

# Hakîm Tirmidhî and the *Malâmatî* Movement in Early Sufism

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The history of the formative years of Sufism has yet to be written. Much of our knowledge and understanding concerning the early spiritual centres, teachers and teaching, their interaction and the formation of their mystical vocabulary has been shaped by the compilations of later generations. These compilations have become a treasure trove not only of information, but also, and more importantly, of accumulative wisdom, insight and imagery of the mystical tradition of Islam. Yet the main object of the Sufi compilers from the end of the tenth century onwards, both explicitly and implicitly, has been to present a picture of a uniform spiritual tradition, based on the reconciliation of the normative extroverted religious aspect of Islam (*shari'a*) with the individualistic, experiential vision of its Reality (*haqîqa*). In this endeavour, the didactic and practical implications of which have become the bone and marrow of Sufism, the compilers have deliberately ironed out the dynamic multifaceted dialogue which had taken place between the various centres and teachers of the first few generations. Yet hints and allusions to this dialogue have been sown in abundance in the fertile soil of the Sufi compilations, and it is the purpose of this study to trace some of them in order to reconstruct, albeit in a preliminary manner, the outlines of a chapter in the history of the early mystical movements of Islam.

One of the most fascinating and illuminating chapters in the history of these formative years is that of the Nishâpûrî 'Path of Blame', the *Malâmatîyya*. In any attempt to draft the early history of Islamic mysticism, the *Malâmatîyya* movement is indispensable.

Yet it is also, and to a no lesser degree, an invaluable phenomenon in the History of Religion at large, especially for its attentiveness, its insights and its formulations pertaining to the psychological obstacles which confront any sincere seeker on the path of the spiritual quest. In the *Malâmatî* teaching the dialectic between the *nafs* (the 'lower

self' and the centre of ego-consciousness) and the *sirr* (the innermost recesses of one's being) - the paradigmatic dialectic referred to by all mystical traditions - is carried almost *ad absurdum*. The *Malâmatiyya* represent an extremely introverted reaction to extroverted and ascetic forms of spirituality (*zuhd*). In the course of time this reaction took various shapes and forms, some of them utterly outstripping all religious and social norms (as, for instance, the Qalandariyya). Yet in the ninth century, the formative period with which this essay is concerned, the *Malâmatî* teachers seem to have proposed a system in which sincere self-scrutiny and self-criticism were interwoven into a highly acclaimed social code based on chivalry and altruism (as exemplified by the *futuwwa* fraternities), and in which the call for abandoning any outward marks of distinction or any inward claim to spiritual superiority meant in practice a strict adherence to the Islamic *shari'a*.

## II. NÎSHÂPÛR

The activity of the early *malâmatiyya* takes place in the Khurâsânî town of Nîshâpûr in the third/ninth - fourth/tenth century against the background of varied religious activity, especially on the part of circles with a distinctly ascetic and mystical flavor.

During this period Nîshâpûr (1), together with Merv, Herat and Balkh, was one of the four main cities of Khurâsân. It stood at an important crossroads from which several main routes spread out: the westward route to Rayy and hence Baghdad; southwest to Shiraz and the Persian Gulf; southeast and then northeast to Herat, Balkh, Tirmidh, Bukhârâ and India; and northeast to Tûs, Mashhad, Merv, Samarqand, Central Asia and China.

During the reign of the Tâhirid Dynasty (820-873) Nîshâpûr was the governmental centre and the capital of Khurâsân. (2) Following the fall of Baghdad to the Buwayhids in 945, Nîshâpûr became the *de facto* centre of Sunnite Islam through to at least the mid-fifth/eleventh century. In its heyday it consisted of a large number of quarters (*mahallât*), originally villages which became absorbed into the expanding town. (3) Its flourishing agriculture was based on a fine and sophisticated irrigation system, with mostly subterranean canals, which efficiently used the water of the melting snow from the mountains surrounding the city as well as the water of the river which flows through its north-eastern part. It also had a flourishing industry based on weaving and pottery. The north-western part of the city, the Mânishâk suburb, was inhabited mainly by the poor, especially weavers and water-carriers. This was most probably the only area of the city which was not irrigated by canals. (4) The north-eastern sections, sometimes referred to as villages (*qaria, qurâ*) - Mulâqabâdh, Khordabâdh and Nasrabâdh - and also the southern suburb of Hîra, were inhabited mainly by merchants, well-to-do craftsmen and

artisans, as well as by scholars and other members of what might be regarded as a well-established middle class. (5) These 'burghers' lived generally in well-irrigated villas, or owned estates with large orchards. The most distinguished, and rich families of Nîshâpûr, those whom Richard Bulliet has termed "the Patricians of Nîshâpûr," (6) lived mainly in the centre of town. These socio-historical observations have a bearing on the identification and characterization of the *Malâmatîyya* which will follow. (7)

Since the third/ninth century the well-being of Nîshâpûr and its inhabitants was impaired by violent religious struggles of a sectarian and fanatical nature. These struggles were known as *'asabiyyât*, and they took place also in other parts of Khurâsân. It seems, however, that Nîshâpûr was the worst affected by them, and that it was they that brought about the eventual decline of the city in the sixth/twelfth century. These "wild sectarian struggles" - *al- asabiyyât*, *al-wahsha* - were carried out, according to the tenth-century geographer al-Muqaddasî, against the background of intense hostility between the different schools of religious law (the *madhâhib*), and first and foremost between Hanafites and Shâfi'ites. (8) (The Mâlikites, Zâhirites and Hanbalites constituted only a small minority in Nîshâpûr.) There were also struggles between Shi'ite groups and the Karrâmiyya (for which see below), as well as between groups of 'vigilantes' (*mutatawwi'a*) and sonic extremists, such as remnants of the Khawârij. As a general rule, the *madhhab* segmentation correlated with the theological segmentation: most Hanafites belonged to the Mu'tazila, whereas most Shâfi'ites adhered to the *ahl al-Sunna wal-Hadîth*, namely Orthodox Islam, and subsequently to the Ash'arites. (9) It is against this factional and sectarian backdrop that the activities of the early *Malâmatîs* of Nîshâpûr take place.

