: Abū Nu'aym al-Aṣfahānī, *Ḥilya*, I, p. 168; on the asceticism of Abū Ḍarr, see Ahmed Mohamed Al-'Assal, "Asceticism in Early Islam, with an Edition of Part of the *Kitāb al-Zuhd wa'l-Raqā'iq* of Ibn al-Mubārak", PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1968, p. 47-54.

62 The meaning of this term is not entirely clear; the root S.R.Ḥ pertains to "pastoring," and a related form of the word, *munsariḥ*, means "denuded," or "lightly clad"; see Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, IV, p. 1344-1346.

notify your husband!" Upon their return, Ḥawla informed the men what the Prophet had said, prompting the revelation of the aforementioned Koranic verse. It seems that 'Uṭmān had exceeded the Koranic provision of temporary celibacy of up to four months (Kor 2, 226), after which a woman could divorce her husband for not upholding his marital duties.

In addition, many early traditions about 'Uṭmān invoke the concept of *rahbāniyya*—always in a negative light. Ibn al-Mubārak, for instance, included the following tradition about 'Uṭmān in his *Kitāb al-Zuhd*:⁶³

Abū 'Umar b. Ḥayyawayh – Yahyā – al-Ḥusayn – 'Abd Allāh (b. al-Mubārak) – Rišdīn b. Sa'd – Ibn An'am – Sa'd b. Mas'ūd: 'Uṭmān b. Maẓ'un came to the Prophet and said: "Are we permitted to castrate ourselves (*iḥtiṣā*)?" The Messenger of God replied: "The one who has castrated someone is not one of us, nor is the one who has castrated himself (*laysa minnā man ḥaṣā wa-lā iḥtaṣā*), for the castration of my community is fasting!" So, he replied: "O Messenger of God, are we permitted to perform *siyāḥa*?" The Prophet said: "Indeed, the *siyāḥa* of my community is *ḡihād* in the path of God!" Then he said: "O Messenger of God, is monasticism (*al-tarahhub*) permitted for us?" He said: "Indeed, the monasticism of my community is sitting in the mosques and awaiting the prayer!"

Here, we find the familiar statement on *siyāḥa* and *ḡihād* subsumed into a larger story about 'Uṭmān and his asceticism. Although they appear in the same early source—the *Kitāb al-Zuhd*—it is easy to imagine how the familiar statement may have first circulated as an independent aphorism before being yoked to biographical reports about this Companion.

Strictly speaking, the hadith discussed at the start of this essay do not denounce *rahbāniyya* and *siyāḥa*. Instead, they express the idea that each community has its own form of pious fear—*rahbāniyya*—and the form this pious fear takes in Islam is *ḡihād*. At most, therefore, we can speak about a "super-sessionist" attitude in the hadith of the early Abbasid period: following the ambiguous language of the Koran, they portray *rahbāniyya* as both a general category of piety and as a specific form of Christian practice voided by the advent of Islam.⁶⁴ At the same time, it is clear that they do not speak with the

63 Ibn al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, p. 290, n° 845; *isnād*, for Abū 'Umar b. Ḥayyawayh, Yahyā, al-Ḥusayn, and 'Abd Allāh, per above, n. 12. Rišdīn b. Sa'd al-Mahrī, Egyptian, no death date (al-Mizzī, *Tahḏīb*, IX, p. 191-195, n° 1911).

64 Along these lines, see the telling anecdote from al-Ġazālī's *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* in which a monk from China (*rāhib min ruhbān al-Ṣīn*) explains to a Muslim visitor what a monk is:

decisiveness of the explicitly negative slogan found in later medieval sources (often wrongly assumed to be the earliest iteration of the *raḥbāniyya* traditions), which reads: "There is no *raḥbāniyya*/*siyāḥa* in Islam."⁶⁵ Rather, the message lies somewhere between these views.

How did early Muslims move from respectful ambivalence about monasticism to outright rejection?⁶⁶ Textually speaking, Abbasid-era stories about 'Uṭmān b. Maẓ'ūn seem to have played an important role in the process. 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan'ānī (d. 211/827), for example, included a report about 'Uṭmān which articulates a much blunter disapproval of *raḥbāniyya* than anything we have seen so far. It appears in a chapter of hadith entitled "The Necessity and Virtues of Marriage," most of which have an implicit anti-celibate message.⁶⁷

The wife of 'Uṭmān b. Maẓ'ūn, known as Ḥawla bt Ḥakīm, came upon 'Ā'īša and seemed very pained. So, she asked her: "What's troubling you?" She said in reply: "My husband stays up all night in prayer and fasts throughout the day." Then the Prophet came, and 'Ā'īša mentioned the situation to him. Therefore, the Prophet met with 'Uṭmān, saying: "O 'Uṭmān, *raḥbāniyya* was not ordained for us (*inna l-raḥbāniyya lam tuktab 'alaynā*)! Or is this some disgrace for you?"

"The monk is the one who fears God in His heaven, who exalts Him in His majesty, who perseveres in His trials, who is content in His judgement and praises Him in his signs, and thanks Him for His blessings, who is humble before His greatness, who is lowly before His might, who submits to His power, who surrenders to His dignity, who reflects on His debts and His penalties. During the day he fasts, at night he stands watch, for hellfire and the interrogation of the Almighty keeps him up through night. That is a monk"; cited in Ṣādir, *Ruḥbān 'arab*, p. 63.

