

INTRODUCTION



Morocco and the Problem of Sainthood in Islamic Studies

Naming Muslim Sainthood: Walāya or Wilāya?

The problematic of Muslim sainthood begins with its very name. When one translates (literally, “carries over”) a word from a foreign language into one’s own tongue, the classic translator’s dilemma arises: a good translation must be both faithful to the meaning of the foreign term and also fully expressive of its own language. In effect, a double translation must be created.¹ Since this is impossible in an absolute sense, every translation is inadequate. This limitation is all the more present with regard to religious concepts, where even a small difference in meaning can lead to serious misunderstandings. Such is the case, for example, when one uses the English word “sainthood”—a concept associated with Christianity—for the Islamic terms *walāya* or *wilāya*. Once taken out of its original context, each term runs the risk of being rendered contextless, and as such would not be recognized by the audience to whom it was first addressed.²

But the Islamic case presents its own paradox: although *walāya* and *wilāya* are related in meaning, they are nonetheless different. The real issue is therefore one of “double subjectivity” rather than of true objectivity.³ A problematic exists on both sides of the equation. Should not one be equally as attentive to Muslim interpretations of *walāya* and *wilāya* as to their English translation?

This problem is seldom recognized in the field of Islamic Studies. *Walāya* and *wilāya* are used interchangeably by most Western scholars of Islam, just as they are in informal Arabic. Recently, however, a debate over these terms has arisen among specialists in Sufism in Europe and America.⁴ Some scholars maintain that what we in the West think of as sainthood is most accurately conveyed in Islam by the term *walāya*. This conclusion comes from a strict etymological analysis of the Arabic root *waliya*, which means “to be near or close.” Thus, *walī Allāh*, the compound word most often translated as “saint” in English, means an “intimate” or a “friend” of God.⁵

But the actual use of an expression does not always correspond to etymological ideals. When the word *walī* is used in the Qur’an, it does not necessarily mean “friend.” More often, it carries the power-laden connotations of “manager,” “guardian,” “protector,” or “intercessor”—concepts that are more in the semantic domain of *wilāya* than *walāya*.⁶ Even *walāya* itself, which is used twice in the Holy Book, does not always connote friendship.⁷ Only when *walī Allāh* is used in the plural, as in the verse: “Verily for the *awliyā*⁷ *Allāh* there is no fear, nor shall they grieve” (X [*Yūnus*], 62), is the idea of closeness to God foregrounded. Thus, according to Qur’anic usage, the term *walī Allāh* has a social as well as a metaphysical signification: the Muslim saint protects or intercedes for others as Allāh’s deputy or vicegerent.⁸

In the Islamic Middle Period, the question of whether *walāya* or *wilāya* was the “correct” verbal noun of *walī* was widely discussed by grammarians.⁹ Ibn Kathīr, for example, came down on the side of *wilāya*, which he defined as authority, power, or the ability to act. To Ibn Sīdah, *wilāya* and *walāya* were more or less identical. For Ibn as-Sikkīt, *wilāya* meant governmental authority (*sulṭān*), while both *wilāya* and *walāya* denoted assistance or support (*nuṣra*). According to the strictly formalistic Sībawayh, *walāya* was a verbal noun whereas *wilāya* was an abstract noun. Yet both meant essentially the same thing: either command (*imāra*) or delegated authority (*niqāba*).¹⁰

Despite their best efforts, neither alternative, *walāya* nor *wilāya*, could be put forward by medieval grammarians as the “correct” verbal noun of *walī*.¹¹ Given this fact, it should come as no surprise to find that the meaning of these terms was also debated by Sufis. In the early fourteenth century, the Indian master Nizām ad-Dīn Awliyā⁷ (d. 725/1325) discussed the difference between *walāya* and *wilāya* in a lecture that found its way into the pages of Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī’s *Fawā’id al-Fu’ād* (Morals for the heart):

The saint possesses both *walayāt* and *wilāyat* at the same time. *Walāyat* is that which masters impart to disciples about God, just as they teach them about the etiquette of the Way. Everything such as this which takes place between the Shaykh and other people is called *walayāt*. But that which takes place between the Shaykh and God is called *wilāyat*. That is a special kind of love, and when the Shaykh leaves the world, he takes his *wilāyat* with him. His *walayāt*, on the other hand, he can confer on someone else, whomever he wishes, and if he does not confer it, then it is suitable for God Almighty to confer that *walayāt* on someone. But the *wilāyat* is the Shaykh's constant companion; he bears it with him (whenever he goes).¹²

For Niẓām ad-Dīn, it is *wilāya* that connotes closeness or love, whereas *walāya* connotes authority. This is not the case, however, for Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Māgīrī (fl. 696/1297), an Egyptian contemporary of Niẓām ad-Dīn and great-grandson of the Moroccan shaykh Abū Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ (d. 631/1234). For this writer, the semantic ambiguity of *walāya* and *wilāya* is resolved in favor of authority:

We say (and with God is the approval): *Walāya* is a verbal noun and *wilāya* is a gerund [*ism maṣdar*]. The meaning of both is “assistance or support” [*nuṣra*], according to Sībawayh. Al-Azharī, however, says that *walāya* means “most clearly related” [*aẓhar fi'n-nasab*], while the idea of assistance or support comes from the saying, “a patron by virtue of authority” [*walī bayna wilāya*]. *Wilāya*, therefore, is like a command [*imāra*], as in the saying, “governing by virtue of [delegated] authority” [*wālin bayna wilāya*].¹³

When all is said and done, *walāya* and *wilāya* are best seen as semantic fraternal twins that coexist symbiotically, like yin and yang. Each relies on the other for its meaning. This interpretation is confirmed by etymology and Qur'anic usage alike. It also corresponds to actual experience. A person can only exercise delegated authority over another by being close to the one who bestows authority in the first place. This closeness can be expressed literally, in terms of physical proximity, or metaphorically, in terms of status. When this logic is applied to the Muslim saint, the following argument pertains: Allah is the source of all power and authority. Since the *walī Allāh* is Allah's “friend,” he must be close to Allah. Therefore, he is seen by others as Allah's protégé, just as the friend of a king is seen as a pro-

tégé of that king. Protégés of the powerful benefit from their links to their patrons by acting as intermediaries for those who are below them. As an intermediary, the protégé is also a patron, for others rely on him to intercede for them before the ultimate source of authority. Thus, the *walī Allāh* is both an intermediary and a patron for his clients.

How does this relate to the semantic problem discussed above? If translation means that fidelity to the original can only be found in exact replication, then distortion and infidelity are the lot of every translation. Does this prove the old adage *Traduttore traditore* (“The translator is a traitor”)?¹⁴ Not necessarily. George Steiner has noted that the academic debate about translation is based on two mutually exclusive premises. The “universalist” premise argues that all human languages share a common structure. If this were the case, then it would be possible for the researcher to delve beneath surface differences to find common similarities. The “relativist” or “monadist” premise, on the other hand, views languages as so different from each other that comparison cannot comprehend them. If this were true, then the interpretation of *walāya* and *wilāya* as “Muslim sainthood” would be so inaccurate as to be meaningless.¹⁵

But the mere fact of difference does not mean that one cannot translate. Such a conclusion would be absurd, since human beings translate all the time. Every good translator is aware that since translation involves interpretation, no translation can be exact. From this perspective, translation is subsumed under the wider category of representation, analogy, and metaphor—what Wittgenstein called “family resemblances.”¹⁶ If all translation is mimetic, then any carefully conceived analogue in any language can serve the task of translation equally well. Whether we use sainthood, *sainteté*, *hagaia*, *santidad*, or any other comparable term for *walāya* and *wilāya* is unimportant, so long as we do not claim that it conveys the full meaning of the Arabic concepts.