### III. SOURCES

1) The only source which deals specifically with the *Malâmatîyya* is Abu 'Abd al-Rahmân al-Sulamî's work entitled *Risâlat al-malâmatiyya* (10) Sulamî (d. 412/1021), himself a native of Nîshâpûr and a member of one of the eminent families there, (11) was also - and this is significant - the disciple of Abû 'Amr Isma'il ibn Nujayd. The latter was Sulamî's maternal grandfather and one of the most distinguished disciples of Abû 'Uthmân al-Hîrî, one of the central Shaykhs of the *Malâmatî* circle at the end of the third/ninth century. (12) Sulamî's *Risâla* (Epistle) is in fact the only source upon which various scholars have based their historical and typological reconstruction of the *Malâmatîyya*. Some of the most important works are: R. Hartmann's "*Al-Sulamî's Risâlat al-Malâmatiyya*" (13) as well as his "*Futuwwa und Malâma*;" (14) Abû'l-'Alâ' al-'Afifî's *Al-Malâmatiyya wa'l-sûfiyya wa ahl al-futuwwa*; (15) Kamil Mustafâ al-Shaybi's *Al-Sila bayna 'l-tasawwuf wa 'l-tashayyu* (16) and J. Spencer Trimingham's *The Sufi*

All these studies emphasize the paucity of source material and single out the *Malâmâtîyya Epistle's* value in this respect. In the last resort, in spite of the open scholarly debate by the writers mentioned above as to the relationship between *malâma* and *tasawwuf*, *malâma* and *futuwwa*, *malâma* and *zuhd*, they all draw their scant information from one another, and ultimately, from Sulamî.

What is overlooked by all these scholars is the fact the Sulamî's text was never intended by its author as an historical document. It was written by a disciple and grandson of one of the apparently moderate members of the Nishâpûrî school, known as the *Malâmâtîyya*, with the triple purpose of: **a)** placing the *Malâmâtîyya* in the arena of the mystical tradition within Islam (quite possibly with a view to counterbalancing the Baghdadi centre), of **b)** promoting the Nishâpûrî teachers and evaluating their distinctive teaching as the purest in the mystical tradition, and **c)** vindicating them of the accusation of nonconformity and antinomianism (see below, III: 4).

Later sources, such as Hujwîrî's *Kashfal-mahjûb*, Shihâb al-Dîn Suhrawardî's *Awûrif alma 'âif* or Ibn 'Arabî's *al-Futûhât al-Makiyya* are erroneously adduced in some of the aforementioned studies in the endeavor to trace the history of the *Malâmâtîyya* erroneously, since the writers in question are not at all interested in the historical set-up but rather, and solely, in the typological and psychological aspects of the Path of Blame.

**2)** In 1965 Richard Frye published three facsimiles of manuscripts which relate to a biographical work written probably at the end of the tenth century: *Ta'rîkh Naysâbûr* by Abû 'Abdullah Muhammad ibn 'Abdullâh al-Hâkim al-Naysâbûrî al-Bayyî' (d. 404/1014). (18)

The original work by Hâkim al-Naysâbûrî has been lost, but large chunks of it were absorbed by al-Sam'ânî in his *Kitâb al-Ansâb*, by 'Abd al-Qâhir al-Baghdâdî (d. 529/1134) in his *Kitâb al-Farq bayna 'l-fîraq*, and especially by al-Subkî in his *Tabaqât al-Shafi'iyya al-kubrâ*. The first manuscript in Frye's collection is an abridged version of the *Ta'rîkh Naysâbûr* in Persian, entitled *Ahwâl-i Nishâpûr*. This abridged version covers the period which concerns us, the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, and ends with contemporaries of Hakîm al-Naysâbûrî. (19) The *Ahwâl-i Nishâpûr* contains, as expected, biographical lists of the eminent scholars ('*ulamâ'*) and Shaykhs of Nîshâpûr in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries. It mentions approximately fifty of the renowned mystics of the town. They are referred to neither as "Sufis" nor as "*Malâmâtîs*" but rather as *zuhhâd* (ascetics), '*ubbâd* (worshippers), *wu''âz* or *mudhakkirûn* (preachers). The epithet "Sufi" comes up for the first time in this source as the attribute of Abû Bakr al-Wâsitî (d. 320/932). The latter indeed lived in Nîshâpûr for a number of years, but was not a native of it. He arrived there from Baghdad, where in his youth he had belonged to the

circle of Junayd. (20) From the fourth/tenth century on, however, the epithet 'Sufi' appears with increasing frequency in front of the names of the local Shaykhs as well. The attribute *malâmatî* does not appear even once. (21)

These manuscripts have been the basis for R.W. Bulliet's enlightening socio-historical study on the distinguished families of Nîshâpûr during the period between the third/ninth - sixth/twelfth centuries. Its title: *The Patricians of Nishapur, a Study in Medieval Islamic Social History*, speaks for itself. (22)

3) An important source for the history of Khurâsân in the fourth/tenth century are the first-hand descriptions of the famous traveller and geographer from Jerusalem, Abû 'Abdullâh Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Muqaddasî (or Maqdisî, d. 380/990) in his book *Ahsan al-taqâsîm*. (23) This source is particularly important for the history and characterization of the Karraâmiyya, which received its name from its founder Muhammad ibn Karrâm (d. 255/869). Ibn Karrâm was an ascetic and preacher in Khurâsân who exerted an enormous influence, especially among the poor of Nîshâpûr (see below, section VI). Muqaddasî does not mention Khurâsânî 'Sufis' or '*Malâmatis*' at all by either of these epithets in his book. He refers to the pietists, ascetics and mystics of this region as '*ubbâd*, *zuhhâd*, *wu"âz*, and *Karrâmiyya*, in a similar way to al-Hâkim al-Naysâbûrî.

4) The earliest source known to me in which the *Malâmatiyya* are mentioned, and which to the best of my knowledge has not yet been adduced in scholarly discussions on the *Malâmatiyya* are the chronicles of another author from Jerusalem, the historian Abû Nasr Mutahhar ibn Tâhir al-Muqaddasî, *Kitâb al-Bad' wa'l-ta'rîkh*, written circa 355/966. In the fifth volume of this book Abû Nasr al-Muqaddasî writes:

The Sufi groups: among them are the Hasaniyya [after Hasan al-Basrî? or perhaps one should read al-Husayniyya after Husayn ibn Mansûr al-Halîj?], al-Malâmatiyya, al-Sûqiyya and al-Ma'dhûriyya. These are characterized by the lack of any consistent system or clear principles of faith. They make judgements according to their speculations and imagination, and they constantly change their opinions. Some of them believe in incarnationism (*hulûl*), as I have heard one of them claim that His habitation is in the cheeks of the beardless youth (*murd*), Some of them believe in promiscuity (*ibâha*) and neglect the religious law, and *they do not heed those who blame them...*" 24