- 65 This slogan is missing from pre-canonical and canonical hadith collections. Despite this, several scholars have regarded the slogan as antedating the *raḥbāniyya*-*jihād* tradition; e.g. Massignon, *Essay*, p. 99; cf. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, II, p. 357; El-Badawī, "From 'Clergy' to 'Celibacy,'" p. 9. The closest we find in the early sources is the categorical statement against abstaining from sex with women (*lā ṣarūra fī l-islām*), see above, n. 58.
- 66 On this point, see esp. Melchert, "Muslim Renunciants and Christian Monks," p. 142. Although rejection of *raḥbāniyya* was widespread in early Islam, some Sufi writers treated it more ambivalently; e.g. al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), *al-Ri'āya li-ḥuqūq Allāh*, ed. Margaret Smith, London, E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust-Messrs Luzac & Co. ("E.J.W. Gibb memorial series. New series", 15), 1940, p. 4-5; and Ḡunayd (d. 298/910), *Kitāb Dawā' al-arwāḥ* in Arthur John Arberry, "The Book of the Cure of Souls", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 2 (1937), p. 225, 231; I thank John Zaleski for these references.
- 67 'Abd al-Razzāq, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Raḥmān al-A'zamī, Beirut, al-Maktab al-islāmī ("Manšūrāt al-maḡlis al-ilmī", 39/6), 1983, VI, p. 167-168, n° 10375; cf. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, eds Samīr Ṭāhā l-Maḡdūb and Muḥammad Salīm Ibrāhīm Samāra, Beirut, al-Maktab al-islāmī, 1993, VI, p. 256, n° 25772.

A similar sentiment is found in reports from Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) and al-Dārimī (d. 255/869), in which the Prophet notifies 'Uṭmān that *rahbāniyya* is under no circumstances part of his religion.⁶⁸ Hadith collections of the third/ninth centuries—including those of al-Buḥārī (d. 256/870), Muslim (d. 261/875), Ibn Māğah (d. 273/887), and al-Tirmidī (d. 279/892)—do not use the term *rahbāniyya* in this context, but make clear that 'Uṭmān's practice of celibacy (here, *al-tabaṭṭul*; cf. Kor 73, 8) was un-Islamic.⁶⁹ It seems, therefore, that renunciation of marriage, sex, and social life lay at the heart of the problem with 'Uṭmān—and therefore, with *rahbāniyya*, too.

V Islam and the Second Sexual Revolution of Late Antiquity

At this point, let us zoom out to consider what this rejection of celibacy meant in the wider context of late ancient culture, particularly existing debates about continence and spirituality. It is important to note that denunciations of celibacy in early Islam could only exist in a world in which celibacy was first a real option for some of the Muslim faithful. Indeed, aside from 'Uṭmān, we know of other prominent Muslims who gave up sex and marriage during the first centuries after the Hijra. These include the follower 'Āmir b. 'Abd al-Qays (*fl.* mid-1st/mid-7th c., who was reportedly exiled for his celibacy under the Umayyads), the *mutaṭawwi'* Ibrāhīm b. Adham, discussed above, and the Baṣran mystic Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. ca 180/796), to name but a few.⁷⁰ They belong to a strain of early Muslim asceticism that Alexander Knysh has termed "extreme world-renouncing piety."⁷¹ We should keep in mind that ascetics like these were exceptions to the rule, not the rule itself: despite sophisticated arguments on behalf of celibacy by later Sufi writers such as Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī

68 Ibn Sa'd, *Biographien Muhammads*, III/ii, p. 287; al-Dārimī, *Musnad al-Dārimī*, ed. Ḥusayn Salīm Asad al-Dārānī, Riyadh-Beirut, Dār al-muğnī-Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2000, III, p. 1386, n° 2215.

69 Al-Buḥārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Buḥārī*, Damascus, Dār Ibn Kaṭīr, 2002, p. 1294, n° 5073-5074; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ed. Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī, Cairo, Mu'assasat al-muḥṭār, 2005, p. 563, n° 1402a-b; Ibn Māğah, *Sunan*, I, p. 340-341, n° 1853; al-Tirmidī, *al-Ġāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ wa-huwa sunan al-Tirmidī*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Ṣākīr, Beirut, Dār iḥyā' al-turāṭ al-'arabī, 1980, III, p. 394, n° 1083; on *tabaṭṭul*, see Al-'Assal, "Asceticism in Early Islam," p. 6-7; Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, I, p. 150.

70 Charles Pellat, "'Āmir b. 'Abd al-Qays", *Er2*; Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*, p. 46-47; Margaret Smith, *Rābi'a the Mystic & her Fellow Saints in Islām*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 10-19.

71 Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism*, p. 18-26.

(d. 386/998)—whose treatise *Qūt al-qulūb* provoked a famous reply by al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111)—the renunciation of sex was always a marginal practice in early Islam, and in fact, was widely condemned by contemporary Muslims.⁷²

If we wish to understand this debate about celibacy in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries—both its rejection and its allure—we must remember the nature of the world the Muslims inherited: starting in the fourth century, if not before, Christianity began to upend many widely held attitudes about sex in ancient society. As Michel Foucault, Peter Brown, and Kyle Harper have shown, the sexual revolution of Late Antiquity had two practical effects.⁷³ First, virginity came to be considered the highest, most pious expression of the Christian life. Although this ideal was shared across all social classes, in reality, it was practiced by a relatively small group of people, consisting mostly of monks, nuns, and higher clergy. Thus, the most radical aspect of the Christian sexual worldview was confined to a narrow social class, leaving the rest of society to carry on reproducing. Second, for the vast majority of Christians who were not spiritual athletes—that is, the laity and lower clergy—high standards of sexual chastity became the norm. These standards promoted monogamy within marriage and condemned divorce. Although this revolution had its opponents⁷⁴ and what is more, did not succeed in transforming every society