This point has also been made by Jacques Derrida. For him, “Une ‘bonne’ traduction doit toujours abuser.”¹⁷ Derrida is saying more in this statement than that “a good translation must always abuse.” Rather, he reminds us that in every act of translation, the interpretive process distorts the original in new and sometimes imaginative ways. According to Derrida’s specialized lexicon of deconstruction, translated concepts are said to be “*ab-used*.” It is often forgotten that the Arabic terms *walāya* and *wilāya* are themselves interpretations, since together they represent a concept whose full meaning goes beyond the semantic range of either word when taken by

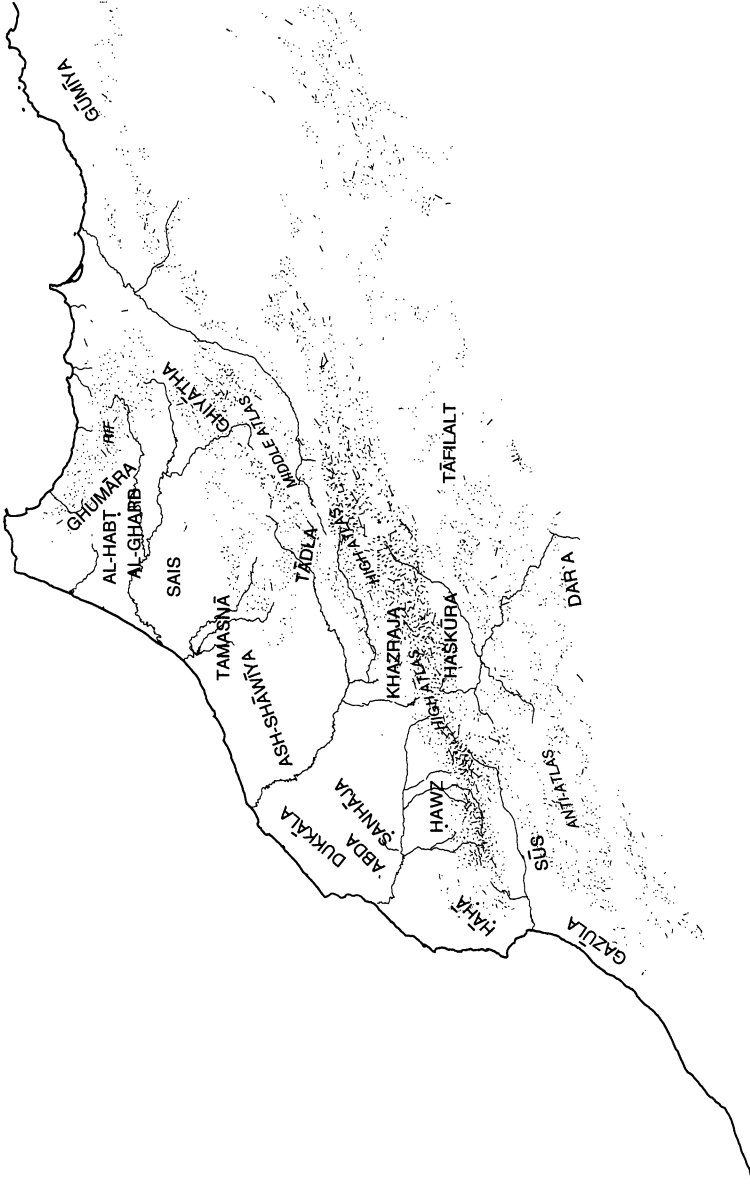
itself. Put another way, they too are “*ab-usive*” of a greater reality. Thus, the English term “sainthood” need not be any more abusive of the larger reality than the Arabic words it replaces. When we translate *walāya* and *wilāya* as “Muslim sainthood,” we are simply trying to “understand other cultures as far as possible in their own terms but in our language.”¹⁸ Such is the nature of all comparative analysis, whether linguistic or otherwise. Although we should not trivialize foreign concepts by disregarding their historical, cultural, and lexicographical contexts, we may unpack or deconstruct them on different levels.

Why Study Morocco?

The aim of this book is to examine the relationship between sainthood and authority in Morocco, the Far Maghrib (Ar. *al-Maghrib al-Aqṣā*) of the premodern Islamic world. Although this region was not a “nation” in the modern sense, its spatial and cultural contours were more clearly defined than in other areas of Islamdom.¹⁹ To the north, it was bounded by the Mediterranean, which formed both a natural border and a means of access to Muslim Spain. To the west was the Atlantic Ocean, an expanse which Moroccans never crossed. To the south was the Sahara desert, a “sea” unto itself, which also acted as a border. The only undefined border was to the east, where the Taza gap opens onto the city of Tlemcen and the Algerian Ouarsenis. Here, cultural and political barriers made up for the absence of geographical limits. After the thirteenth century, it became increasingly difficult to conceive of Tlemcen—a city so near yet so far away from Morocco proper—as part of the Far Maghrib. After the Ottoman occupation of western Algeria in the sixteenth century, the separate identity of this city and its region became an accepted fact.

Premodern Morocco is important to the study of sainthood for several reasons. First, this part of the world has been studied extensively by Western social scientists. However, since anthropological and sociological studies of religion are concerned primarily with behavioral and social-structural issues, social-scientific investigations of Moroccan sainthood have focused on the social aspect of this phenomenon instead of its doctrinal or metaphysical aspect. Although such research is useful, it tells only part of the story. If the doctrinal aspect of Muslim sainthood is not explored, the important relationship between Sufism and the Moroccan cult of saints is liable to be ignored or misunderstood.²⁰

Second, although Morocco has received plenty of attention from social



MAP TWO
Regions of Premodern Morocco

scientists, it has been overlooked in the field of Islamic Studies. This is particularly true of Moroccan Sufism.²¹ While a number of Moroccan Sufi texts have been edited in Arabic and one or two have appeared in French, no detailed study of Moroccan Sufism has yet been written in any language. This problem is all the more acute because the Far Maghrib has long been one of the most important crucibles of Islamic mysticism. The wide geographical extent of the Shādhiliyya and Tijāniyya Sufi orders underscores the importance of this lacuna. In addition, recent studies of so-called neo-Sufism have shown that the transregional character of this concept extends to, and must include, Moroccan Sufism.²²

North Africa was never the backwater that many orientalist and social scientists have assumed. While Muslim Spain (Ar. *al-Andalus*), with its sophisticated intellectual life and “civilized” ways, is often highlighted in surveys of Islamic civilization, the premodern Maghrib is still dismissed as either an appendix of Islamic Iberia or a mere subregion of a peripheral and marginalized Islamic Africa. But the historian who looks at North African primary sources without prejudice finds that such an extreme center-periphery approach distorts reality. Rather than making a peripheralized North Africa dependent on Muslim Spain, it is better to view the entire Islamic West—al-Andalus, the Maghrib, Muslim Sicily, and parts of West Africa—as a single, relatively unified cultural entity. In this wider region, ideas were freely exchanged and innovations were adopted as readily as anywhere in the Muslim world. Most importantly, religious and intellectual movements from Morocco and other parts of the Maghrib often created ebb tides of intellectual and cultural influence that flowed toward the East. Instead of being merely imitative, many of the doctrines and institutions that were created in western “subcenters” such as Fez or Marrakesh had profound effects on the rest of the Islamic world.