The significance of this mid-tenth-century text for clarifying historical and typological facts concerning the *Malâmatiyya* and other so-called Sufi groups related to them is obvious. There is no doubt that it relates to groups which had chosen to follow the peculiar Path of Blame (*malâma*) and it may thus allude to the unique characteristics of a mystical trend within Islam, practised by the masters of Nîshâpûr to whom Sulamî, barely a generation later, dedicated his *Malâmatiyya Epistle*. The historian Abû Nasr al-Muqaddasî thus suggests that in the fourth/tenth century a group of "[people] who do not heed those who blame them," known as the *Malâmatiyya*, could have been classified as



"Sufis." In itself it is an unfavourable and critical description. It suggests that the *Malâmatiyya*, and the other groups mentioned in association with it, were characterized by a strong antinomian trend with a clear nonconformist flavor. This information, which to the best of my knowledge is unique in the non-Sufi literature of the time, sheds light on the apologetics undoubtedly underlying Sulamî's works, the *Malâmatiyya Epistle* as well as his great hagiographical *Tabaqât al-sûfiyya* to vindicate the spiritual teachers of his hometown, (25) in fact, his own teachers, of the antinomian and nonconformist accusation, and to include them within the respectfully established "Generations of the Sufis." (26)

5) Additional material which is at our disposal are letters written by Hakîm al-Tirmidhî (d. ca. 295/908), a ninth-century mystic of great renown and authority from the Transoxanian town of Tirmidh, to two contemporary mystics associated with the early *Malâmatiyya* Abû 'Uthmân al-Hirî and Muhammad ibn al-Fadl al-Balkhî (see our discussion below of this correspondence, section X). Each of the three letters available to us, which Tirmidhî seems to have written in response to his correspondents' arguments or questions pertaining to the 'psychological' aspect of the mystical path (one to Abû 'Uthmân and two to Muhammad ibn al-Fadl), reads as a critique of a system which has been led astray by excessive concern with the negative, blameworthy aspects of the 'lower self' (*nafs*). There is no doubt that these letters reflect a dynamic dialogue, which took place in ninth century Khurâsân, on the psychological issue, so intrinsic to the *Malâmatiyya*, of how to conquer the lower self. In fact, this issue touches upon a fundamental *malâmâtî* problem: how far can one proceed on a spiritual path of uncompromising introverted purification, which entails elimination of any external traces of vanity (*'ujb*), presumptuous pretension (*iddi'â'*) and delusion (*ghurûr*), to the point of incurring constant blame, without undermining the ethical and practical precepts of extroverted religion.

#### IV. MYSTICS NOT NECESSARILY SUFIS

One of the surprising deductions from the study of the various Sufi and non-Sufi sources is that from the third/ninth to fourth/tenth centuries not all Muslim mystics were known as Sufis. Addressing Muslim mystics with the comprehensive name *sûfî* and identifying Islamic mysticism with *tasawwuf* seems to be the direct result of the compilatory literature of the late fourth/tenth century and later. With Kalâbâdhi's *Kitâb al-Ta'arruf*, Sarrâj's *Kitâb al-Luma'*, Sulamî's *Tabaqât al-sûfiyya* and, later on, Qushayrî's *Al-Risâla fi 'ilm al-tasawwuf* and Hujwârî's *Kashf al-mahjûb*, one may trace a clear attempt to present an amalgamated picture of the different schools and centres, without losing sight - albeit subtly and tacitly - of the compiler's own affiliation and allegiance. One may thus argue that Sulamî's *Tabaqât al-sûfiyya*, in which he includes mystics of different schools

under one heading, complements the more locally particularistic Malâmatiyya Epistle: both works are the response of a Khurâsânî-Nîshâpûrî compiler to the emphatically Baghdadi slant of the earlier compilations of Kalâbâdhî and Sarrâj.

The last two authors, in spite of their Khurâsânî origin, represent in their compilations mainly the Baghdadi school of the third/ninth century. One of Sarrâj's main authorities is Ja'far al-Khuldî (d. 348/ 959), who appears to have been the main transmitter of sayings and traditions emanating from Junayd, the central Baghdadi teacher during most of the ninth century. (27) In the same vein it is significant to note that in Sarrâj's *Kitâb al-Luma'* the Khurâsânî Shaykhs are scarcely mentioned; some of them are totally glossed over (e.g. Hamdûn al-Qassâr and Hakîm al-Tirmidhî). This reticence is not at all accidental. It reflects an early split between Baghdad and Khurâsân, a split which, notwithstanding the later amalgamation has left its traces in the Sufî tradition. (28) This split is highlighted by a curious comment made by the same Ja'far al-Khuldî and recorded by Sulamî in his *Tabaqât*, concerning Hakîm al-Tirmidhî:

... I heard Ja.'far ibn Muhammad al-Khuldî say: "I own a hundred and thirty odd works by Sufis." I asked him: "Do you own any of the works of al-Hakîm al-Tirmidhî? He said: "No, I do not count him among the Sufis." (29)

At first sight it would appear that in this comment Hakîm al-Tirmidhî is snubbed by Khuldî. It may well be understood though as reflecting, behind the fastidious tone, the pre-compilatory period in which the terms *sûfi*, *sûfiyya* and *tasawwuf* designated exclusively the Baghdadi teachers. Indeed, in the vast corpus of Tirmidhî's works there does not seem to occur even one reference to 'Sufis', and yet his works are deeply mystical. This assumption is also corroborated by the fact, mentioned above, that in Hâkim al-Naysa-bûrî's lists the first to be accorded the title *al-sûfi* is Abû Bakr al-Wâsitî, who had left the Baghdadi school before moving to Khurâsân. The statistics provided by Bulliet in his study of Ahwâl-i Nîshâpûr are also relevant: they show that the distribution of the attribute *sûfi* attached to the names of Nîshâpûrî Shaykhs becomes more frequent only from the fourth/tenth century onwards. (30) Sulamî himself seems to explicitly acknowledge this fact in his *Tabaqât* when he remarks about Abû 'Uthmân al-Hîrî, the central Nîshâpûrî Shaykh at the end of the third/ninth century (on whom see below, sections V and X), that "... the Sufî system in Nîshâpûr spread from him..." (31) Does this necessarily mean that before Abû 'Uthmân there were no adepts of the mystical path, or only a small number of them, in Nîshâpûr? Or may it not rather suggest that Abû 'Uthmân, a moderate *malâmâtî* as well as the spiritual teacher of Sulamî's grandfather, could have adequately represented for Sulamî himself an early attempt to amalgamate the Baghdadi and the Khurâsânî mystical schools under the comprehensive title "Sufî."