72 Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Die Nahrung der Herzen: Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's Qūt al-qulūb*, ed. and transl. Richard Gramlich, Stuttgart, F. Steiner ("Freiburger Islamstudien", 16/3), 1994, III, p. 536-602; cf. Beatrix Immenkamp, "Marriage and Celibacy in Mediaeval Islam: A Study of Ghazali's *Kitāb ādāb al-nikāḥ*", PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1994; and the English translation of al-Ġazālī's treatise: *Marriage and Sexuality in Islam: A Translation of al-Ghazali's Book on the Etiquette of Marriage from the Iḥyā'*, transl. Madelain Farah, Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1984. I am grateful to Khaled El-Rouayheb for pointing me to this debate. Here, I feel that the useful overview of Shahzad Bashir, "Islamic Tradition and Celibacy", in *Celibacy and Religions Traditions*, ed. Carl Olson, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 133-147 overstates just how widespread celibacy ever was in Islamic culture, especially in the early period; the article does not engage with any of the denunciations of celibacy cited here.

73 Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, Paris, Gallimard ("Bibliothèque des histoires"), 1976-1984; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York, Columbia University Press ("Lectures on the history of religions", 13), 1988 (and 20th anniversary edn., 2008); Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press ("Revealing antiquity", 20), 2013.

74 E.g. Jovinian (d. ca 405 CE), who believed that celibate and non-celibate Christians were of equal spiritual merit: David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press ("The Oxford early Christian studies"), 2007.

it touched,⁷⁵ it did spread a bold new ideal about sex throughout much of the Mediterranean and Middle East.

Into the arena transformed by Christianity stepped the first Muslims. Indeed, an underappreciated consequence of the rise of Islam was the onset of what I have called a “second sexual revolution” that implicitly challenged late antique Christian ideas about marriage and family (at least in places like Egypt, Syria, North Africa, and al-Andalus where Christians formed a majority of the population and the legacy of Roman rule endured for centuries after the conquests). Under the new order, Muslim men were entitled to take up to four wives and to engage in sexual relations with a variety of non-marital partners, including concubines and slaves.⁷⁶ Divorce was considered licit. More importantly, Islam asserted that the pursuit of holiness no longer required the pious man to abandon the pleasures of the flesh, as the monks of Late Antiquity had once done. Instead, the pious man was free to exercise his sexual prowess—much like the Prophet Muḥammad, who had married thirteen women and fathered seven children over the course of his life.⁷⁷ Vis-à-vis the social principles of late ancient Christianity, the moral code of early Islam was plainly different.

It is important to note that sexual practices among the early Muslims were not consciously formulated in opposition to Christianity, at least at first. They drew on a variety of inputs, including those of the pre-Islamic Arabs, Jews, and Iranians, all of whom saw fertility as a positive and necessary component

75 Lev Weitz, “Polygyny and East Syrian Law: Local Practices and Ecclesiastical Tradition”, in *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, ed. Robert G. Hoyland, Princeton, The Darwin Press (“Studies in late antiquity and early Islam”, 25), 2015, p. 157-191; cf. Payne, *A State of Mixture*, p. 108-117.

76 Wael Hallaq, *Shari‘a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 271-280; on women, sex, and marriage in early Islam, see Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 41-63; Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 2010; *id.*, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*, Oxford, One-world, 2006.

77 Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muhammad*, p. 792-798. In this context, we can begin to understand why some Christian polemicists took issue with the Prophet’s alleged “carnality”; e.g. the famous Zayd-Zaynab incident (see Kor 33, 37), mentioned by John of Damascus (d. 749 CE): Gk text in Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1972, p. 138; and Eulogius of Córdoba (d. 859 CE): Juan Gil (ed.), *Corpus scriptorum Muzarabicorum*, Madrid, Instituto Antonio de Nebrija (“Manuales y anejos de ‘Emerita’”, 28), 1973, II, p. 398; cf. David Stephan Powers, *Zayd*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press (“Divinations”), 2014, p. 30-48.

of the cosmic struggle.⁷⁸ Indeed, there was much continuity between early Muslim and ancient Near Eastern practices. These continuities were so powerful, in fact, that one suspects it was Christianity that was out of step with the sexual ethics of the region over the *longue durée*, not Islam. What is more, lay Christian practice both before and after the conquests sometimes veered from the ideals preached in the pulpits: in addition to polygyny, practices such as concubinage, sex with slaves, and divorce were common among Christians at both elite and sub-elite levels.⁷⁹

Still, even if the overarching system of sexual ethics in Islam was not a calculated reaction to Christianity at the start, and even if some Christians engaged in practices resembling those of Muslims, it is undeniable that the *practical* effect of the conquest was to make widespread a view of marriage and sex that implicitly undermined those of the late antique church, something we can detect most obviously in Muslim attacks against celibacy from the early Abbasid period. For Muslims, celibacy came to be seen as a totem of monasticism specifically and of Christianity generally.⁸⁰ By contrast, it is hard to find explicit Muslim critiques of the chaste Christian layman, other than general exhortations to polygyny and a certain permissiveness towards divorce. Rather, what strikes me as significant is that the Muslim case against Christian sexual ethics targeted only its most extreme manifestation—monastic celibacy—not the more widely-held behaviors of the average Christian on the street.