Only by embracing a more open-minded approach to the premodern Maghrib can we fully understand the relationship between Islam, authority, and mysticism in Morocco. Why, for example, is Muslim sainthood referred to as *walāya* in Sufi texts but as *wilāya* in Moroccan Arabic? Can this difference be dismissed as the result of dialectical euphony or were there different modalities of sainthood in premodern North Africa?²³ Can one bridge the gap between Sufism and popular religion without having to rely on etymological explanations? How much have North African Sufis assimilated the concept of *wilāya* into their own understanding of sainthood? Was there, in fact, a Sufi order that stressed *wilāya* as part of its doctrines?

If so, how was the interrelationship between *wilāya* and *walāya* articulated in theory and practice? All of these issues, and more, will be addressed in the following chapters.

Sainthood and Social Science in Morocco

When social scientists discuss sainthood in Morocco, they seldom use either *walāya* or *wilāya*.²⁴ Instead, they talk about charisma, which they equate with the Arabic term *baraka*—a concept whose definition has run the gamut from “blessed virtue” and “spiritual potency” to “power” and even “luck.”²⁵ Since European saints are said to be charismatic figures, charisma is also assumed to be central to the Moroccan conception of religious authority. For this reason, the Moroccan saint is most often defined as a *baraka*-laden individual.²⁶

But how is the holy person characterized in Morocco itself? In actual practice, what is doctrinally known as a *walī Allāh* can be designated by any one of several terms, either masculine or feminine: *ṣālīh/ṣālīha* (Ar.), *shaykh* (Ar.), *murābiṭ* (Ar.), *siyyid/siyyida* (Dial. Ar.), *agurram/tagurramt* (Ber.), and *amghār* (Ber.).²⁷ Yet despite this range of alternatives, social scientists most often refer to the Moroccan saint as a marabout, a Francophone corruption of the Arabic term *murābiṭ* that was used in Algeria to designate rural holy men.²⁸ This “abuse” of an indigenous concept has become so prevalent that today even North Africans often use *marabout* in place of *walī Allāh*.²⁹

In examining the role of the saint in Moroccan society, social scientists often base their discussions on *La Religion musulmane en Berbérie* (1938) by the French historian Alfred Bel. According to Bel, North African Islam was heavily influenced by pre-Islamic Berber religiosity. This he defines as a predilection for sacrifice, a belief in the dualistic opposition of good versus evil, and faith in the power of charms and amulets. These pre-Islamic beliefs, which were driven underground after the Arab conquest, supposedly reemerged from the soil of the Maghrib after the introduction of Sufi mysticism in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.³⁰ Into what Bel saw as the “Arab” ethos of Islam—dominated by a remote and “terrible God” (*dieu terrible*) who permits no communion, no intermediary, and no contact between Himself and His creatures—Sufism introduced the concepts of mysticism, divine love, and belief in a beneficent deity who bestows *baraka* upon favored protégés.³¹ Over time, a syncretistic form of religiosity, neither specifically Berber nor properly Muslim, metamorphosed out of this

admixture of Berber spiritualism, Arab Islam, and Sufism. After gaining the approval of a sufficient percentage of the scholarly elite, this new syncretism supposedly evolved into an intolerant form of popular Sufism and a self-satisfied fatalism that contributed to the overall decline of Islamic civilization.³²

According to Bel, the key figure in the development of popular Islam in North Africa was the marabout. Originally a point man in the Islamization of the rural Maghrib, he was seen by the masses as a theophany or “human fetish” (*homme fétiche*).³³ Based in a rural hermitage located far from the influence of cities or governments, the marabout performed important social functions, such as teaching Islam and mediating disputes. By thus making himself indispensable, he could compete with urban scholars in influencing the beliefs and practices of his followers. The marabout dominated Moroccan Islam from the beginning of the sixteenth century, when a so-called “epidemic of sharifism” was started by the followers of the Sufi shaykh Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān al-Jazūlī (d. 869/1465). In the early modern period, marabouts began to ascribe false prophetic lineages to themselves, replacing a paradigm of holiness based on asceticism and heroic virtue with one that was based on genealogy alone.³⁴

Although Bel does make some valid historical points, his paradigm of “maraboutism” was heavily influenced by his political agenda. The overall purpose of his book was to explicate North African Islam for colonial officials who had little sympathy for the religion of their native subjects. These officials were most concerned with countering the influence of Islamic reformists in Algeria, who had begun to add their voices to the call for independence.³⁵ The concept of maraboutism was well-suited for creating an artificial dichotomy between the supposedly “natural” religious syncretism of the Berbers and an “Arab” Islamic orthodoxy. Until the end of the colonial period, the official French policy toward religion in the Maghrib was to distinguish the supposedly sober, authoritarian, and culturally alien ethos of classical Islam from the affective, syncretistic, and Mediterranean ethos of the Berber “state of nature.”³⁶

Despite its lack of objectivity, some of the most prominent anthropologists, social historians, and political scientists working in Morocco still regard Bel’s model of North African Islam as definitive.³⁷ Others have tried to improve upon it by examining his paradigm of maraboutism through the lens of social anthropology, basing their findings on structural–functional studies of holy families and tomb complexes.

Ernest Gellner exemplifies this approach. Gellner sees maraboutism as one side of a dichotomy between urban and rural types of religious expression. In *Saints of the Atlas* (1969), he postulates an egalitarian, scripturally oriented, and urban Islamic orthodoxy, opposing it to a hierarchical, ritually indulgent, and rural heterodoxy.³⁸ Grafting Max Weber's ideal-type model of Protestant and Catholic religious culture onto an alien context, he epitomizes the conflict between these contrasting interpretations of Islam by drawing on an oppositional pair from medieval Europe: the "doctor" (an urban legist) versus the "saint" (a rural marabout).³⁹ Although Gellner tries to indigenize his model by identifying the ascribed and acquired traits that Moroccans associate with sainthood, these after-the-fact explanations do not extricate him from the mire of reductionistic and tautological definitions. Why is a Moroccan marabout or *agurram* a saint? "A person is a [saint] by virtue of being held to be one."⁴⁰

Although Gellner's analysis of Moroccan sainthood provides certain insights into the nature of holy-family politics, it does not solve the problem of maraboutism. Claiming that a person is a saint because others treat him as such may help one understand why the descendants of a saint are considered holy, but it tells us little about the original, living saint himself. Also, one must ask: how can typologies drawn from localized case studies, such as Gellner's Aḥansal marabouts of the Atlas mountains, represent Muslim (or even Moroccan) sainthood in every respect? Finally, Gellner seems to contradict himself. Despite his stated aversion to the reification of tradition, he affirms the immutability of social structure by applying analytical tools developed for the study of small-scale societies to the complex and often literate world of Islamic Morocco.⁴¹ Part of his problem lies in the anthropological disposition to favor the present over the past. If the present is not systematically compared with the past, it is easy to imagine that premodern institutions do not change. But traditions are ideational complexes, and ideas change all the time. It is not, therefore, more logical to assume that Moroccan ideas about holiness have changed as well? And may not local conceptions of sainthood reflect more than just local paradigms?