It is my contention that Sulamî, who is almost our only positive source of information for the early *Malâmâtî* movement in Nîshâpûr, is also the author who is responsible-

especially via his *Tabaqât al-sûfiyya* in which he includes both Baghdadi and Khurâsâni teachers - for creating the deceptive impression that *tasawwuf* was a homogeneous movement in the formative years of Islamic mysticism. The *Tabaqât* is in fact the main source which has shaped our knowledge and ideas on early Sufi history, so great has been the suggestive impact of his compilations and methods on modern as well as medieval students.

And yet, having said all this, the bottom line of this brief historical discussion is that ultimately Sulamî's *Tabaqât*, as well as Qushayrî's *Risâla* and other compilations, do reflect the all-inclusive mystical tradition within Islam. Indeed, the various Shaykhs mentioned and referred to in these compilations are all mystics: seekers for whom a direct numinous experience and the psychological transformation which this experience entails is the end and meaning of their lives and teachings. These seekers and teachers were known in the first few centuries of Islamic history by various names: *ahl al-ma'rîfa*, *ahl al-haqîqa*, *al-'ârifûn*, *al-sâlikûn*, *al-zuhhâd*, *al-fuqarâ'* etc. At times they were named after their particular teachers: *al-Hakîmiyya*, *al-Hallâjiyya*, *al-Qassâriyya*... (32) They were distinguished by local qualifications related to etiquettes and occupation. It seems most probable that the mainstream of Islamic mysticism in the third/ninth century, that is, the Baghdadi school, adopted the name *sûfiyya*. (33) It is possible that this term had initially related to certain ascetical groups. (34) It was not until the second half of the fourth/tenth century - mainly as a result of the compilatory activity - that the terms *sûfiyya* and *tasawwuf* became the comprehensive terms for Muslim mystics and Islamic mysticism at large, including all the various paths and schools within its scope.

## V. TWO STREAMS WITHIN THE NÎSHÂPÛRI SCHOOL IN THE THIRD/NINTH CENTURY: HAMDÛN AL-QAS-SÂR AL-MALÂMATÎ, AND THE FOLLOWERS OF ABÛ HAFS AL-HADDÂD AND ABÛ 'UTHMÂN AL-HÎRÎ

In the Sufi compilations from the fourth/tenth century onwards, including Sulamî's *Tabaqât*, there is only one Nîshâpûrî Shaykh who is consistently referred to by the attribute *al-malâmatî*: Hamdûn al-Qassâr (d. 271/884). According to Sulamî's *Tabaqât* he was the founder of the *malâmatî* school in Nîshâpur. (35) A close scrutiny of the hagiographical material concerning the third/ninth-century teachers of Nîshâpur against the backdrop of Sulamî's *Malâmatîyya Epistle* shows that in fact there had been two distinct circles within the Nîshâpuri Path of Blame: the circle of Hamdûn, which was extreme and non-compromising in its pursuit of *malâmat al-nafs*, or 'incurring blame on oneself' (36) and the more moderate circle of Abû Hafs and Abû 'Uthmân. It was the latter circle to which Sulamî's grandfather, as one of the closest disciples of Abû 'Uthmân,



adhered. (37)

Hamdûn's insistence on the principle of hiding away all external signs of spirituality is exemplified by many stories in the Sufi tradition. The following is what seems to be a candid appraisal of Hamdûn by a co-patriot, Nûh al-'Ayyâr, who probably belonged to one of the more extroverted spiritual circles in Nîshâpûr:

I [Nûh] . . . wear a patched frock. . . in order that I may become a Sufi and refrain from sin because of the shame that I feel before God; but you put off the patched frock in order that you may not be deceived by men and that men may not be deceived by you..." (38)

An indication of Hamdûn's denunciation of overt spiritual practices we may read in the following passage from the *Malâmatiyya Epistle*, in which Hamdûn al-Qassâr criticizes the audible *dhikr* (the practice of remembering God vocally) (39):

When some of the teachers were in a gathering with Hamdûn al-Qassar a certain master was mentioned and it was said that he practiced *dhikr* profusely. Hamdûn remarked, "Still, he is constantly heedless." Someone who was present inquired, "But is he not obliged to be grateful that God bestows upon him the ability to commit himself to the audible *dhikr*?." Hamdûn said, "Is he not obliged to see his limitation when the heart becomes heedless by the [audible] *dhikr*?." (40)

As for Abû 'Uthmân al-Hîrî, one of the correspondents of Hakim al-Tirmidhî mentioned above (see also below, section X), he was the central Shaykh of the Nîshâpûri school from circa 270/883 to 298/910. He was born in Rayy, where he became the disciple of Shâh Shujâ' Kirmânî. Hujwîrî tells us how on a visit with his teacher to Nîshâpûr, he became deeply impressed with their host Abû Haf's Haddâd, one of the leading spiritual teachers of his day. Abû Haf's "saw" intuitively the struggle in Abû 'Uthmân's heart - torn between loyalty to his teacher and the strong inclination towards Abû Haf's. The latter therefore asked Shâh Shujâ' to leave his disciple behind. Thus Abû 'Uthmân became Abû Haf's closest disciple, and eventually, his successor. (41) The *Malâmatiyya Epistle* tells us that Abû 'Uthmân trained his disciples in the middle path that ran between his teacher's method and that of Hamdûn. Thus, according to Abû Haf's teaching the disciples were encouraged to carry out many spiritual practices, the merits of which were emphasized. According to Hamdûn, on the other hand, spiritual practices were criticized and denounced in order to eliminate conceit and inflation. Abû 'Uthmân taught the middle path. He said:

Both ways are correct; each, however, in its right time. At the beginning of his novitiate we train the disciple in the path of practices and we encourage him to follow it and establish himself in it. However, when he is established and consistent in this path he becomes attached to it and dependent on it. Then we show him the shortcomings of this path of actions [or efforts] and our disregard for it, until he becomes aware of his helplessness, and sees how remote his efforts are from completion. Thus we make sure that first he becomes grounded in practices, yet does not (later on) fall into self-delusion. Otherwise, how can we show him the shortcomings of his practices if he

has no practices'?... Between the two this is the most balanced way. (42)

In response to a letter from Muhammad ibn al-Fadl al-Balkhî, a close companion of Abû 'Uthmân and another of the correspondents of Hakîm al-Tirmidhî mentioned above (also see below, section X), who asked him how one can perfect one's actions and states, Abû 'Uthmân wrote:

No action or state can become perfect unless God brings it about without any wish on the doer's part and without any awareness of the doing of the action, and without awareness of another's observation of the action. (43)