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- 78 On Jewish attitudes towards celibacy, see Immanuel Jakobovits, "Celibacy", in *Encyclopaedia Judaica. Second Edition*, ed. F. Skolnik, Detroit, MacMillan Reference, 2007, IV, p. 537. On Zoroastrian views of marriage, see Maria Macuch, "Incestuous Marriage in the Context of Sasanian Family Law", in *Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies: Proceedings of the 6th European Conference of Iranian Studies*, eds Maria Macuch, Dieter Weber and Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz ("Iranica", 19), 2010, p. 133-148. In the *Martyrdom of Aqebshma*, a Syriac text set in the fourth-century Sasanian Empire, a mowbed criticizes Christians for teaching the Zoroastrian faithful "not to marry women, not to produce sons or daughter," just as a Muslim might do in later periods; cited in Payne, *A State of Mixture*, p. 38.
- 79 E.g. Roger Shaler Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 188-199; Kyle Harper, "Marriage and Family", in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 682-684.
- 80 See al-Ġāhiz, *Ṭalāt rasā'il*, ed. Joshua Finkel, Cairo, al-Maṭba'a l-salafiyya, 1925-1926, p. 17, 21, in which al-Ġāhiz mentions celibacy and prohibitions on divorce and concubinage as distinctive markers of Christian social identity in the Abbasid period in contrast to the practices of their Muslim neighbors. I owe this reference to Lev Weitz, who discusses the passage in the introduction of his forthcoming book, *A God-Fearing House*.

Why were Muslims in the early Abbasid period so focused on the sexual practices of such a narrow slice of Christian society? It seems that the prospect of permanent celibacy becoming widespread in the Muslim *umma* was deeply threatening. It was a threat not only because celibacy was a distinctively Christian practice, and therefore, bad for Muslims to imitate (a feeling echoed in a striking tradition in the *Muṣannaḥ* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī).⁸¹ It was also a threat because the Sunnī scholarly class of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries regarded celibacy as laying beyond the ability and appetite of the average pious Muslim. If asceticism was to become widespread in the *umma*, it was not to be the extreme form of figures like ‘Uṭmān b. Maẓ‘ūn or Ibrāhīm b. Adham.

The threat was particularly pronounced in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries—precisely when the hadith on *rahbāniyya* became popular—because this was precisely the moment when Muslims and Christians came into contact and competition as members of an integrated society with vertical divisions, rather than as a ruling class of conquerors and a complex tax-paying base with horizontal divisions.⁸² Muslims and Christians around 800 were no longer exclusively distinguished from one another as Arabs and non-Arabs, as city-dwellers and village-dwellers, as soldiers and peasants, as they had been through much of the Umayyad period. These tidy divisions were collapsing as non-Muslims entered the *umma* in droves, as Muslim settlement of the countryside increased, and as Islam reached ever more into the peasantry and sub-elites. In this world, contact and competition between old Muslims, new Muslims, and non-Muslims was on the rise, and this spurred new fears about influence and differentiation. These fears expressed themselves in anxieties about Christian asceticism (and extreme Muslim practices that might be confused with it), which were articulated through the hadith about *rahbāniyya* and legends about ‘Uṭmān b. Maẓ‘ūn.

81 ‘Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaḥ*, VI, p. 171, n° 10387; here, the Prophet meets a celibate Muslim named ‘Akkāf b. Biṣr al-Tamīmī. When the Prophet discovers that ‘Akkāf has neither a wife nor a concubine, he proclaims: “You are among the children of the devils! If you were a Christian, you would be one of their monks! Verily, marriage is part of our *sunna*!”.

82 Christian C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World*, Princeton, Princeton University Press (forthcoming), Conclusion; I owe this language to Luke Yarbrough.

VI Monks Waging *Ġihād*, Muslims Becoming Monks

A final element in the hadith literature requires explanation: why did the traditionists associate monasticism and *ġihād*?⁸³ At first glance, they make for uneasy bedfellows. It is hard to think of a stronger contrast than the one between the life of a monk and a *ġāzī*—the former living in peaceful solitude in his cell, the latter fighting the infidel along the frontiers of a heathen empire. But the genius of the hadith—along with the anecdotes discussed in this final section—was to obscure all sense of opposition between these routines. In fact, they presented the conversion of Christian monks to the life of *ġihād* as being completely effortless, even predictable. This radical claim requires explanation.

To understand the relationship between monasticism and *ġihād* in second/eighth- and third/ninth-century sources, we should recall certain features of Christian monastic culture in Late Antiquity. As Michael Gaddis, Thomas Sizgorich, and others have shown, monks in Late Antiquity were not strictly passive men of prayer.⁸⁴ They were also men of action—sometimes violent action—smashing idols, demolishing temples, and forcibly baptizing unbelievers. Challenging the enemies of God in whatever form they took lay at the heart of their vocation.⁸⁵ The militancy of the monks was an extension of the culture of martyrdom. After Constantine, Christians could no longer undergo the red martyrdom of the circus, but they could undergo the white martyrdom of the monastic cell.⁸⁶ There, the struggle against evil was as real and effortful as it had been in the arena centuries before.

The connection between monasticism and militancy was not only symbolic, but also sometimes literal: a number of late antique saints embraced asceticism after having served as soldiers, including Apollonius (d. ca 284-305 CE), Pachomius (d. 348 CE), and Martin of Tours (d. 397 CE).⁸⁷ St Sabas

83 For the meaning of *ġihād* in the works of Ibn al-Mubārak, see now Melchert, “*Kitāb al-Jihād*,” p. 64-69.

84 Michael Gaddis, *There is No Crime for those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*, Berkeley, University of California Press (“The transformation of the classical heritage”, 39), 2005, p. 151-250; Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief*, p. 108-143.