Other anthropologists and social historians have tried to overcome such difficulties by interpreting Moroccan sainthood in terms that are more universally Islamic. Émile Dermenghem (1954), for example, draws a distinction between "hereditary sanctity" and "initiativ sanctity" and focuses on three Islamic ideal types: the *walī* (the one who is close to God), the *ṣāliḥ* (the pure), and the *ṣiddīq* (the just).⁴² Dale Eickelman (1976), on the other

hand, concentrates on the idea of closeness (*qarāba*), which is both a doctrinal and a cultural metaphor.⁴³ These approaches indeed point academic inquiry toward categories that are used throughout the Muslim world. But before they can be worked into a general theory of sainthood, the extent of their applicability must first be established by comparative research.

The most fundamental problem with the neo-Weberian approach to Muslim sainthood, however, lies in Weber's paradigms themselves. This is particularly true of his model of charismatic authority. In Moroccan Studies, this concept is commonly used to explain the phenomenon of hereditary sainthood. In place of the prophet, Weber's ideal-type charismatic leader, neo-Weberians substitute the marabout; for charisma, they substitute *baraka*. As for the *ribāṭ* (the marabout's home base), its institutional development is assumed to follow the pattern of Weber's charismatic state.⁴⁴

According to Weber's theory of the transformation of charisma, the charismatic authority of a religious leader changes after his death into a hereditary charisma that is retained by his descendants. To preserve their position in a competitive world, these second- and third-generation charismatic leaders rely on the artificial proof of miracle working and magic to attract a clientele. Since pure charisma can no longer be maintained, hereditary authority instead becomes dependent on social-structural and economic criteria. This "routinization of charisma" dulls the creative aspects of charismatic authority after only a few generations. Now stagnant, religiously legitimated leadership comes to rely on traditional forms of authority that have little of the original, creative character of charisma itself.⁴⁵

At first glance, this approach seems ideally suited to the study of institutionalized sainthood. Recent historical and anthropological studies have indeed demonstrated that a number of North African marabouts presided over micropolities or "charismatic states."⁴⁶ What remains at issue, however, is Weber's inability to clarify the premises on which the phenomenon of charismatic domination is based. Among recent anthropologists, only Michael Gilsenan (1982) has attempted to identify the epistemological foundations of a Muslim holy man's charisma. To do so, however, he is forced to go outside the boundaries of classical Weberian sociology.⁴⁷

Bryan Turner (1978) has attempted to modify the neo-Weberian discourse in Muslim sainthood by rejecting the terms "saint" for *walī* and "charisma" for *baraka*. Taking the monadist position on translation, he asserts that the Christian term "sainthood" is of little use in an Islamic context. Using the Roman Catholic process of canonization as his basis of compari-

son, he points out that this formal and highly bureaucratic procedure for recognizing posthumously the holiness of theologians and clerics has little to do with the informal and often ad hoc sanctification of living persons in the Islamic world. For Turner, since these Arabic concepts have little or nothing in common with Christianity, it is best to leave them untranslated.⁴⁸

Yet the point made earlier about translation is equally valid for sociology. Differences in expression do not necessarily imply differences in the phenomena that words describe. While it is correct to say that a European “saint” and a Moroccan *walī Allāh* are not exactly the same, cultural relativism can be taken too far.⁴⁹ Turner’s cultural purism is based on the premise that difference is fundamental whereas similarity is not. But if this were true, how could cross-cultural comparison be at all possible? To put it another way: If a *walī Allāh* looks like a saint, acts like a saint, and speaks like a saint, why not call him a saint?

Turner’s relativistic argument is further weakened by misconceptions about the nature of sainthood in Islam and Christianity alike. First of all, the term “saint” is not inherently Christian. Like the term “religion,” it has a polytheistic origin that is significantly different from its monotheistic present character.⁵⁰ Second, premodern Muslim sainthood (which Turner calls “Islamic maraboutism”) can in no way be considered “formally and practically heretical.”⁵¹ Chapters One and Three of this book will show that jurists and similar “clerical” types were just as important to the hagiographical tradition of Morocco as they were to that of Europe. Furthermore, studies of sainthood in medieval Europe have demonstrated that whatever the official Church position on sainthood might have been, the *vox populi* was just as clearly heard in Latin Christendom as it was in Moroccan Islam.⁵² Finally, Turner takes no account of the fact that even a Roman Catholic saint has to be recognized as holy in life before being canonized after death. This means that any serious investigation of sainthood—whether in premodern Europe, North Africa, or anywhere else in the Christian or Muslim worlds—must be conducted among the living as much as among the deceased.⁵³

The Sociology of Sainthood

Unfortunately, the problematic of sainthood has not been resolved for any case under scholarly examination. If the relationship between holiness and authority in medieval Europe is imperfectly understood, how can one compare Islamic and Christian ideal types—even superficially? Must the

student of Muslim sainthood forever rely on simplistic models? Can we do no better than Dermenghem's facile distinction between "popular saints" and "serious saints"?⁵⁴ Are we left with Clifford Geertz's (1968) cynical vision of marabouts as "vivid" manipulators of the masses who gain power by "contriving" to make things happen?⁵⁵ Although Geertz has provided a novel twist to the analysis of maraboutism, is charisma-as-showmanship the definitive explanation of this phenomenon?

One certainly hopes not. Sainthood as a characteristic of living men and women deserves more than to be dismissed with offhand or reductive explanations. If modern scholarship is to understand what it means to be a Muslim saint in both doctrinal and social terms, we cannot assume, as Geertz does, that the concept of holiness is ineffable. Lacking sufficient analytical tools in one discipline, we must turn to others until we find the right one. In other words, we need a multidisciplinary approach that is also cross-credal and transregional.

The most significant advances in the study of sainthood have come not from the field of Islamic Studies, but from historians and sociologists working within the Christian tradition. This research is indebted methodologically to the Bollandist cleric Hippolyte Delehaye, who sought to rationalize the study of sainthood in the Catholic Church by subjecting the *vitae* of saints to critical historical analysis. In his influential work *Sanctus* (1927), Delehaye attempted to come up with a normative paradigm for the Christian saint by analyzing early Church doctrines and the veneration of holy persons in late antiquity. He was most concerned with drawing a distinction between saints *per se*, who appear in the hagiographical record as martyrs and confessors, and the public cult of saints, which he traced to pagan antecedents.⁵⁶ Only in the last section of his work does he discuss the concept of sainthood (*sainteté*) itself.