It is interesting to note that after Abû 'Uthmân's death the Nishâpûrî centre seemed to lose its attraction and many of the disciples found their way to other centres, especially the one in Baghdad. (44)

## VI. MALÂMATIYYA AND KARRÂMIYYA

The *Malâmatî* school of Nishâpûr during the third/ninth century advocated the realization of a spiritual experience of rare psychological purity. The key terms in *malâmatî* psychology are: *riyâ'*, *iddi 'â'*, *'ujb* and *ikhlâs*. *Riyâ'* (hypocrisy, acting ostentatiously) relates to the psychological dangers which arise when spiritual attainments become ostensible; *iddi 'â'* (pretense, presumption) relates to self-delusion; *'ujb* (conceit, vanity) to the pride and inflation which are bound up psychologically with the perception of one's own spiritual attainments; *ikhlâs* (sincerity) relates to a state in which one's actions and perceptions become free of the contamination of the ego or the lower self (*nafs*). The main aim of the *Malâmatîyya* is to reach a stage in which all one's psychological and spiritual attainments become totally introverted. This aspiration is succinctly expressed in the following saying attributed to its central teacher Abû Hafis Haddâd (as well as by many similar sayings scattered throughout the relevant literature):

They [the *malâmatîs*] show off what is blameworthy and conceal what is praiseworthy. Thus people blame them for their outward [conduct] while they blame themselves for their inward [state]..." (45)

There is no doubt that as a mystical path the *malâmatîyya* represented a sharp, albeit subtle and well-codified, reaction against movements known for their extreme asceticism, movements which had a tremendous following in third/ninth-century Khurâsân. The *malâmatî* reaction is itself a continuation of the anti-*zuhdî* tendency of certain circles within Islam right from its very beginning. (46) Islamic mysticism - contrary to what one may expect - is steeped in this anti-*zuhdî* tendency.

From the *Ahsan al-taqâsîm* of al-Muqaddasî, as well as from the biographical lists of

Hâkim al-Naysâbûrî, the *Tabaqât al-Shâfi'iyya* and other heresiographical and hagiographical sources, we learn of the popularity and the tremendous influence exerted by the Karrâmiyya - the followers of Muhammad ibn Karrâm - on the lower classes of Khurâsân and especially Nishâpûr. (48) Edmund Bosworth in his studies describes an extremely militant and ascetic movement, which, on account of its popularity among the weavers and water-carriers who inhabited the north-western sections of Nishâpûr (according to Bulliet's description, the poor district known as Mânishâk), became a threat to the Tâhirid rulers. The disciples of Ibn Karrâm were apparently the first Muslims who established a quasi-monastic institution in Khurâsân, which they named *Khânqâh*. Indeed, al-Muqaddasi refers to them also as Khânqâhiyyûn. Although the Karrâmiyya are attacked in the pro-Shâfi'ite heresiographies for their theological opinions, their extreme asceticism is nowhere disputed. In his *Tabaqât al-Shâfi'iyya* al-Subkî, who cannot be accused of favoring them, gives the following description of their leader Ibn Karrâm:

...He used to exhibit a great deal of piety (*tanassuk*), Godfearing (*ta'alluh*), devotional worship (*ta'abbud*) and asceticism (*taqashshuf*) ... Special assemblies were conducted for him, and when he was asked about his ideas he would say that they come from divine inspiration (*ilhâm*)...

Quoting al-Hâkim al-Subkî continues:

I was told that he was followed by a group of the poor (*fuqarâ'*), that he used to wear dyed but unsewn sheep skin; on his head he used to wear a white *qalansuwwa*, and that he used to sit in a stall [at the market]...preaching... The governor of Sijistân had expelled him...but was afraid to execute him because of his ostensible piety and asceticism (*al-'ibâda wal-taqashshuf*) which attracted to him many followers (*iftatana bihi khalq kathîr*, lit.: by which many people were deluded ...') (50)

From al-Sam'ânî's *Kitâb al-Ansâb* we have an indirect piece of evidence for the critical attitude with which the *Malâmatiyya* regarded the Karrâmiyya's extroverted asceticism. He tells us about a confrontation between Sâlim ibn Hasan al-Bârusî, one of the teachers of Hamdûn al-Qassâr al-Malâmâtî, and Muhammad ibn Karrâm:

Sâlim ibn al-Hasan al-Bârusî came to Muhammad ibn Karrâm. [Muhammad] asked [al-Bârusî]: "What do you think of my followers?" He said: "If the longing of their interior were seen manifest in their exterior, and the asceticism of their exterior were concealed in their interior then they would have been 'men'. (51) And he added: "I see much prayer, fasting and humiliation; yet I cannot see the light of Islam upon them." (52)

Interestingly, in the early Sufi literature there is no mention of the Karrâmiyya. Hujwârî in the fifth/eleventh century is the first Sufi author who mentions one of their teachers - Ahmad ibn Harb. (53) This reticence is very significant. In Sufi ethics polemics is counter-advocated. This, therefore, must have been the way in which the early Sufi

tradition chose to alienate itself from these extreme ascetic circles: to simply ignore them. Bearing in mind the tendency of the later compilatory literature to standardize and amalgamate the different mystical schools, this silence has very loud reverberations. It reflects the on-going dialectical attitude of Islamic mysticism towards extroverted ascetical behaviour and practice.

## VII. THE CHIVALRIC TRADITION (*FUTUWWA*)

The tradition of spiritual chivalry (*futuwwa* = chivalry, generosity; literally 'youth') (54) concerns us here because it was an important part of the socio-religious scene in Khurâsân, and because many of the Khurâsânî and Nîshâpûrî teachers refer to themselves as *fatan* (= youth; the Persian equivalent of which is *jawânmardî*), naming their disciples *fityân* (the plural form), and dedicating many sayings and even whole treatises to the topic of *futuwwa*. Sulamî composed an entire book on spiritual chivalry, the *Kitâb al-Futuwwa*; one finds, likewise, a special chapter devoted to this theme (*bâb fi 'l-futuwwa*) in Qushayrî's *Risâla*. The use of *futuwwa* terminology, similar to that of *zuhd* terminology, has caused great confusion in the study of the historical implications and the terminology of the early Sufi lexicon. Hartmann, Taeschner, Trimmingham and others are all concerned with the differentiation between *futuwwa* and *malâma*. (55)

The *futuwwa* organization has a primarily socio-ethical connotation: it is the name given to the system of closed societies of crafts and professions in medieval Persian towns. These societies were exclusive and esoteric. Members were not only required to belong to the relevant professions but were required to abide by the strictest ethical and professional standards. It seems that the most important of these ethical norms was *îthâr* - extreme altruism or self-sacrifice, to the extent of always giving precedence to one's neighbour, especially to the fellow members of the fraternity. The etiquette of the *fityân* also concerned specific garments and items of clothes by which they were distinguished. It is evident from Sufi compilations as well as from the *Malâmatiyya Epistle* that the social-professional *futuwwa* and the mystical *futuwwa* were interrelated. Qushayrî's *Risâla* abounds with anecdotes about Sufi *fityân*, most of whom it appears are affiliated to Khurâsânî teachers.