85 See below, n. 101.

86 Edward Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr: The Monk as the Successor of the Martyr*, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press (“Studies in Christian antiquity”, 12), 1950; cf. Adolf von Harnack, *Militia Christi: The Christian Religion and the Military in the First Three Centuries*, transl. David McInnes, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1981.

87 On the military careers of Apollonius and Pachomius, see Norman Russel (transl.), *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, London-Oxford-Kalamazoo,

(d. 532 CE), one of the founders of Palestinian monasticism, was the son of a soldier and reportedly refused his father's command to enlist in the army and command a regiment.⁸⁸ Ascetic literature from Late Antiquity also described the monastic life using sharply martial language. The opening lines of the Rule of St Benedict (d. 547 CE) are exemplary in this respect; they call on men "willing to renounce self-will and take up the powerful and shining weapons of obedience, to fight for the Lord Christ, the true king."⁸⁹ Given this, it is not surprising that Arab Christians of later generations used the term *ġihād*—a word redolent of Muslim holy war, but also of "struggle" or "striving" more generally—to translate the Greek term *agōn*.⁹⁰

Islam inherited this distinctive fusion of asceticism and militancy. As Thomas Sizgorich reminds us, in the imagination of Abbasid-era writers, the soldiers of the conquests had been formidable on both the battlefield and in prayer.⁹¹ The historian al-Azdī (d. 157/774) aptly described the tribesman who overran Syria during the 630s as "monks by night [and] lions by day."⁹² The best example of how asceticism and militancy could meet in a single lifestyle was the *mutaṭawwiʿ* phenomenon of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries,

Mowbray-Cistercian publications ("Cistercian studies series", 34), 1980, p. 16; on Martin: Adalbert de Vogüé, *Histoire littéraire du mouvement monastique dans l'Antiquité: première partie: le monachisme latin*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf ("Patrimoines. Christianisme"), 1997, iv [Sulpice Sévère et Paulin de Nole (393-409), Jérôme, homéliste et traducteur des *Pachomiana*], p. 28-33.

- 88 Cyril of Scythopolis, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, p. 101. The emperor Valens tried to conscript monks into the Roman army in 375 CE: Noel Lenski, "Valens and the Monks: Cudgeling and Conscriptio as a Means of Social Control", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 58 (2004), p. 93-117. After Sabas' time, Gregory the Great protested an order of the emperor Maurice (r. 582-602 CE) forbidding able-bodied men from joining monasteries while Rome was at war with Persia: Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, Malden, Blackwell ("The making of Europe"), 2003, p. 224-225.
- 89 Terence G. Kardong (transl.), *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1996, p. 3; cf. Tim Vivian, Kim Vivian and Jeffrey Burton Russell (transl.), *The Life of the Jura Fathers*, Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications ("Cistercian studies series", 178), 1999, p. 101; John Cassian, *The Institutes*, transl. Boniface Ramsey, New York, Newman Press ("Ancient Christian writers", 58), 2000, p. 38, 129, 220-221, 243.
- 90 This usage was common; for example, the martyr-monk George-Muzāḥim (d. 978 CE) is called a *muḡāhid* at several points in his *vita*, e.g. Cairo, Coptic Museum, Hist. MS. 469, fol. 77r, 80v, 81r. I owe this point to Alexander Treiger.
- 91 Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief*, p. 144-167.
- 92 Al-Azdī, *Ta'riḥ futūḥ al-Šām*, ed. 'Abd al-Mun'im 'Abd Allāh Āmir, Cairo, Mu'assasat siġill al-'arab, 1970, p. 262.

studied so ably by Michael Bonner and D.G. Tor.⁹³ The *mutaṭawwi'a* were volunteer soldiers who carried on waging *ḡihād* at a time when the caliphate was ceasing to fight the infidel as systematically as it had done during the first/seventh and early second/eighth centuries. Overwhelmingly Ḥurāsānī in origin with a strong Sunnī bent, these men were pious and deeply ascetical: when they were not fighting, they busied themselves transmitting hadith and undertaking great ascetic feats.

The most famous of the *mutaṭawwi'a* was 'Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak, the very man responsible for circulating the traditions about monasticism and *ḡihād*. In his day, he was known as "lord of the ascetics" (*sayyid al-zuhhād*), and his book about asceticism, the *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, was among first of its kind in Muslim literature.⁹⁴ According to hagiographic traditions, Ibn al-Mubārak was kind to the poor, committed to fasting, and humble in spirit. Like late antique monks, whose spiritual charisma empowered them to speak frankly (Greek *parrhēsia*) before emperors and kings, Ibn al-Mubārak rebuked the authorities as he willed ("commanding the right and forbidding the wrong," to use the technical phrase).⁹⁵ He held such a dim view of the Abbasid government, in fact, that Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal quoted him as saying: "Do not go near [the caliph's court], for if you come to them, you must speak truth to them, and I, I fear [the consequences] of speaking truth to them."⁹⁶ Given all this, it is no surprise that we find the hadith on monasticism and *ḡihād* circulating in the milieu of figures like Ibn al-Mubārak. These were men who managed to contain the tension between asceticism and militancy, who knitted them together into a seamless spiritual garment. Theirs was a *ḡihād* of the frontier as well as of the soul.⁹⁷

93 Michael David Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence and Holy War: Studies in the Jihad and the Arab-Byzantine Frontier*, New Haven, American Oriental Society ("American oriental series", 81), 1996, p. 107-134; Tor, *Violent Order*, p. 39-84.