For this Catholic priest, *sainteté* is an act of divine grace that manifests itself in several dimensions at once. In the most general sense, the saint is a friend of God whose virtue makes him the object of divine consideration. More narrowly conceived, he is also a member of a spiritual elite whose heroic acts elevate him above other human beings. Finally, as an individual exemplar, he is something different for different people at different times: in late antiquity he was a martyr or an ascetic; in medieval times he was a mystic or a miracle worker; in modern times he is a practitioner of charity. In the end, however, Delehaye's definition of sainthood remains suspended between Church doctrine on the one hand and the elusiveness of charisma

on the other: sainthood is a quality of the individual soul whose effects can be seen by men but whose reality is known only to God.⁵⁷

Although Delehayé's overt Catholicism limited the usefulness of his conclusions for secular historians, his attempt to create a sociohistorical model of sainthood aroused the interest of a fellow Belgian, the sociologist Pierre Delooz. Combining Delehayé's purely historical approach with the *Annaliste* concern for the study of mentalities, Delooz produced *Sociologie et canonisations* (1969), a historical–sociological study that gave birth to a new discipline known as the “sociology of sainthood.”⁵⁸

Going beyond Pitrim Sorokin's (1950) naive vision of sainthood as a form of idealized altruism,⁵⁹ Delooz examines holiness as part of a wider issue: the sixties-era interest in a sociology of knowledge. In his view, the cult of saints, as expressed in “sacred biography” or hagiographical literature, is uniquely able to satisfy the requirements of such a discipline.⁶⁰ First, it provides a precise type of social perception that can be assessed quantitatively. Second, because the production of hagiographies has persisted over so many centuries, the researcher can observe variations in the perception of sainthood over extended periods of time.

Delooz's starting point is the premise that a saint's reputation for holiness is socially generated: “to be a saint is to be a saint for others.”⁶¹ Although this statement appears on the surface to agree with Gellner's tautological definition of sainthood, in reality it says more. Like Delehayé but unlike Gellner, Delooz draws a fundamental distinction between the perception of living saints and the reputation that is ascribed to saints after death. Most saints, he claims, are “real” individuals who reside in the social imaginary. The raw data of this collective memory consist of accounts about the conduct of a holy person that are recorded during the saint's lifetime. Witnesses to the holy person's behavior “selectively perceive” the saint's actions according to their shared experiences, faith, and religious doctrines. After the holy person dies, these understandings help to redefine and transform the recollection of the saint within his or her community, so that only certain traits are reinforced and retained, while others are blurred and forgotten with the passage of time. In this way, the image of the saint is continually being remodelled according to the expectations of the saint's audience. In time, the saint who is the focus of cultic practices becomes what Delooz calls a “constructed saint”—one for whom the collective recollection is defined on the basis of universal paradigms. In the most extreme cases, the totalizing character of these paradigms might even lead to the

fictional construction of a saint's reputation. This victory of the imaginary over the real is illustrated in Delooz's book by the Italian "Saint Priscilla of the Via Salaria," a woman whose only objective existence consisted of an empty Roman tomb discovered in 1802.⁶²

Because of Delooz's affinity with the *Annales* school of social history, he is particularly sensitive to the issue of class. Although the canonization process in Roman Catholicism is notorious for its politics and bureaucratic legalisms, he found that the initiative in proposing an individual for sainthood usually came from the lower classes; it was they who aroused the interest of the Church hierarchy in the first place. Seldom did such initiatives come from either the nobility or the upper levels of the clergy.⁶³ Even in modern times, the Church has remained aware of the fact that although individual saints may have been princes, bishops, kings, or popes, the saint cult as an institution is maintained by the common people who visit saints' shrines. Significantly, Delooz's investigations could uncover no instance in which the canonization of a saint was the result of a purely political or top-down imposition of a holy reputation.⁶⁴

Delooz's hypothesis of the "construction" of saints significantly advances our understanding of the relationship between living sainthood and tomb cults. Rather than assuming that the occupant of a tomb is venerated simply because others treat him as a saint, Delooz reminds us that the cult of a holy person is closely linked to the memory of who (or what) the saint was during his or her life. Whether this recollection is true or not is of little importance. What is significant is the fact that the collective memory of a saint's past attributes is based on a living model.

The American historians Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell have brought this paradigm into clearer focus by subjecting the *vitae* of European saints to a statistical analysis of traits and behaviors. The key to their monograph *Saints and Society* (1982) is the often-neglected concept of piety. For these scholars, who take a Durkheimian rather than a Weberian approach to the study of religion, piety is a speculum that the researcher can use to investigate social norms: "We study saints in order to understand piety; we study piety in order to understand society, for it is one of our basic premises that the pursuit as well as the perception of holiness [mirrors] social values and concerns."⁶⁵

To Weinstein and Bell, sainthood is more than a mere tableau of individual and collective perceptions. Rather, it is a dynamic concept, both conditioned by and acting upon the society of which it is a part. In contrast

to the dominant social-scientific tradition, which dismisses heroic piety as a passive–aggressive rejection of the material world,⁶⁶ they conceive of the saint’s approach to God as “active, world-denying, God-seeking. Ordinary piety was more likely to be passive and favor-seeking, the majority of the faithful blurring the goals of purification and reverence with those of petition and covenant.”⁶⁷ The dialectic engendered between ordinary and extraordinary forms of piety produces in turn the “paradox of the two spheres of sanctity” that is the leitmotif of their book.⁶⁸

The centerpiece of *Saints and Society* is a computer-based, multivariate analysis of the *vitae* of 864 European saints who lived between the years 1000 and 1700 C.E. The authors’ purpose in subjecting sacred biography to quantification is to study modal differences in sainthood for each region of Europe. As a result of their efforts, they identified variations specific not only to individual regions but to different time periods as well. For example, the majority of eleventh-century saints were noble wielders of power, twelfth-century saints were monastic reformers, and thirteenth-century saints were déclassé individuals who practiced humility as members of mendicant orders.

Weinstein and Bell also subjected their data to collective analyses in order to discover patterns not anticipated at the start of their research. By comparing data on the childhoods of saints, they were able to establish that the concept of the affective family was known in medieval society. Also significant was their discovery that differences in social demography were reflected in the meanings that people gave to the central paradigms of sainthood—a controversial point that attempts to resuscitate Delooz’s earlier link between the study of sainthood and the sociology of knowledge.⁶⁹ Although Weinstein and Bell rely too heavily on official hagiographical lists as sources of data,⁷⁰ their research further highlights the relationship between a saint’s posthumous cult and his or her prior life—a connection that was more logical to the medieval mind than to our own.

What This Book Will Demonstrate

The investigations of European sainthood begun by Delehaye and continued by Delooz, Weinstein and Bell, and others⁷¹ suggest useful directions for the study of sainthood in Morocco and elsewhere in the Muslim world. In particular, these attempts to understand the medieval concept of holiness on its own terms rather than on the basis of theoretical hindsight alone open up the possibility of making systematic comparisons for the first time.

In both Islamdom and Christendom, a major problem for both religious authorities and modern researchers has been what to make of the two worlds of sainthood that existed in premodern society: the way of piety and mysticism as expressed in doctrinal writings and the way of power and miracle as expressed in the cult of saints. In Islam and Christianity as well, it was so-called popular religiosity that gave rise to the saint cult. Similarly, the proofs of sainthood often consisted in both cases of exceptional and miraculous occurrences. The collective appreciation of holiness was also expressed in terms of vaguely defined properties such as charisma (Christian) or *baraka* (Muslim). In both Christendom and Islamdom, the recollections of a saint's contemporaries were codified in literary form—through biographies (both collective and individual), memoirs, and accounts of memorable acts. In both doctrinal environments, such works helped to secure the acceptance of saint cults by religious officials, who consecrated and legitimized traditions that were instituted from below.