Study of the relevant source material has led me to the conclusion that the interrelatedness (rather than identity) between *Futuwwa* and *Malâmatiyya* was based on the following principles:

- 1) The *Malâmatiyya* identified with the *fityân* In regard to their attitude to altruistic self-sacrifice or *îthâr*.

2) The *Malâmatiyya* masked their mystical life under the guise of the social *futuwwa*. Many of the *malâmatî* teachers and disciples bore epithets indicating crafts and professions: al-Haddâd (=the ironsmith), al-Qassâr (=the bleacher), al-Hajjâm (=the cupper), al-Khayyât (=the tailor). Thus, in the *Malâmatiyya Epistle* Hamdûn al-Qassâr says to 'Abdullâh al-Hajjâm:

It is better for you to be known as 'Abdullâh al-Hajjâm (the bath-attendant, cupper) than as 'Abdullâh the Mystic (al- 'Ârif), or as 'Abdullâh the Ascetic (al-Zâhid). (56)

3) The *Malâmatîyya* adopted the term *futuwwa* (youthful chivalry) as a code-name for one of the stages in the mystical hierarchy, perhaps the one preceding manhood *rujûliyya*. Such terms as 'man' (*rajul*), 'manliness' (*rujûliyya*), 'men' (*rijâl*) as well as 'perfect manliness', 'complete maturity' (*kamâl al-rujûliyya*) appear quite often in Sulamî's writings. In the *Malâmatiyya Epistle*, for instance, we read:

Abû Yazîd was asked: "When does a man reach the stage of manhood in this business (*matâ yablughu al-rajul maqâma al-rijâl fi hâdhâ al-amr*)?" He said: "When he becomes aware of the blemishes of his lower self (*nafs*) and when his charge against it increases (*idhâ 'arafa 'uyûb nafsihi wa qawiyat tuhmatuhu 'alayhâ*)." (57)

Most illuminating in this regard is a saying ascribed to Abû Hafs, in which he assesses the spiritual attainments of Abû 'Abdullâh ibn Muhammad al-Râzî (d. ca. 310/922):

It was told that Abû Hafs had said [concerning the above]: "A 'youth' (*fatan*) grew up in Rayy; had he kept [faithfully] to his path and to the [behaviour appropriate to] this attribute, he would have become one of the 'men' (*rijâl*)." (58)

## VIII. MALÂMATIYYA AND SÛFFIYYA

As explained above, *sûfiyya* and *malâmatiyya* are two terms pertaining to two different mystical schools in the third/ninth century: the Baghdadi and the Khurâsânî schools respectively. Between these two schools there were relationships and communications. From the *Tabaqât al-sûfiyya* we know of disciples who moved from one centre to another: there were Baghdadis such as Abû Bakr al-Wâsitî who moved to Khurâsân, and Khurâsânîs who moved to Baghdad or stayed there for a while on their journey *fi talab al-'ilm* (in search of knowledge). Analyzing the somewhat dry biographical material supplied by the *Tabaqât* it seems that the Nishâpûrî centre reached its zenith during the time of Abû Hafs al-Haddâd, Hamdûn al-Qassâr and Abû 'Uthmân al-Hîrî in the second half of the third/ninth century, when it attracted disciples from far and wide. After Abû 'Uthmân's death, however, it appears that the Nishâpûrî disciples started to wander off. Many found their way to the Baghdadi centre of Junayd (Junayd died between six to ten



years after Abû 'Uthmân, and at least twenty years after Abû Hafs).

There exists at least one interesting record of a meeting between the teachers of the two schools—Abû Hafs and Junayd—with their disciples in Baghdad. From this anecdote, which is related by Sulamî in the *Tabaqât* (pp.117-18), in the interaction between these two Shaykhs, one can detect the subtle dialectics which operated between these two schools. This interaction illustrates the notion of proper manners and dignity conceived according to the strict code of *adab* (code of conduct, behaviour, proper manners or etiquette), especially *îthâr*, and at the same time it contains also a hidden rebuke:

When Abû Hafs came to Baghdad the Shaykhs of Baghdad gathered round him and asked him what the *futuwwa* was. He said: "You speak first, because you possess eloquence."

Junayd said: "*Futuwwa* is that one obliterates the vision [of one's acts and merits] and stops taking notice of them (*isaqât al-ru'ya*)."

Abû Hafs said: "How eloquently have you spoken! Yet for me *futuwwa* is that one should conduct oneself according to what is right and just (*insâf*) without expecting to be treated according to what is right and just."

Junayd said: "Arise, my friends, for Abû Hafs has transcended Adam and his descendants!"

In the last words of Junayd one can discern a subtle irony, perhaps even a concealed criticism of Abû Hafs' over-submissiveness to the *îthâr* code, while there is no doubt that Abu Hafs' praise of the Baghdadi eloquence is also double-edged. Indeed, just before departing, when he is again pressed by the Baghdadis to give his definition of *futuwwa* Abu Hafs says:

*Futuwwa* is practiced by actions not by speech (*al-futuwwa tu 'khadhu isti'mâlan wa mu 'âmalatan lâ nutqan*).

It is also related that Abû Hafs could not speak Arabic at all, but by way of a certain charismatic power (*karâma*) vouchsafed to him he was enabled to understand the Baghdadi brethren and even answer them in their language.