94 For general discussion, see now Feryal, *Emergence of Early Sufi Piety*, for *zuhd*, esp. p. 105-138; on Ibn al-Mubārak's scholarly circle, see Al-'Assal, "Asceticism in Early Islam," p. 92-154, for the *Kitāb al-Zuhd wa-l-raqā'iq*, *ibid.*, p. 158-170; Melchert, "*Kitāb al-Jihād*," with discussion of contemporary treatises on *ḡihād* at p. 58.

95 See the definitive study of Michael Allan Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000, esp. 50-67.

96 These anecdotes are cited in Tor, *Violent Order*, p. 53-62; also Bonner, *Aristocratic Violence*, p. 119-125; Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief*, p. 180-186. On *naṣiḥa*, or "advice," especially challenging advice given to a ruler, see Claude Gilliot, "*In consilium tuum deduces me*: le genre du « conseil », *naṣiḥa*, *waṣīyya* dans la littérature arabo-musulmane", *Arabica*, 54 (2007), p. 467-499.

97 Paul L. Heck, "Sufism—What Is It Exactly?", *Religion Compass*, 1/1 (2007), p. 152.

It is significant that their spiritual garment also embraced family life. Like most of the *mutaṭawwiʿa*, Ibn al-Mubārak was married. He reportedly said that the only thing more pleasing than the life of a warrior was that of a pious father who relinquishes his cloak to protect his children from the cold.⁹⁸ As with other practitioners of “mild asceticism”—who in the recent words of Feryal Salem, “shun[ned] worldliness but not the world itself”—sex was a central component of his life and worldview: in his hadith collection, Ibn al-Mubārak provided his readers with detailed descriptions of the sexual pleasures that awaited warriors like him on the battlefield as well as in heaven.⁹⁹ One tradition in the *Kitāb al-Ġihād*, for instance, speaks of how *ḥūrīs*—the voluptuous virgins of paradise mentioned in the Koran (e.g. Kor 52, 20; 56, 36-37; 78, 33, etc.)—encourage soldiers in battle and descend on them as sexual rewards in their moments of death.¹⁰⁰ In the world of the *mutaṭawwiʿa*, at least, there was no contradiction between asceticism and the desire for sexual experience. The latter was an outcome—in fact, a prize—of the former, a notion no Christian monk could have countenanced.¹⁰¹

The valorization of such warriors left traces in Abbasid literature as complex and fascinating as the hadith on monasticism and *ġihād*. In particular, there are tantalizing stories about Christian monks converting to Islam and waging *ġihād*. One comes from the *ʿUyūn al-aḥbār* of Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), which

98 Cited in Andrae, *In the Garden of Myrtles*, p. 46.

99 Salem, *Emergence of Early Sufi Piety*, p. 87, citing Hurvitz, “Biographies and Mild Asceticism.”

100 Ibn al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Ġihād*, p. 38-39, n° 22; p. 117-118, n° 143; for discussion and further references to the sexual qualities of the *ḥūrīs*, see Maher Jarrar, “The Martyrdom of Passionate Lovers: Holy War as a Sacred Wedding,” in *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic Approach, Proceedings of the International Symposium in Beirut, June 25th-June 30th, 1996*, eds Angelika Neuwirth, Birgit Embaló, Sebastian Günther and Maher Jarrar, Beirut-Stuttgart, Orient-Institut-Franz Steiner Verlag (“Beiruter Texte und Studien”, 64), 1999, p. 87-107; David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press (“Themes in Islamic history”), 2007, p. 18, n. 11.

101 For vivid scenes of sexual temptation in late antique monastic literature, see Russell, *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, p. 57; Armand Veilleux (transl.), *The Life of Saint Pachomius and his Disciples*, Kalamazoo, Cistercian Publications (“Pachomian koinonia”, 1; “Cistercian studies series”, 45), 1980, p. 26, 36; Cyril of Scythopolis, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, p. 46, 70 (prepubescent boys); and more generally, David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 2006.

tells of a Muslim visitor to a Syrian monastery known as Ḥarmala.¹⁰² Inside, the Muslim discovered a monk whose eyes were swollen with tears. When the Muslim asked why he was crying, the monk replied: "I am crying because I no longer rejoice in my work, and the days go by and by, and my work accomplishes nothing." The Muslim passed by the monastery sometime later and inquired about the monk. He was told that the man had converted to Islam, become a *ḡāzī*, and died fighting the Byzantines. A related story comes from the *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'* of Abū Nu'aym al-Aṣḫānī (d. 430/1038), a compilation of biographies of early Muslim ascetics. In it, we read how the famous Jewish convert Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. ca 32/652-653) encountered a monk who had been living alone in his cell for forty years. The two began discussing monasticism, and at the end of their conversation, the monk decided to abandon his vocation, take up arms, and live in the military camps of the Muslims (*al-fasāṭiṭ*).¹⁰³ He then recited the *ṣahāda* and joined Ka'b fighting the Byzantines.