Such correspondences are sufficient to demonstrate that approaches used for the study of Christian sainthood can also be relevant to the study of *walāya* and *wilāya* in Islam. The present research builds upon such foundations by applying sociological and sociohistorical research methods to the study of sainthood and authority in premodern Morocco. Unlike previous works on Moroccan sainthood, however, its scope is not limited to the social-scientific alone. Instead, it is both revisionist and multidisciplinary. It is revisionist in that it approaches Islamic history from the methodological edge—by tracing the development of Moroccan Sufism and Moroccan sainthood without focusing on states or dynasties.⁷² Its main characters are scholars and mystics, not sultans and viziers. Although these developments are periodized according to well-known eras and regimes, the latter are important only insofar as the politics of the times impinge on specific doctrines or modes of thought. In general, dynastic histories tell us little about what went on in premodern Muslim societies beyond the palace walls.⁷³ Those who wish to know more about the political history of the Maghrib should consult standard historical surveys of this region, such as Abdallah Laroui's *The History of the Maghrib, An Interpretive Essay* (1977) or Jamil M. Abun-Nasr's *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period* (1987).

This research is multidisciplinary in that it employs the methodologies of narrative history, social history, rhetorical studies, and historical anthropology in a single work. A chronological approach is necessary because the

history of Moroccan Sufism, the intellectual tradition in which Moroccan sainthood was embedded, has yet to be written. It makes little sense to draw conclusions about the nature of sainthood and authority in Muslim Morocco without first detailing the evolution of these concepts.

The historical narrative of this book will trace the development of Moroccan Sufism as an institution and Moroccan sainthood as a concept from the introduction of Islam through the end of the sixteenth century. As social history, it is concerned with how the perception of sainthood affects social action—what historians of the *Annales* school call the “history of public opinion.”⁷⁴ As a study of the social uses of rhetoric, it also examines the role of hagiography in the development of the Moroccan paradigm of sainthood. Finally, as historical anthropology, it investigates the “logic of culture” in rural and urban society and across ethnic and regional boundaries.

The conceptual thread that ties the chapters of this book together are the themes of sainthood as a metaphysical “closeness” to God (*walāya*) and sainthood as the exercise of power and authority on earth (*wilāya*). In Morocco, as elsewhere in Islam, both aspects of sainthood are thought to be personified by Sufi teachers or spiritual masters (Ar. *ustādh*, *shaykh*, *murshid*). Consequently, it is impossible to disassociate the study of Moroccan sainthood from that of Sufism. Certainly, not all Muslim saints are Sufis. Martyrs, Companions of the Prophet, Shi‘ite imams, and Kharijite ascetics might also be called *awliyā’ Allāh*. But the existence of a few exceptions does not alter the general rule. Sufism and sainthood must be studied together because the Moroccan hagiographical tradition conceives of them as related. Whether or not a saint actually followed Sufi teachings or belonged to a Sufi order matters less than the fact that he (and occasionally she) is assumed to have done so.

The symbiotic relationship between Muslim sainthood and Sufism also underscores the limits to the sociological investigation of sanctity. Even if one accepts the premise that sainthood is a matter of social perception, the mystical–philosophical discussions of the subject found in Sufi treatises indicate that this perception operates on more than one level at the same time. This observation tells us that another version of Weinstein and Bell’s “two spheres of sainthood” existed in premodern Morocco: the *walī Allāh* as seen by the Muslim masses versus the *walī Allāh* as seen by an inner circle of mystics and intellectuals.

Although different, these two modes of perception are not completely separate. Rather, they influence each other reciprocally: the “popular”

image of the *walī Allāh* may also be shared by Sufi specialists, who reinterpret it according to their own doctrines. This “eternal point” of conjuncture, as one sixteenth-century Moroccan Sufi called it—the bridge between mystical doctrine and sainthood as experienced by the majority of Muslims—is most clearly visible in the saint who is the greatest of his time: the so-called Axis of the Age (*quṭb az-zamān*). The most important axial saint in early-modern Morocco was Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān al-Jazūlī, the very person blamed by Alfred Bel for causing the decline of Moroccan Islam. Far from introducing an unorthodox model of Islamic leadership as Bel surmised, the image of al-Jazūlī as a *walī Allāh* was modeled on the paradigm of the Prophet Muḥammad. Thus, the collective recollection of his sainthood reflected not just local norms but a more universal “tropics of prophethood” that pertained to Islam as a whole.⁷⁵

Al-Jazūlī’s appearance, however, culminates a process that requires detailed investigation. Therefore, this study of Moroccan sainthood must begin in the institution’s formative period—the eleventh and twelfth centuries C.E. This era roughly matches, but is not identical to, the temporal extent of the Almoravid and Almohad empires.

Chapter One introduces the reader to the concept of the *ṣāliḥ*, a term which epitomizes Moroccan sainthood in early hagiographical texts. In the cities, the *ṣāliḥ* was often revered as an “anchor of the earth” (*watad al-ard*). In this role, he was a religious leader (*imām*) whose knowledge of Islamic law and moral uprightness kept the social fabric intact. As an “anchor” of his society, he was first and foremost a juridical scholar (*faqīh*): one who exercised interpretive authority over the *Sharī‘a*, the divine law. When the paradigm of the *ṣāliḥ* was incorporated into Sufism, it came to symbolize the perspectives of “Sunni internationalism” and *uṣūl ad-dīn*, a hermeneutical method that based normative Islamic practice on the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad. As both Sufi and *uṣūlī*, the *ṣāliḥ* advocated a consensus-based interpretation of Sunni Islam against regional forms of sectarianism.

Chapter Two examines rural sainthood in Morocco from the standpoint of historical anthropology, focusing on the rural saint’s dependence on urban intellectual traditions. As Alfred Bel surmised, the rural saint was a spokesperson for normative Islam and played a vital role in the Islamization of the countryside. But the rural saint was more than just a marabout. Although Bel popularized this particular persona of the rural saint, he ignored two others of equal importance: the rural legist and the rural Sufi shaykh.

Often, a marabout might double as both legist and shaykh. Yet even when these roles were embodied in different persons, each drew on similar epistemologies and played similar social roles. In addition, all three figures saw themselves as legitimate bearers of religious authority and members of the *ulama*, the scholarly class.

The relationship between rural sainthood and authority was most clearly visible in the context of the *ribāṭ*, the institutional center of rural Sufism. From this site the rural saint taught Islamic dogma and dispensed justice to tribal clients. Since the *ribāṭ* also served as a teaching center for normative Islam, it complemented rather than opposed urban Islamic institutions. In addition, its position astride multiple social and intellectual networks allowed it to play an important role in the development of institutionalized Sufism. In Morocco, the earliest Sufi confraternities were *ribāṭ*-based. These brotherhoods fostered the normative homogeneity of Sunni Islam by combining mystical doctrines that originated in lands far removed from Morocco, such as Egypt and eastern Iran, with criteria of membership that were based on ethnic or tribal ties.⁷⁶

Chapter Three examines Moroccan sainthood as visualized in the hagiographical monograph made up of “exploit narratives” (Ar. *manqaba*, pl. *manāqib*), focusing in particular on the role of the urban jurist in establishing the limits of saintly authority. By examining a work on the rural holy man Abū Yi‘zzā (d. 572/1177), it explores how an urban legist and arbiter of tradition can reconceptualize the “meaning” of a rural charismatic. In the case of Abū Yi‘zzā, this process of redefinition involved turning the saint’s reputation for miracle working into an argument for divinely guided leadership. The second half of the chapter examines how the saint himself might participate in the interpretation of sainthood. The subject of this section is Abū l-‘Abbās as-Sabtī (d. 601/1204), the patron saint of Marrakesh. In contrast to the power-wielding Abū Yi‘zzā, as-Sabtī is concerned to portray himself as an ethical exemplar and defender of the poor, whose miracles are designed to raise the social consciousness of his audience.