## IX. MALÂMATÎ PRINCIPLES

The main principle on which the Malâmâtî Path is based requires that one always behold one's self as blameworthy. Rather than being an ethical postulate, this principle stems primarily from a psychological understanding of the nature of the self. The 'self', or more accurately the 'lower self' (*nafs*), is understood by the Malâmâtî mystics as being the tempting element in the psyche, *al-nafs al-ammâra bi'l-sû'*: 'the soul which prods one to

evil' and in this capacity it functions as the *agent provocateur* of Satan, the lusts and all evil inclinations. Yet it is also understood as the centre of ego consciousness. Most mystical systems agree that the more one's energy is absorbed in satisfying and gratifying the requirements of the ego, the less energy can be put into the process of psychological and spiritual transformation. However, by ascetic practices alone the humiliation and surrender of the *nafs* cannot be achieved. On the contrary, the ascetic path often brings about an inflated hardening of the *nafs*. Inflation and conceit derive from both one's self-appraisal (*riyâ', 'ujb*) as well as from external social feedback (*shuhra, ri'âsa*). The Nîshâpûrî school known as the Malâmâtiyya therefore taught that the only way to neutralize the *nafs* is to expose it to blame and humiliation in all circumstances and conditions. The blame and humiliation should be incurred from both external agents and from the malâmâti himself. Blame should be drawn upon one's self not only in accordance with what is considered *blameworthy* by social, religious and ethical standards, but also - and first and foremost - with disregard to what is accepted as *praiseworthy* by these standards. Evidently, this lends the *malâmâtiyya* a clear nonconformist character.

Perhaps the most paradoxical and bewildering aspect of malâmâtî teaching concerns blame in the arena of spiritual practice and mystical experience. Thus we read in Sulamî:

Most of the [malâmâtî] Shaykhs warn their disciples against relishing the taste of devotional worship. This is considered by them a grave offense [min al-kabâ'ir]. This is because when the human being finds anything to be sweet and desirable it becomes important in his eyes; and whoever regards any of his actions as good and desirable, or regards any of his actions with satisfaction, falls from the stage of the eminent ones. (59)

In psychological terms, the malâmâtî teachers are warning their disciples against inflation of the ego which may accompany spiritual realization. However, the ultimate purpose of this path of contrariety is to reach a psychological stage of equanimity where no importance is attached to either praise or blame. (60)

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the complexity of the *malâmâtî* masters' teaching, and to expose the principles of the mystical methods to be followed in order to combat the wiles of the ego, is to examine their own words. The following excerpts from Sulamî's *Malâmâtiyya Epistle* reveal some of the depth of their psychological speculations in this regard:

Hamdûn al-Qassâr was asked "What is the Path of Blame?" "It is to abandon in every situation the desire to smarten up in front of people," he said, "to renounce in all one's states and actions the need to please people, and to be at all times beyond blame in fulfilling one's duties to God."

The *malâmâtîs* outwardly have no special marks distinguishing them from other people, and inwardly make no claims with God, so that their innermost consciousness (*sirr*), which lies between

them and God, can be perceived by neither their inner hearts (*af'ida*) nor outer hearts (*qulûb*).

No man can attain the rank of these people [the *malâmati s*] unless he regards all his actions as hypocrisy (*riyâ'*) and all his spiritual states are presumptuous pretense (*da'âwâ*).

One of the [*malâmatî*] teachers was asked, "What are the first steps in this affair?" He answered, "To humiliate and abase the lower self (*nafs*) and deprive it of what it relies upon, of that which it finds comfort with, and of what it inclines towards; to respect others, to regard others with favour, to justify the wrongdoings of others and to rebuke one's own self. (61)

The *malâmatîs* are those over whose innermost consciousness (*asrâr*) God keeps watch, drawing over their innermost consciousness the curtain of formal appearances, so that outwardly they participate in all activities performed by their fellows, keeping company with them in the marketplaces and in earning a means of livelihood, while in their true essence and [spiritual] conduct they associate with God alone. (62)

Spiritual states are valuable assets deposited in the hearts of their trustees; whoever externalizes them forfeits the rank of a trustee. (63)

He who wishes to understand the waywardness of the lower self (*nafs*) and the corruption of the instinctual nature let him observe himself when praised. If he notices that his lower self is favourably affected, even minutely, by what he hears, he should realize that it has deviated from the Truth, for the lower self relies on praise which has no truth in it, and is disturbed by blame which has no truth in it. (64)

One of them was asked concerning the path of Blame. He replied, "It is to abandon being conspicuous (*shuhra*) in all matters which may distinguish one in the eyes of people, whether in one's manner of dressing, walking or sitting... He should rather adopt the external behaviour of the people in whose company he is, while at the same time be isolated from them by way of contemplation, so that his exterior person conforms with society so as not to be distinguished in any way, while his interior reality is in utter distinction."

One of them was asked, "Why do you not participate in *samâ'* gatherings (musical concerts conducive to ecstasy]?" "It is not," he replied, "out of objection to *samâ'* that we abstain from attending its gatherings, but rather out of fear that we may not be able to conceal our inner spiritual states, and this is grave for us." (65)

One of their principles is that there are four grades of remembrance of God (*dhikr*): the *dhikr* of the tongue, the *dhikr* of the heart, the *dhikr* of the innermost consciousness (*sirr*) and the *dhikr* of the spirit (*rûh*). If the *dhikr* of the spirit is sound the heart and the innermost consciousness are silenced: this is the *dhikr* of contemplation (*mushâhada*). If the *dhikr* of the innermost consciousness is sound, the heart and the spirit are silenced: this is the *dhikr* of awe (*hayba*). If the *dhikr* of the heart is sound the tongue is silenced: this is the *dhikr* of divine graces. If the heart is heedless of the *dhikr* then the tongue takes over, and this is the *dhikr* of habit. Each one of these grades has a fault. The fault of the *dhikr* of the spirit is to be perceived by the innermost consciousness. The fault of the *dhikr* of the heart is that the lower self (*nafs*) should take note of it and admire it, or that it should

seek to gain by it the reward of attaining one of the spiritual ranks. (66)

## X. HAKÎM AL-TIRMIDHÎ & THE NÎSHÂPÛRI MASTERS

Among the many treatises and epistles written by Abû 'Abdullâh Muhammad ibn 'Alî al-Hakîm al-Tirmidhî (d. ca. 295/908) are a number of letters in which he responds to questions addressed to him by eminent correspondents. Among these, one letter is addressed to Abû 'Uthmân al-Hîrî, the Nîshapûrî *Malâmâtî* Shaykh. Two other letters are addressed to Muhammad ibn al-Fadl (d. 319/ 931) from Samarqand, a close companion of Abû 'Uthmân (more on whom below).

