

**Christopher Melchert**, *Before Sufism: Early Islamic Renunciant Piety*.

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The trend of renunciation (*zuhd*) in the formative period of Islam put a decisive stamp on the development of Islamic morality and left significant traces in *ḥadīth* literature as well as the later Sufi tradition. The more surprising is how few historicizing studies there actually are on these renunciants, focusing on the earliest available sources through a historical-critical lens. The work under review here is such an attempt to thoroughly historicize this phenomenon based on the earliest available literary sources – *adab* (polite letters), appropriations in early Sufi sources, and *hadith*. The author has already shown his capability on these subjects in a series of journal articles, mostly published in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>1</sup> This work may be considered as an accumulation of his scholarship of the past three decades and a firm restatement of his main positions.

MELCHERT's main argument, as presented in Chapter One, is that renunciant piety started as a common attitude among postconquest Muslims that aimed to preserve the austere ethos of the conquest period. For a significant period of time Muslims remained a minority in the conquered areas, and mainly lived from taxes on local non-Muslim populations, which freed them from daily labor. This put them in the position to collectively live according to these austere ideals and also distinguish themselves from their non-Muslim surroundings through their practices of piety. When Muslims slowly became a majority and working for gain became the norm, renunciation became more and more problematic as an ideal for all Muslims to uphold. The renunciant ideals of the early postconquest period were gradually replaced by Sufism, which still upheld certain ideals of renunciation but only for a spiritual elite.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Christopher MELCHERT, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism at the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.", *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996): 51–70; idem, "Sufis and Competing Movements in Nishapur", *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 39 no. 1 (2001): 237–247; idem, "The Ḥanābila and the Early Sufis", *Arabica* 48 no. 3 (2001): 352–367; idem, "The Piety of the *Ḥadīth* Folk", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 no. 3 (2002): 425–439; idem, "Early Renunciants as *Ḥadīth* Transmitters", *The Muslim World* 92 no. 3–4 (2002): 407–418; idem, "Baṣran Origins of Classical Sufism", *Der Islam* 82 no. 2 (2005): 221–240.

MELCHERT cares to stress in this introductory chapter – and other places in his book, see, for example, his criticism on Atif KHALIL's take on al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (182–183) – that his approach is that of a historian only, and that historicizing the phenomenon of renunciation in isolation from the later Sufi tradition is very well possible. Attempts to read a superhistorical essence of Sufism manifest throughout history into the sources on renunciation, as some in the academic study of Sufism wish to do, should be rejected categorically according to MELCHERT. He intends to understand these early renunciants on their own terms, with a critical eye to their later reception in Sufi circles. Sufis may have adopted elements of the thought and attitudes of the early renunciants (as he discusses in Chapter Ten), but to historically consider them proto-Sufis is a mistake.

To support his main argument, in Chapters Two to Five MELCHERT sums up and summarizes a score of textual sources on main themes represented in renunciant literature. These show the pious practices that renunciants engaged in to give them their specific identity vis-à-vis their non-Muslim surroundings and to manifest their submission to God. These are the physical austerities of poverty, food, sleeping little, abstinence from sex, clothing, and scrupulosity (Chapter Two); moral austerity in the form of sadness and fear, withdrawal, not speaking much, hostility to laughter, “sticking to what is important,” and accepting impractical consequences of good works (Chapter Three); supererogatory forms of worship, like ritual purity and ritual prayer, supplication (*du‘ā'*), almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage (Chapter Four); and new devotional forms, especially “recollection” (*dhikr*) in the form of Qur'ānic recitation, pious phrases, and “hearing” (*samā'*) (Chapter Five). While these chapters provide an adequate survey of the sources, they do not offer deeper analysis of renunciant practices presented therein.