What makes these anecdotes interesting is not merely that they portray improbable kinds of conversion. What makes them surprising is how they portray these conversions as not improbable at all. In fact, the anecdotes convey a powerful message about the continuity between seemingly opposite religious practices: although these monks left Christianity for Islam, they did not lose their spiritual callings. Instead, by embracing the life of *ḡihād*, they fulfilled their original vocations as monks with even greater fervor and devotion. In these anecdotes, therefore, the act of converting is portrayed as equivalent to crossing a barely delineated frontier. Such a view accords well with much recent research about the weak boundaries separating Muslims and Christians at this time, especially in the realms of everyday life.¹⁰⁴ There is no sense of the monk as the errant religious "other" or as the man abandoned by God and caught in the grip of demonic possession, as Christians so often portrayed their enemies in Late Antiquity. Rather, what we have here is a self-consciously muted religious shape-shifting, one that assures the reader by emphasizing a seamless transition, not rupture, between two discrete spheres. To play down

102 Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb 'Uyūn al-aḥbār*, Cairo, Dār al-kutub al-miṣriyya, 1925-1930, II, p. 297; Ibn 'Abd Rabbih al-Andalusī, *Kitāb al-'Iqd al-farīd*, eds Aḥmad Amīn, Aḥmad al-Zayn and Ibrāhīm al-Ibyārī, Cairo, Maṭba'at laḡnat al-ta'līf wa-l-tarḡama wa-l-naṣr, 1940-1949, III, p. 167; cited in Mourad, "Christian Monks," p. 90.

103 Abū Nu'aym al-Aṣḫānī, *Ḥilya*, VI, p. 6-7; cited in Livne-Kafri, "Early Muslim Ascetics," p. 108, n. 33; later, Ka'b mentioned this incident to 'Umar b. al-Ḥaṭṭāb (r. 13/634-23/644), who was amazed, since "monasticism was an innovation among them" (*i.e.* the Muslims; *fa-kānat al-rahbāniyya bid'a minhum*), the meaning of which is opaque.

104 See above, n. 1.

the frontier between worlds in this way—between Christian and Muslim, monastic and military—was a master stroke on the part of the Abbasid-era authors who recorded them.

Given this, it is tempting to see the convert-monk as simply another literary motif from the golden age of medieval Muslim literature. At the same time, there is evidence that such stories may have had a basis in reality. Jacob of Edessa (d. 708 CE), for example, noted in one of his canons that priests and deacons were sometimes dragooned into Muslim armies fighting the Byzantines.¹⁰⁵ Unlike the monks in Ibn Qutayba and Abū Nu‘aym al-Aṣḥānī’s narratives, however, these Christians were apparently forced to fight against their wills. Furthermore, it is unclear from Jacob whether fighting for the Muslims also entailed converting. Based on the large numbers of non-Muslims who are known to have taken part in the conquests, it probably did not.¹⁰⁶ Still, in Jacob’s canon, we have striking evidence that clergy did participate in *ḡihād*.

Just as there are stories of monks converting to Islam and waging holy war, so there are other stories of Muslims abandoning *ḡihād* and becoming monks. These stories are set in the first/seventh century, but clearly reflect the concerns of the early Abbasid milieu in which they were first written down and circulated. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that they may be fictional. On the Muslim side, for instance, we read about a mysterious figure named al-Mustawrid al-‘Iḡlī, who was executed by ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (r. 35/656–40/660) for apostasy.¹⁰⁷ In one report, al-Mustawrid is said to have “waged *ḡihād* for a long time then converted to Christianity.”¹⁰⁸ In others, he is described as appearing before the caliph dressed in wool (*ṭiyāb al-ṣūf*) like a monk.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, al-Mustawrid left holy war as a Muslim to become a Christian ascetic. Similar information is found in a story by Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1070), who states that ‘Uṭmān b. Maẓ‘ūn declared to the Prophet: “O Messenger of God! The raids (*al-maḡāzī*) cause us such distress. Can’t you just let me be a eunuch and castrate

105 Syriac text and translation in Tannous, “Syria between Byzantium and Islam,” p. 543–544 n. 1310; cf. Penn, *Envisioning Islam*, p. 146.

106 Wadad al-Qadi, “Non-Muslims in the Muslim Conquest Army in Early Islam,” in *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State*, eds Antoine Borrut and Fred M. Donner, Chicago, Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (“Late antique and medieval Islamic Near East”, 1), 2016, p. 83–128.

107 For discussion, see Sahnner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam*, Appendix 1.

108 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tahdīb al-āṭār*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṣākir, Cairo, Maṭba‘at al-madani, 1982, IV, p. 79, n° 140.

109 Abū Bakr al-Ḥallāl, *Aḥkām ahl al-milal*, ed. Sayyid Kisrawī Ḥasan, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1994, p. 419–420.

myself?"¹¹⁰ Naturally, the Prophet rejected his request. Although 'Uṭmān was not portrayed as having converted to Christianity, the story revolves around the same transformation from the life of *ḡihād* to that of *raḥbāniyya*.

Christian literature from the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries also furnishes a number of interesting examples which can help to contextualize the hadith with which we began this essay. The Arabic life of the martyr 'Abd al-Masiḥ al-Ġassānī tells of a young Christian with roots in Naḡrān, who embarked for the Holy Land in the company of Muslim friends. He never made it to Palestine, however, but thoughtlessly wound up along the frontier with Byzantium. There he waged *ḡihād* with his companions, "fighting, killing, plundering, and burning" for thirteen years. While on the frontier, he lived as a Muslim, "trampling every sacred thing as they did and praying alongside them." Later, the accidental warrior returned to Christianity and became a monk, ascending to the position of abbot at the Monastery of Mt Sinai.¹¹¹ He was eventually discovered by his former raiding companions, turned over to the authorities, and executed for apostasy in Palestine. The incident is undated, though it is probably set in the late Umayyad or early Abbasid period and was written down shortly thereafter.¹¹²

110 Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī'āb fī ma'rīfat al-aṣḥāb*, eds 'Alī Muḥammad Mu'awwaḍ and 'Ādil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawḡūd, Beirut, Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1995, III, p. 166.