Hakîm al-Tirmidhî himself did not belong to the Nîshapûrî school or any other mystical school. (67) He appears to have led his mystical and literary life away from the contemporary centres. Perhaps he did not even have a teacher in flesh, and thus belonged, as the Sufî tradition permits, to the *Uwaysiyyûn*, those whose teacher is the eternal prophet al-Khidr. Traditions in this vein are reported by Hujwîrî and 'Attâr as well. (69) Hakîm al-Tirmidhî himself voices explicit reservations about the depending upon "a created being (*makhlûq*)" in the mystical quest rather than upon "the Creator (al-khâliq)." (70)

Yet, as we can see from his letters, he maintained direct links with some of his contemporaries among the mystics of Khurâsân. His letter to Abû 'Uthmân al-Hîrî, as well as the other two letters mentioned above revolve around the important issue of how best to deal with the ego (*nafs*) which undermines all spiritual attainments. Touching on this question, Hakîm al-Tirmidhî writes to Abû 'Uthmân:

I have received your letter, my brother, one letter after another. You confirm repeatedly [how] the blemishes of the lower self (*nafs*) [are an obstacle] in the [attainment] of [spiritual] knowledge. My brother, if you can refrain from being occupied by this obstacle, since this is other than Allâh, do so. For Allâh has servants who indeed have knowledge of Him, and they ignore all things but Him. They are wary of being occupied with the lower self and instead they fear Him. Whenever anyone of them is afflicted by its memory, his stomach turns (71) as if he were about to vomit. How can one who strolls through gardens of roses, jasmine and wild lilies graze in valleys of thorns? How can one who is nourished by the remembrance of the Majestic be aware of anything but Him? (72)

Tirmidhî's objections to an exaggerated preoccupation with the *nafs* in the mystical quest is expressed here as well as in other letters and in many passages throughout his writings. In his letter to Abû 'Uthmân he presents the nucleus of his own understanding and approach in which the *nafs* is conceived as the centre of negative qualities: lust, desire, fear, anger, doubt, idolatry and forgetfulness. A transformation (*tabdîl*) of these negative qualities into positive ones is possible. This transformation is possible,

however, only by means of the heart, that is, by the capacity of the heart to "see things in their essence" (*haqâ'iq al-umûr*). The heart's vision is obscured by the negative qualities of the lower self which cause a veil (*ghitâ'*) to fall between it and the Truth. This vicious circle can be broken by faith (*îmân*) which resides in the heart. Faith is reinforced by the grace of God, and its light intensifies gradually. As the light of faith intensifies in the heart, the impact of the 'veil' becomes weaker. As it weakens, 'the essence of things' becomes clearer and more visible to the heart. When the heart 'sees' the 'essence of things', its faith is transformed and becomes 'certitude' (*yaqîn*). At this stage, when the heart has attained 'certitude', the full transformation occurs: the desire of the *nafs* becomes desire for God, fear becomes fear of God, anger becomes anger for the sake of God, lust becomes longing for God, doubt becomes certitude, idolatry becomes pure unity and forgetfulness becomes determination.

Evidently Hakîm al-Tirmidhî's teaching, although revolving around the same psychological issues and obstacles which occupied the *malâmâtiyya*, advocates an utterly different approach. Excessive concern with the *nafs* regardless of its prominence in counteracting the sincere spiritual and devotional quest, will lead nowhere as long as the seeker's attention remains focused on it alone. Tirmidhî's method, as he reiterates in his letter, is based on "the science of God" (*al-'ilm bi'llâh*), whereas the method of Abû 'Uthmân and the Nîshâpûrî school - who are not mentioned by name but are undoubtedly implied - is based on "the science of the self" (*al-'ilm bi'l-nafs*). If one focuses one's attention on the science of the self - says al-Tirmidhî - one will never be released from the self. "If one occupies oneself with the knowledge of the self's blemishes, one will spend all one's life in the attempt to be released from it (*fa-'in ishtaghala al-'abd bi ma 'rfat al- 'uyûb baqiya 'umrahu fîhâ wa fî 'l-takhallus minhâ*)," he comments. On the other hand, if one focuses one's attention on the science of God, the heart becomes stronger and its vision of Divine revelations clearer. These revelations revive the heart, and its antithesis, the self, withers away. "When the self gives up because of the impact of the Divine revelations, the heart is revived by the Lord; what blemish remains then?" (73)

In the two letters addressed to Muhammad ibn al-Fadl al-Balkhî Tirmidhî expounds the same teaching. Muhammad ibn al-Fadl lived for many years in Samarqand, after having been expelled from his hometown of Balkh. (74) Although he cannot be said to have belonged to the Nîshâpûrî school, he was closely linked to Abû 'Uthmân al-Hîrî. In his *Tabaqât* Sulamî quotes Abû 'Uthmân as saying, "If I were strong enough I would have travelled to my brother Muhammad ibn al-Fadl to find in his company solace for my inner-most heart (*sirrî*)." (75) Qushayrî too, in his *Risâla*, mentions the great esteem in which Abû 'Uthmân held Muhammad ibn al-Fadl. (76)

The two letters of Hakîm al-Tirmidhî to Ibn al-Fadl are found in my unpublished critical edition - *Masâ'il wa-rasâ'il* - based on MS. Leipzig 212. (77) In one of these letters, (78) Tirmidhî seems to be answering Muhammad's question as to how one attains the



knowledge of the self. Here Tirmidhî reveals an uncompromisingly passionate sarcasm in his criticism of those who spend their entire life incurring blame on their selves. (Interestingly, al-Tirmidhî uses the terms *dhamm* and *lawm* rather than *malâma*.) To think that in this way they are going to eliminate the self is sheer delusion. The self is cunning and wily. It will turn the means whereby one attempts to destroy it to its own advantage. Its essence is pleasure and enjoyment. When one makes efforts to fight it, the self finds pleasure in these very efforts. If this is done publicly, the self will gain strength from the admiration and respect this will draw from the public. Thus all these efforts are to no avail. He who has eyes to see without deluding himself knows that the obstacle of the self will not be removed by the knowledge of the self or by blaming the self. Only the Creator of the self can eliminate it. He who knows this finds refuge with Him without Whom there is no refuge.

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This correspondence, which has involved three Khurâsânî mystics of the third/ninth century, is a first-hand source that corroborates the contention expressed throughout this paper that towards the end of the third/ninth century there existed in Khurâsân (as well as in Baghdad) a number of mystical circles, centered around various important teachers. These circles were mutually related to each other by a complex and dynamic interaction revolving mainly around questions of mystical psychology. Perception of the many-faceted personal and communal relationships of these schools as well as the versatility of their opinions and methods is somewhat blurred and obscured in the later Sufi compilations, which were written with the purpose of solidifying and standardizing the Sufi tradition at large. The existence of such multifarious traditions, however, can be traced even within these very Sufi compilations, and when analysed alongside additional sources, both Sufi and non-Sufi, may present a fuller, richer and more accurate picture of the early development of Islamic mysticism.

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