Although the material he presents in these chapters is unique in the English language, one may wonder what this selection of material exactly adds to the well-known similar and more extensive overviews in German of Richard GRAMLICH, mainly *Weltverzicht* and *Alte Vorbilder des Sufitums*, to which he does refer in his footnotes.<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, GRAMLICH approached the early renunciants through the lens of later Sufi sources. He consequently offered a “mystical” reading of early renunciants and his portrayal may thus be considered less historically accurate. Still, it would have been illuminating if MELCHERT had stressed a bit more how he ultimately differs in the reading of those sources, or how also involving hadith and *adab* changes the picture painted by GRAMLICH radically. This literature in

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<sup>2</sup> Richard GRAMLICH, *Alte Vorbilder des Sufitums*, 2 vols., Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 1995–1996; idem, *Weltverzicht: Grundlagen und Weisen islamischer Askese*, Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 1997.

German is often overlooked by Anglo-American scholars of Sufism, and it would have been good to bring it to the attention a bit more in this study. MELCHERT does not mention Josef VAN ESS' classic dissertation in his discussion of al-Muḥāsibī, for example (172–175).<sup>3</sup> Nor does he cite the works of Bernd RADTKE or Fritz MEIER even once, who made the case for early asceticism as a mystical trend, thus taking the opposite position from MELCHERT. A direct engagement with this literature would have surely made his own position clearer.

Only from Chapter Six onward does MELCHERT offer more analysis of his collected material and mildly engages in critical dialogue with the secondary literature. Chapter Six discusses the renunciants in light of Peter BROWN's concept of the "holy man" in late antiquity and sheds light on some discontinuities with early Islam.<sup>4</sup> MELCHERT shows how three qualities attributed to late antique holy men also survived in early renunciants: the holy man as an arbitrator, as an intercessor, and as a miracle worker. The renunciant was the ideal person to rebuke the ruler for oppression or transgressions of the boundaries of Islamic law, "without social attachments, with nothing in the world to lose" (109). He also considers the institution of *iftā'* as a form of arbitration, either between Muslims in civil disputes or between the Muslim and God. He further suggests that holy individuals with intercessory powers, and the idea that the order and prosperity of the world depended on their prayers, were a normal phenomenon in early Islam. Miracle working is present in the early sources but seems less central to the Islamic "holy men" than in Peter BROWN's thesis and differs significantly from Christian late antiquity: rather than healing from illness, relief from famine, and restoration of social order, miracles are mostly related to dream interpretation, performance of ritual duties, and miraculous punishment.

MELCHERT explains the main discontinuities between the holy men of Christian late antiquity and early Islam through the urban character of postconquest Islam and its minority status: arbitration hardly took place between rulers in the cities and the rural population, mostly still non-Muslim, since Islam's holy men were part of the urban centers and not well connected to the rural populations (withdrawal of Muslim holy men was rather in their urban houses than in the countryside); celibacy was unpractical since the whole Muslim community was considered holy in its minority status; travel to holy sites did not fit with the urban character either. MELCHERT argues that the Muslim holy man gradually become

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<sup>3</sup> Josef VAN ESS, *Die Gedankenwelt des Ḥārīt al-Muḥāsibī anhand von Übersetzungen aus seinen Schriften dargestellt und erläutert*, Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität Bonn, 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Peter BROWN, "The Rise and Function of Holy Man in Late Antiquity", *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101.

obsolete when Muslims became a majority in society, due to the routinization of politics and the professionalization of law, that made charisma and holiness less central to religious leadership.

Chapter Seven focuses on renunciants and politics. It shows how renunciants were part of all early religio-political sects (note the tension with a later passage in the same chapter that shows how involvement with rulers is generally discouraged in renunciant literature) and shows the attractiveness of jihad as a form of religious self-denial for renunciants. Chapter Eight discusses the economics of renunciation. It shows how in the 7<sup>th</sup> century conquest booty and state stipends were the main source of income for the Muslim minority that formed “a thin stratum at the top of the society” (157), but how in the postconquest period stipends gradually became strained due to professionalization of the military and growth of the Muslim population. Other sources of livelihood thus had to be found. This triggered the encouragement of austerity as an ideal. Trade, agriculture, and gain (*kasb*) were points of controversy in renunciant sources. Living off stipends did not fit the ideal of independence from rulers. Self-sufficiency was the ideal, and trade served this purpose best. Alms were also a possibility to remain independent from the rulers, but begging was generally discouraged.