Chapter Four concludes the first part of this book by examining the genre of the hagiographical anthology, the *rijāl* literature. After addressing the interpretive nature of this tradition, 316 saints who flourished in the Almoravid and Almohad periods are analyzed sociologically, based on the methods introduced by Deloos and Weinstein and Bell. The information in these notices is examined according to multiple criteria, including ethnicity, urban origins, education, and social status. Other criteria, such as

spiritual practices, significant signs of holiness, and types of miracles are also examined to arrive at a typicality profile of the Moroccan *walī Allāh*. A major goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that although Delehayé may have been right when he asserted that the full reality of the saint is known only to God, sainthood as a concept is by no means ineffable, and can be traced by sociological investigation.

The second part of this book details the institutionalization of the Moroccan paradigm of sainthood in a specific corporate body: the Sufi order (*tāʾifa*) founded by the axial saint (*quṭb*) al-Jazūlī. Chapter Five sets the stage for this discussion by providing an overview of Moroccan institutional Sufism in the two centuries before al-Jazūlī. Here Sufism is examined in the context of Marinid-era intellectual life, which was characterized by the attempt to institutionalize and standardize most branches of Islamic thought. This process of institutionalization affected Moroccan Sufism as well and resulted in the creation of the corporately organized Sufi confraternity. Two groups of regional confraternities are discussed in this chapter: those stemming from the way of Abū Madyan (d. 594/1198), which drew from both Andalusian and Moroccan antecedents and was influential as far away as Egypt, and those tracing their roots to Abū'l-Ḥasan ash-Shādhilī (d. 656/1258), which helped introduce the sharifian model of authority into Moroccan Sufism.

The crux of this book lies in the final three chapters, where the interrelationship between *walāya* and *wilāya* in Moroccan Sufism is examined through a study of the doctrines and activities of the Jazūliyya Sufi order. These chapters constitute the first in-depth study of this important confraternity in any language. The writings of al-Jazūlī and his successors demonstrate that these mystical leaders conceived of their order as a vehicle for new and revolutionary ideologies. Through the concepts of the “sovereignty of saintly authority” (*siyādat al-imāma*) and the “Muḥammadan Way” (*aṭ-ṭarīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*), the Jazūliyya *tāʾifa* was more than just a vehicle for religious reform. It also promoted the political ideology of sharifism and helped to define Morocco as a country with a unique Islamic identity.

Chapter Six is a literary-biographical study of the founder of the Jazūliyya Sufi order in light of the political, social, and intellectual life of fifteenth-century Morocco. The impact of al-Jazūlī's doctrine, which combined Shādhilī, Qādirī, and even Persian perspectives, was so great that it dominated Moroccan Sufism for two hundred years. In fact, it was practically

impossible for one to be a Sufi in sixteenth-century Morocco without calling oneself a Jazūlite. Al-Jazūlī's personification of power and authority was no less important than his doctrine. More than just a spiritual master and doctrinal innovator, he was also regarded as the long-awaited "just Imam"—a divinely guided leader whose persona reflected the paradigms of both Sufism and sharifism. Although he was a sincere Sunni Muslim and disapproved of Shi'ite comparisons, his concept of authority was at least partly dependent on 'Alid paradigms.

Chapter Seven is a study of the main pillar of Jazūlite ideology, the doctrine of the Muḥammadan Way. The roots of this model of authority are traced to the "imitatio Muhammadi" paradigm of Islamic pietism and Idrisid sharifism, which conceived of the Muḥammadan paradigm in genealogical terms. The Jazūlite concept of Muḥammadan sainthood is next traced doctrinally from al-Ḥakīm at-Tirmidhī (d. 298/910) to Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240) and 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 805/1402–3), and ending with the Jazūlite shaykhs 'Alī Ṣāliḥ al-Andalusī (d. before 914/1508–9) and 'Abdallāh al-Ghazwānī (d. 935/1528–9). The writings of these last two figures reveal that in Morocco at least, the Muḥammadan Way constituted a model of authority in which sainthood and religious leadership were predicated on the assimilation of the Prophetic archetype. This merging of Prophet and saint was most clearly expressed in al-Ghazwānī's doctrine of the "sovereignty of saintly authority" (*siyādat al-imāma*), in which the paradigmatic Sufi saint takes on many of the characteristics of the 'Alid Imam.

Chapter Eight concludes the narrative sequence of this book by taking al-Ghazwānī's concept of the "sovereignty of saintly authority" into the material world and detailing how the shaykhs of the Jazūliyya aided in the creation of sharifian Morocco. This involvement in political activism was different from the so-called Maraboutic Crisis described by colonial-era scholars. Rather than reflecting the fissiparous tendencies of traditional Moroccan society, the doctrines and actions of Jazūlite shaykhs helped to unite Morocco against its Portuguese invaders and gave a new sense of legitimacy to the state and its institutions. Contrary to the assumptions of Alfred Bel and his followers, the leaders of the Jazūliyya did not see themselves as rivals for the throne but as religious guides and moral guardians, and they tended to support any claimant for power who agreed with their agenda. When al-Ghazwānī and his followers finally cast their lot with the Sa' dian sharifs of southern Morocco, they attained their immediate objectives but created the conditions for their eventual undoing. In the end, the

sharifs prevailed over the shaykhs of the Jazūliyya as divinely sanctioned imams because their ascribed *wilāya*, based as it was on genealogical closeness to the Prophet, was more easily reckoned than the acquired *wilāya* of their Sufi mentors, which was based on the elusive criterion of closeness to God.

Texts and Sources

This study relies extensively on primary sources of information: the treatises, aphorisms, and sayings of Moroccan saints themselves, notices and memoirs composed by their followers, and hagiographical materials from later generations. In the field of Islamic Studies, the use of biographies as sources for social history is a relatively new, but by no means unheard-of approach. Richard Bulliet's *The Patricians of Nishapur* (1972) and L. Carl Brown's *The Tunisia of Ahmad Bey* (1974) were ground-breaking attempts in the use of such materials.⁷⁷ Carl F. Petry's (1981) use of biographical dictionaries to study the ulama of fifteenth-century Cairo provided a wealth of information on late Mamluk society.⁷⁸ Similar work has yet to be done, however, with hagiographies.⁷⁹ To a large extent, this is due to the fact that the canons of Western rationalism have led contemporary Islamicists and social scientists to doubt whether the saints described in sacred biography are actual historical personages. This is also a reason why anthropologists, assuming that the "real" individual at the heart of a saint cult lies beyond objective verification, tend to avoid the doctrinal aspects of Muslim sainthood, preferring instead to concentrate on more "objectively" visible concepts such as *baraka* and the routinization of charisma.