111 Sidney H. Griffith, "The Arabic Account of 'Abd al-Masiḥ al-Naḡrānī al-Ġassānī", *Le Muséon*, 98 (1985), esp. p. 362 (conversion to Islam and raiding); for commentary, see Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam*, chapter 1; on the theme of *ḡihād* in this and the following text, see Thomas Sizgorich, "Mind the Gap: Accidental Conversion and the Hagiographic Imaginary in the First Centuries A.H.", in *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond: Papers from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar, University of Oxford, 2009-2010*, eds Arietta Papaconstantinou, with Neil McLynn and Daniel Louis Schwartz, Burlington, Ashgate, 2015, p. 169-170.

112 Griffith originally dated the martyrdom to the 860s, though recent analysis of Sinai Ar. 542 as well as internal evidence in the text suggest that the incident may have happened around the 740s or 750s. Griffith, "Arabic Account of 'Abd al-Masiḥ," p. 351-359; cf. John C. Lamoreaux, "Hagiography", in *The Orthodox Church in the Arab World, 700-1700*, eds Samuel Noble and Alexander Treiger, DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press ("Orthodox Christian series"), 2014, p. 114-115. In my judgment, this fits much better with the general milieu of the life, which is remarkably similar in style and content to other martyrologies set in the mid-second/eighth century. For more, see André Binggeli, "L'Hagiographie du Sinai en arabe d'après un recueil du IX^{ème} siècle", *Parole de l'Orient*, 32 (2007), p. 75-77. The preface of the recension in British Library Or. 5019 also states that the martyrdom took place during the reign of the Umayyads (*qiṣṣat 'Abd al-Masiḥ allādī stuḡhida bi-l-Ramla*

The life of Anthony al-Qurašī is another hagiographical work written in Arabic in the early third/ninth century. It recounts the conversion of a Muslim aristocrat from Damascus after witnessing a Eucharistic miracle and receiving a vision of St Theodore. He was eventually baptized in the River Jordan and took up the monastic cowl. Upon professing his faith in public, he was handed over to the caliph Hārūn al-Rašīd (r. 170/786-193/809) in al-Raqqā. After learning that he would be executed for apostasy, Anthony told the caliph that he welcomed his sentence with open arms, for it would help expiate his three greatest sins: having gone on pilgrimage to Mecca, having sacrificed on ʿĪd al-Aḏḥā, and having killed Christians during raids against the Byzantines.¹¹³ Once again, we see a Muslim convert trading *ġihād* for *rahbāniyya*. In contrast to Muslim accounts, however, this transformation is presented as not seamless at all, but a decisive rupture between old and new. Put differently, if Muslim authors of the early Abbasid period were quick to stress the ease with which a monk might become a *muġāhid*, then their Christian counterparts (like the author of the life of Anthony) were eager to raise a wall between Christianity and Islam and mark it with a martyr's blood.

Conclusion

It is difficult to say whether these stories are purely symbolic, or if they trade on an element of truth. Are they examples of polemical one-upsmanship between Muslims and Christians, or a reflection of a social reality, in which Muslims and Christians frequently converted, with the most pious shapeshifters drawn to the most demanding spiritual paths in the two religions—*rahbāniyya* and *ġihād*? To my eyes, both seem possible.

The hadith we have examined constitute a narrow slice of a much wider conversation about the sacred and the profane in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Though we may perceive a tension between *rahbāniyya* and *ġihād*, men like Ibn al-Mubārak balanced these practices with seeming ease, battling the Byzantines by day and plunging to the depths of *zuhd* by night. Ibn al-Mubārak understood himself to be reviving the spirituality of Muḥammad's

fī mulk al-Umawiyya): Ḥabīb Zayyāt, "Šuhadā' al-našrāniyya fī l-islām", *Al-Machreq*, 36 (1938), p. 463.

113 Ignace Dick, "La passion arabe de S. Antoine Ruwaḥ néo-martyr de Damas († 25 déc. 799)", *Le Muséon*, 74 (1961), esp. p. 126 (raiding against the Byzantines); for commentary, see Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam*, chapter 3.

earliest Companions; but what he may not have known was that he was also operating in the tradition of Late Antiquity's great monastic stars.

At the same time, men like Ibn al-Mubārak broke decisively with the monks of Late Antiquity on a crucial point. Just as early Christian ascetics were terrified by the prospect of voluptuous young women tempting them away from the life of prayer, the holy warriors of the early Abbasid period dreamt of zaftig beauties caressing them in the throes of the death, in the moment of their own kind of ascetic triumph. Herein lies one part of the dramatic change wrought by the sexual revolution of early Islam: the eclipse of celibacy as a way of honoring God, and its replacement by a code of ethics based on the ideals of the holy warrior.

One suspects none of this was easy for Muslim ascetics like Ibn al-Mubārak. They lived in a world in which the example of the non-Muslim "other" was ubiquitous, enthralling, and threatening all at once. Their double challenge, therefore, was to metabolize the traditions of the cultures they had conquered, but at the same time, to do so in a manner that left room for differentiation and separation. Thus, the ambiguity at the heart of the *rahbāniyya-ḡihād* traditions is both shocking and intelligible: it expresses a spiritual *koine* shared by Muslims and Christians alike—a consensus that man can come to know God through extreme acts of physical renunciation. But at the same time, it expresses a sense of distinctiveness—that despite mirroring Christian practices to a great extent, the asceticism of the Muslims had to be tempered by commitment to marriage and family and subordinated to a higher goal of holy war. This was a spiritual message the early Sunnī scholars of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries could support, and they defended it vigorously with the hadith on monasticism and *ḡihād*.