Chapters Nine and Ten are arguably the most important of the book as they most emphatically engage with MELCHERT’s main argument: the transition from renunciation to Sufism due to the gradual shift from Muslims as a dominant post-conquest minority to Islam as the majority culture. Chapter Nine explores how opposition to renunciation grew as a “counterattack of an increasingly distinct scholarly class against an increasingly distinct renunciant class” (159). Scholars emphasized the importance of renunciation as an inward disposition but disdained outward austerity increasingly, with eye-service (*riyāʾ*) as main argument. Specialization of the religious class in scholarly disciplines contributed to this rivalry. There was an economic impetus as well: the rise of a bourgeoisie beside an aristocracy. Also, MELCHERT argues, the austere practices of the earlier generations were good to recollect as an ideal type of piety but were not meant to be surpassed. They were supposed to be hailed as extreme exceptions, not as a moral demand for everyone.

Chapter Ten deals with the transition from asceticism to mysticism, a theme on which MELCHERT first published in 1996 and reiterates here.<sup>5</sup> Building on Max WEBER, he discusses asceticism and mysticism as separate archetypes. He claims that the early renunciants clearly were on the side of asceticism and that mystical inclinations were only accidental, not structural. MELCHERT sees two

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5 MELCHERT, “Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism”.

solutions for devotional life after the social and economic consequences of the shift from minority to majority: turning piety inwards or creating a caste specialized in devotional works, similar to monastic traditions. The first was partially the solution of the Hadith folk, the second partially of the Sufis. The transition from renunciation to Sufism harbored both continuities and discontinuities. Austere living and respect for the law remained important to Sufis. Sufis adopted renunciation as “an early stage in the progress of a Sufi and a continuing outward observance of all Sufis” (193), but now as a minority pursuit. They were much more hierarchically minded than the renunciants, however, and their expectation of communion with God was new, as was their detailed theoretical elaboration of the mystical path.

MELCHERT’s transliteration of Arabic names and terms is meticulous and almost faultless. His overall writing style, however, is not easily penetrable and may come across as unstructured and even chaotic at points: it is sometimes easy to lose track of the gist of his argument due to his digression into details. Also, his discussion of and embedding in the secondary literature generally tends to be cursory, sometimes ending quite abruptly (see the introduction to Chapter 6 on the work of Peter BROWN, “I mostly leave it aside here”; or the discussion of Feryal SALEM’s valuable work on Ibn al-Mubārak on p. 149) and sometimes even slightly disrespectful in an unnecessary manner (“Khalil’s formulation is a conversation stopper and I can only respond by saying that I am working in a different tradition from his,” 183).

Despite MELCHERT’s stress on his historicizing approach, one could say that this monograph still lacks historical rigor. It is mostly a cursory reading of sources and fragmented case studies that lack depth in their discussion and do not significantly add something to his earlier publications on the same subject. It is mainly focused on a history of attitudes, focusing on details rather than a larger narrative, and still offers little in the sense of a social history of the renunciants. His main argument does need that approach more than he shows now. One may dispute whether the material he presents really proves that the teachings of renunciation were aimed at all Muslims in the postconquest period to preserve the ethos of the conquest period, and that the shift from minority to majority was responsible for the shift from collective renunciation to renunciant Sufism for a spiritual elite. This seems more to be his framework of interpretation for the material than a conclusion the material inevitably leads to.<sup>6</sup> *Before Sufism* contains

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<sup>6</sup> Compare his harsh and *ad hominem* critique elsewhere on Feryal SALEM’s alleged substandard scholarship that according to him is caused by “determining one’s results in advance as opposed to going wherever one’s evidence leads.” Christopher MELCHERT, “Ibn al-Mubārak, Tradition-

some gems, is at times a rewarding read, and opens valuable material for analysis to an English audience. However, the last word on how to interpret this material is not yet said. It is hoped that a new generation of scholars of early Islam will continue the conversation in a more thorough and profound dialogue with other scholarship.

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ist”, in: *Modern Hadith Studies: Continued Debates and New Approaches*, eds. Belal Abu al-Abbas, Michael Dann, and Christopher Melchert, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020, 54.