The ineffability of religious experience is a central premise of Durkheimian sociology, which views religion as a closed cultural system that reflects the ethos of the host society. This perspective is evident in Clifford Geertz's famous definition of religion as a cultural system: religion is "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting *moods* and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and *clothing* these conceptions with such an *aura of factuality* that the moods and motivations *seem* uniquely realistic" (italics added).⁸⁰

Geertz's definition can be challenged in at least three ways. First, if religions could not transcend cultural boundaries, then conversion would require a process of re-enculturation whereby the convert would exchange

not only his or her religious identity but also the entire cultural matrix in which his or her identity has been formed.⁸¹ If this were the case, the practical barriers to conversion would be nearly insurmountable, and conversion from one religion to another would not be as easy or as rapid as it clearly has been. Second, the vocabulary used by Geertz in his definition “poisons the well” against spiritual realities and strips religion of its claim to truth: *moods* are changeable emotional states; *clothing* implies a sense of fashion or even dissimulation; *aura of factuality* refers to something that is not really there, a false consciousness or a psychic delusion; and *seem* connotes appearance rather than reality, a distortion of the facts, and reality seen “through a glass darkly.” Finally, Geertz’s premise of ineffability renders the academic study of sainthood all but impossible. While it is true that the boundaries between the sacred and the profane have become more permeable in the social-scientific study of religion, the modernist bias of “perspectivist” models such as is displayed here still precludes any dialectic between the sacred and concrete, lived experiences. Without such a dialectic, there can be no place for either saints or miracles.⁸²

Postmodern literary criticism and historiography have demonstrated that the politics of data selection can provide an image of former events that reflects the consciousness of the present as much or more than that of the past. Hayden White and others have additionally pointed out that the process of hermeneutics can alter the “facts” that are retained by later generations.⁸³ It is often forgotten, however, that such caveats are equally applicable to a Western historian’s own reconstruction of non-Western “facts.” To use but one example, many have assumed, on the basis of present custom, that descent from the Prophet Muḥammad is a near-universal prerequisite for Moroccan sainthood. An examination of premodern Moroccan hagiographies, however, reveals that prior to the sixteenth century the possession of a Prophetic lineage, although highly valued as a marker of social status, was largely irrelevant to the attribution of sainthood.⁸⁴

There are a number of ways to look at the texts that provide information about a Muslim saint. One approach is to view all accounts—first-hand, second-hand, premodern, or contemporary—as literature. Those who adhere to this perspective tend to view both history and biography as rhetorical exercises that say as much about their writers as they do about their subjects. On the radical side are post-Nietzschean deconstructivists, whose “metaphysics of the nihil” cause them to regard all historical writing as

fiction.⁸⁵ A more fruitful approach is that of Hans-Georg Gadamer or Alasdair MacIntyre, who see the history of ideas as the product of ever-changing contexts and epistemologies that leave tradition dynamically suspended between the present and the past.⁸⁶ Similarly, Hayden White contends that the “fictions of factual representation” are relative rather than absolute, and Paul Ricoeur argues that a time-based “narrative understanding” lies at the heart of all historical writing.⁸⁷

Although the rhetorical approach to history is both beneficial and thought-provoking, having too much faith in the concept of tropes can lead to two major pitfalls. One is the idea that premodern peoples could not or would not distinguish between fact and fantasy.⁸⁸ If this were the case, then why did medieval hagiographers in both the Christian and the Islamic worlds make such an effort to prove the validity of their claims? In answering this question, the tropological extremist can only fall back on the fallacy of the unverifiable assumption and assume that these authors’ concern for the truth was no more than a mystification created by the rhetoric of *instructio*.

Another, more subtle error is to assert that the study of premodern religiosity should be concerned with perceptions rather than facts. This premise, which is a corollary of Durkheimian sociology, assumes, without adequate corroboration, that the notices contained in hagiographical literature are latter-day expressions of ideal sainthood, not representations of real people.⁸⁹ This perspective also begs the question of verifiability by implying that divine revelations, extraordinary virtues, or paranormal phenomena do not exist.⁹⁰ Although the epistemological problem of differentiating fact from fantasy is undeniably difficult, it is simply not true that all sacred biography represents only *topoi* and not real human beings. The Moroccan hagiographies discussed in this book contain too much quotidian information to dismiss their subjects as mere tropological ideals.

A different approach to hagiography can be found in the so-called traditionalist perspective, which views the contents of sacred biography as expressing a “human margin” that obscures an underlying spiritual reality.⁹¹ Frithjof Schuon, the most notable proponent of this approach, would agree with rhetoricians and tropologists that the “exaggerations and platitudes” of hagiographies render them “practically unreadable for anyone who is looking for a concrete and lifelike picture of the saints.” He would further agree that the primary purpose of sacred biography is *instructio*—not to

condition the human being to a “cringing punctiliousness that is actually insulting to God, but to perfect truthfulness in deeds and thought, which is a way of realizing a certain unity for the sake of the One and Only.”⁹² This profoundly anti-relativistic way of looking at sacred biography has much in common with the way in which it is viewed by Moroccan Sufis themselves. When informed that I was writing “a book about Imam al-Jazūlī,” a venerable mystic in the city of Salé told his companion, “Yes, but what can he *say* about him?”

I can only reply that one must say something. Schuon and his followers have reminded us that it is necessary to view the Moroccan saint as both the recipient and the transmitter of a long-standing mystical tradition.⁹³ But a *walī Allāh* is more than a spiritual trope, just as he or she is more than a figment of the narrative imagination. The *walī Allāh* is also a human being who acts, like other human beings, in several dimensions at once. At one moment the *walī* is a teacher, at another a philosopher, at other times a pure charismatic, at others a politician. There must be a way to express the many-sided reality of Moroccan sainthood without reducing the *walī Allāh* to any single essence. There must also be a way to make the “inside” view of Moroccan sainthood intelligible to those who experience reality outside of both the Islamic and the Sufi traditions.

To accomplish these goals, the historian of sainthood must be concerned with what Aviad Kleinberg has called “saving the text.”⁹⁴ It is not to be forgotten that all history, whether oral or written, expresses a variety of *topoi*. However, as historians who assess the stories told by others, we must assume that our informants tell us the truth as they see it. This is not to say that we cannot interpret this information in our own way and even reconceptualize our informants’ appraisal of the truth as a product of social conditioning or rhetoric. But we must maintain the integrity of their beliefs in what we write about them. To say that premodern people believed in saintly miracles is to acknowledge that such miracles indeed existed—to premodern people. Whether or not we believe that miracles exist today is irrelevant to our understanding of what they meant to human beings in the past. Faith claims, such as the belief in miracles and paranormal phenomena, are inherently unprovable. On the other hand, they are also undeniable assertions and thus fall under the rubric of what phenomenologists of religion call *epoché*, the suspension of judgment.⁹⁵ Historians of religion should never forget that the Moroccan Muslim of past ages—both the *walī Allāh*

and his audience, whether educated or uneducated, scholar or soldier—lived in a sacralized cosmos in which the transcendent, not the material, represented the greater reality. Whatever our modern or postmodern assumptions may be, remaining true to our subjects' cultural space and time requires that we acknowledge the *walī Allāh* as both a transmitter of spiritual wisdom and an agent of the miraculous.