

# *TODAY'S PERSPECTIVES ON IBADI HISTORY*

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# Nāṣir b. Abī Nabhān's Use of Sunnī Literature

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Among the great Ibādī scholars of the modern period, one of the most intriguing is Nāṣir b. Abī Nabhān (1192–1263/1778–1847). Son of Abū Nabhān Jā'id b. Khamīs al-Kharūṣī (1147–1237/1734/5–1822), known in Oman as *al-shaykh al-ra'īs*, a scholar of such towering eminence that his reputation has largely eclipsed Nāṣir's, the latter was nonetheless the leading Ibādī scholar of his generation in Oman. Most of his voluminous writings remain unpublished and have received scant attention in contemporary scholarship, though he is frequently cited in Nūr al-Dīn al-Sālimī's history of Oman, *Tuḥfāt al-a'yān bi-sīrat abl 'Umān*, and in the ninety-volume work on Ibādī teachings entitled *Qāmūs al-sharī'a* (Encyclopedia of the Law), written by his student, Jumayyil ibn Khalfān al-Sa'dī.

Although Nāṣir's legacy is somewhat overshadowed by that of his more famous father, Nāṣir was a more original thinker. While sharing his father's concern with the promotion of Ibādī law, theology, and politics, in addition to mystical poetry, Nāṣir displayed a keen interest in the full range of Islamic thought, but what I will focus on in my paper is the way that he framed a number of his writings as commentaries on Sunnī works. The extent of Nāṣir's engagement with non-Ibādī sources is not an indication that he felt any less invested than his father in Ibādism's unique articulation of the truth. He rejects the suggestion that truth and falsehood could be distributed among all Muslim sects, insisting that, true to the *ḥadīth* about the 73 sects into which the *umma* would be divided, there is only one that attains the truth, and that is the Ibādiyya.

Most of the writings of other Ibādī scholars, even those of his more famous father, consist mainly of repetitions of received wisdom; they summarize standard accounts of the beliefs of other Islamic schools and offer standard rebuttals. But Nāṣir critically examined the accuracy of scholars' accounts of the beliefs of the various schools, and even occasionally critiqued the logic and consistency of Ibādī arguments. He stands out for his preoccupation with analyzing the viewpoints of non-Ibādī Muslims of various schools, who are called *abl al-khilāf* (the people of opposition) or *al-qawm* (the people), and comparing them with Ibādī views, and for his close reading of the works of various Sunnī scholars, whom he variously called *abl*

*al-madhābīb al-arba'a* (the people of the four schools), *al-jamā'a* ([those who follow the consensus of the majority of] the community), or *al-balkafiyīn*.<sup>1</sup>

Nāṣir was equally comfortable with poetry, philosophy, astrology, mysticism, theology, law, Arabic linguistics, and popular medicine. What is striking about Nāṣir's approach to the texts of non-Ibādīs, and we also see this sometimes in *Qāmūs al-sharī'a*, is that he often quotes non-Ibādī texts at length, with only occasional comments on points that conflict with Ibādī doctrine, allowing, in effect, the texts to inform the reader on essential points. Interestingly, the lengthy quotations of non-Ibādī works found in *Qāmūs al-sharī'a* are usually interspersed with comments by Nāṣir b. Abī Nabhān, indicating that al-Sa'dī had studied these texts with him.

One of Nāṣir's major unpublished works, *al-ʿilm al-mubīn wa l-ḥaqq al-yaqīn* (Clear Knowledge and Certain Truth), was written in response to a request for a clear explanation of Ibādī doctrine for the sake of a friend who had become "one of those among the people of the truth who are bewildered and deceived by the people of the four schools."<sup>2</sup> Nāṣir replied that the only solution would be for this friend to read the books of the people of truth, which could not be exhausted even if he read both day and night. Nonetheless, he consented to provide a response that would be an 'extremely brief' (*shiddat al-ikhtisār*) 'preliminary introduction' (*shurū' al-ibtidā'*)—but this 'brief' response turned out to be no less than six thick volumes!<sup>3</sup> Even more amazing than the length of this work is the format followed in at least the first volume, which deals with theology: he decided that "it is most suitable for us to discuss doctrinal obligations from what we found among the *balkafiyīn*". He provides the following reasoning for this approach:

*The Most High said, "Beware of fitna (sedition), which affects not only those among you who do wrong" (8:27).*

*The best interpretation of the meaning of this verse is that it speaks of the fitna (civil war) that would take place between the Companions after the Prophet's death. It is well known that the Companions asked the Prophet about that and he informed them. There are many reports (akhbār)*

transmitted from them and there is no point in citing them, because if you argue with an opponent from another school by citing a report the truthfulness of which he doesn't accept, that report cannot be used as an argument against him. It is better for someone who wishes to demonstrate the soundness of his own school to look at the contradictions in other schools. Therefore, whoever wishes to argue about the falseness of the teachings of an opponent must point out the contradictions in the doctrines of his school.<sup>4</sup>

He faults his contemporaries for dismissing the idea that any of the sects could be sole proprietor of the truth, and that since all the sects have some truth one may pick and choose what one likes from each. Nāṣir argues:

*The Prophet said, "My community will never agree upon deviance (ḍalāl); he did not say "My community will never agree upon an error (ḍalāla)." In this way he indicated that there must of necessity be a sect that attains the truth until the Day of Judgment. Had he said 'an error', it would have been possible that falsehood be found in every sect, and that the truth also be distributed among them. [In that case,] his community would not have agreed on an error, but it would have agreed on deviance [in general]. But this is unsound, because that would mean that there remained not a single person on the face of the earth who obeys God in truth in all aspects of his religious practice. If all the people have gone astray, there can be no proof in the transmission of the religion. ... In that case, the revelation of the books and the sending of messengers would be useless—but there can be no futility in what God does.<sup>5</sup>*

Because discernment of what is best in many religious matters can only be known by examining the differences between different Islamic schools, Nāṣir suggests that

*it is most suitable for us to discuss doctrinal obligations from what we found among al-balkafiyīn concerning their doctrines, and what they say about the Mu'tazila, in order to clarify on what they agree with us and on what they disagree with us, so this person who is suffering [from lack of certainty] can know the teachings of their school and the way they contradict the teachings of his own school, so he may see the truth of that through his intellect by evidence from the Book, the Sunna, and the intellect.<sup>6</sup>*

For this purpose, he selects representative texts from the two main Sunnī theological schools: the popular *Aqā'id* (Doctrines) of the Māturidite scholar Abū Ḥafṣ 'Umar Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī (d. 537/1142),<sup>7</sup> along with one of the commentaries written on it, and the short creed entitled *Umm al-barāhīn* (The Main Demonstra-

tion) of the Ash'arite scholar Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d. 895/1490), with a commentary by Muḥammad b. 'Umar b. Ibrāhīm al-Mallālī (d. ca. 999/1591), along with al-Sanūsī's own commentary on another of his five theological works, *al-Muqaddimāt fī 'ilm al-tawḥīd* (Theological Premises). Nāṣir also discusses a poetic version of *Umm al-barāhīn* written in *rajaz* meter by Ibrāhīm b. Ibrāhīm al-Laqqānī (d. 1040/1631–2) and al-Laqqānī's commentary on his poetic version of al-Sanūsī's work.<sup>8</sup> Long passages of these texts are quoted extant, interspersed with Nāṣir's own explanations and responses, in order to explicate the Sunnī writings and point out aspects on which the Ibādīs differ.

By allowing these Sunnī authors to explain, with hardly an interruption, the principles of existence, the different types of theological proofs, and the nature of God, Nāṣir essentially acknowledges the extent to which truth may be found in their teachings. After many pages lifted from the creed of al-Nasafī, Shaykh Nāṣir explains, "we present this creed because of the clarification it contains of the knowledge of God by means of His creatures. ... For every atom of existence is one of the words of God."<sup>9</sup> When al-Sanūsī says in his *Sharḥ al-muqaddimāt* that *taqlīd* is impermissible in matters of doctrine, but that rational speculation is not a requisite (*sharḥ*) of sound faith and is not necessary, though it is a requisite of perfection, Nāṣir elaborates, "The truth indicated by the Book and Sunna is that sound reflection is obligatory, although there is hesitation to say it is a [necessary] condition/stipulation of faith."<sup>10</sup> And when al-Sanūsī outlines six types of *shirk*, and includes among them *shirk al-asbāb*, which is to attribute effects to natural causes, as the philosophers and naturalists do, Nāṣir steps in:

*Someone who believes that God is the creator of all things and yet attributes effects to causes is not [necessarily] a mushrik; it is possible for people to be imprecise or lazy [in speech] and attribute deeds to creatures, without meaning that they created them. Likewise, to attribute an effect to a cause can be just a manner of expression, as when a doctor says that this food does such-and-such to the digestive system, and this medicine will remove the cause and cure the affliction. ... It is known in [sound] doctrine that nothing causes an effect but God Most High, so how can [al-Sanūsī] know that someone who with his tongue attributes something to other than God is guilty of shirk? ... Most people do not distinguish metaphor from reality, but that is no reason to condemn them."*

Nonetheless, when quoting Sunnī passages on the definition of belief and *kufr*, it is not surprising that Nāṣir devotes a great deal of space to the Ibādī doctrine of *kufr*

*ni'ma* and the insistence that good deeds and performance of religious obligations are necessary constituents of faith, calling to the service of his argument al-Ghazālī's discussion of the Prophet's saying, "patience is half of faith and gratitude is all of faith".<sup>12</sup> He defends the Ibādīs' expanded definition of *kufr* as the doctrine of the early Muslims of all the different sects, so that later Sunnīs in fact contradict the teachings of the founders of their schools.<sup>13</sup>

Nāṣir displays the extent of his knowledge of Sunnī texts by distinguishing between the doctrines of different Sunnīs on the divine attributes—a topic on which he naturally finds Sunnī doctrine deficient. Nonetheless, he is strikingly fair and analytical. He may point out the logical flaws in the notion that God's essential attributes subsist in His essence (*qa'ima bi-dhātibi*), but he does not hesitate to point out that their wording should not lead the reader to think that they mean that the attributes inhere (*ḥulūl*) in the divine essence.<sup>14</sup>

In response to a Sunnī text criticizing philosophy as deviant, Nāṣir replies that philosophy is of four types: engineering, the natural sciences, illuminative knowledge, and knowledge of divine matters (*al-ilābiyyāt*). "The first three types are not dangerous, because they do not deal with religious sciences, but if one errs in the knowledge of divine matters, which is theology, this deviation should not be called philosophy, because philosophy is the realization of the truth (*taḥqīq al-ḥaqq*) in all its categories."<sup>15</sup> Nāṣir defends philosophy as a noble science, first practiced by the Greeks, the people of the prophet Idrīs, and denies that Socrates, Plato or Aristotle could have truly erred in their doctrine of God:

*It is said that they went astray in monotheism, but that is preposterous. ... The likes of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Galen, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and Ibn 'Abbās never go astray [in matters of tawḥīd]. As for us—we, the Sunnīs, the Shī'a, and the Mu'tazila—the likes of us go astray for the least reason if God does not grant us success (tawfiq).*<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, he does not hesitate to offer Islamic evidence against some of their teachings that are less consequential than *tawḥīd*. For example, he rejects the philosophers' distinction of humans from animals as residing in their ability to speak (*nāfiq*); he doubts that one can be sure that animals do not understand worship as humans do, because of the Qur'ānic story of the hoopoe (*ḥudhud*) and the Queen of Sheba.<sup>17</sup>

Undoubtedly, some of Nāṣir's attitude toward non-Ibādī texts was learned from his father. Nāṣir writes that his brother Nabhān studied a book with their father written by an *imāmī* scholar. As Nabhān read out loud to his father, he said, "It is written (*maktūb*), "Alī, peace be

upon him." Abū Nabhān angrily demanded that his son show him where the text used the word *maktūb*. Nabhān explained that he was afraid of repeating such an erroneous phrase, but his father rebuked him for confusing the accurate reading of a text—even out loud—with an endorsement of its contents.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of the first volume of *al-ʿilm al-mubīn wa l-ḥaqq al-yaqīn*, Nāṣir returns to the *ḥadīth* with which he began the volume: "My *umma* will be divided after my death into 73 sects". He comments:

*Most of the schools say that the ḥadīth continues, "all of which will perish except one sect that is saved (illā firqa wāḥida nājiya)". Most of the jamā'a [Sunnīs] say this is an addition, because they don't believe that any of the sects will perish. They disagree greatly among themselves. The truth [of the complete transmission] is proven by the meaning contained in God's word, "you were the best umma to appear among the people, commanding the good and forbidding the wrong, and believing in God", and in another place, "let there be among you an umma calling to God, commanding good and forbidding wrong, hastening to do good deeds—those are the righteous". Yet the histories of all the sects agree that after the killing of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, all the caliphs were unjust oppressors during the rule of the Umayyads, except 'Abd al-'Azīz,<sup>19</sup> and likewise during the rule of the 'Abbāsids, and no one went out on behalf of the princes of tyranny to command the good and forbid the wrong... except the Khawārij. This indicates that the meaning of the umma should be restricted to them. All the historians who wrote about the battles and events praised them, even if they didn't belong to their school. ... No one reproached them for anything but their opposition to 'Alī. ... But even if the Ibādīs were wrong [to oppose 'Alī], the error of the jamā'a is worse, because their deviance is in their doctrine of the oneness of God Most High and Majestic, and dissociation from a creature from whom dissociation is impermissible, even if it is a grave sin, is not nearly as grave as deviation in doctrine.*

In order to prove his point, he tells a story: A foolish, weak-minded man brought [a copy of] *al-Bayān* by al-Qalhātī,<sup>20</sup> to an assembly and praised it to one of the Sunnīs there. Many people were there, including the Shī'ī scholar Muḥammad Khalaf.<sup>21</sup> The foolish Ibādī gave the book to the Sunnī scholar, or to the leader of the assembly. He scanned its contents and said, "may God blacken the face of the people of this school". Among the *imāmī* Shī'a, *taḥqīya* is an obligation. So the Shī'ī scholar took the book, gave it back to its owner and ordered him to leave the assembly, threatening him that if he found him in any Sunnī or Shī'ī scholarly gathering he would have him arrested—he had influence with the rulers. Then

he said to the one who had cursed, “what good is it to say such things? You will lose either in this world or the next—wouldn’t silence be better for a person who is wise and discerning?” He exclaimed, “they dissociate from ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib!” The Shī‘ī replied, “your deviation is greater, in our opinion, and is a graver *kufr*”—*kufr ni‘ma* in Ibādī usage. “Let them dissociate from seventy ‘Alī’s as good as ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib! That is only an offense against a person who is less than a prophet, but you have offended God through your theology, by saying you will see your Lord in paradise. You have deviated in all your doctrine by saying that God can inhere in a place and direction and by making Him finite and saying he has a body, and other things by which no Muslim can describe Him...”

And so, on page 415, at the end of a long volume in which Nāṣir b. Abī Nabhān quotes long passages from Sunnī theological works, he deploys a Shī‘ī critique to condemn them. The description of this assembly perhaps reflects scholarly life in Zanzibar. That Nāṣir wrote the book in Zanzibar is indicated both by its motive—to save an Ibādī from the seductions of Sunnism—and by the care it takes to note that a coin mentioned in a story was from India and was not as heavy as an identically named coin on the Swahili coast.

So far, this paper on Nāṣir’s use of Sunnī texts has not even touched on one of the most important ways that he consults them: to explicate the teachings of Ṣūfism, which he fully endorses. The chapter on Ṣūfism in *Qāmūs al-sharī‘a* features a long discourse by Nāṣir on the subject, which al-Sa‘dī says came “from a big book he wrote”.<sup>22</sup> This sixty-page section draws a great deal from al-Ghazālī’s discussion, in *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, of the characteristics of the soul and the cultivation of virtue. Abū Nabhān was the first Ibādī to publicly embrace Ṣūfism, or *‘ilm al-sulūk*, as the mystical orientation is known in Oman.<sup>23</sup> In this case, *sulūk* refers not to ‘behavior’, but to ‘wayfaring’, in the Ṣūfī sense of taking the path of self-purification and devotion to God. Abū Nabhān composed a number of mystical poems, most famously *Ḥayāt al-muhaj* (Life of the Hearts, or the inner life), on which both he and Nāṣir wrote commentaries.<sup>24</sup> Nāṣir wrote:

*Sincere worship requires both inner knowledge (‘ilm al-bāṭin), which is knowledge of the truth (‘ilm al-ḥaqīqa), and external knowledge (al-‘ilm al-zāhir), which is knowledge of the law. These two are always joined; their distinction is merely semantic, in order to clarify what is intended by each. Every ḥaqīqa (truth gained by mystical insight) without a sharī‘a (truth revealed to a prophet) is false, and every sharī‘a without a ḥaqīqa is pointless (‘āṭila). Our companions wrote in great detail on the sharī‘a, but they neglected to go into detail on ‘ilm al-ḥaqīqa, though neither*

*is more important than the other, for worship offered to God must be offered by the light of knowledge and truth, and ignorance is not excused. We do not know of anyone who has written an explanation of this except the divine scholar, Shaykh Abū Nabhān, who dealt with an aspect of it.*<sup>25</sup>

Nāṣir did not restrict himself to the so-called ‘sober’ dimensions of Ṣūfism. He wrote a very lengthy commentary on *Nazm al-sulūk ilā khidmat malik al-mulūk*, ‘Umar ibn al-Fārid’s great poem that is often called *al-Tā‘īyya l-kubrā* (to distinguish it from the shorter poem using a ‘t’ rhyme, *al-Tā‘īyya l-ṣughrā*).<sup>26</sup> Ibn al-Fārid’s poem is 760 verses long, and Nāṣir’s commentary on it is 293 pages.<sup>27</sup> In 2011 an annotated edition of this work was published in Abu Dhabi by the Iraqi scholar Walid Muḥammad Khāliṣ, a professor at Sultan Qaboos University.<sup>28</sup> Nāṣir’s commentary is an unambiguous endorsement of Ibn al-Fārid’s mysticism of love, to which Nāṣir also refers in volume 3 of *al-‘Ilm al-mubīn wa l-ḥaqq al-yaqīn*, titled *Tanwīr al-‘uqūl fī ‘ilm qawā‘id al-uṣūl* (Illuminating Minds on the Fundamental Principles), in which Nāṣir discusses three ways to know God: 1) observing the Shari‘a obligations; 2) ridding the heart of all bad characteristics; and 3) the way of love, which Nāṣir says is both the best and the most difficult way. It means, he says, that a person must “strive to make his heart present with God” by engaging in constant recollection of His qualities and disengaging from thinking of anything other than God. If a person is successful in doing this, the way of ridding the heart of bad characteristics is automatically achieved, for God will become his intellect, his tongue, his hand, his hearing, and his sight, according to the famous *ḥadīth qudsī*.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

Nāṣir’s fascination with Sunnī thought goes well beyond that of not only his predecessors in Oman, but also of other Ibādī scholars in Zanzibar. It reflects a time when Ibādī scholars in Zanzibar were in close contact with their Sunnī counterparts and some Ibādīs were clearly attracted to Sunnism and questioned the distinctive doctrines of Ibādism, though Ibādīs were perhaps not yet threatened by the spectre of large-scale Ibādī conversions to Sunnī Islam, which seem to have begun only after Nāṣir’s lifetime.

## Notes

- 1 Sunnis are called *balkafiyin* because of their doctrine of *bi-la kayf*—that one must believe the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* without qualification or saying how they can be so.
- 2 Kharūṣī 1883: 1.
- 3 I have found copies of volumes 1, 3, 4, and 6. While much of volume 1 includes large sections cited from Sunnī sources, this is not the case with volume 3. The titles of the volumes, as stated at the beginning of vol. 1 are: (1) *al-Tawḥīd li-llāh al-majīd* (The Oneness of God the Glorious); (2) *al-Kashf al-mubīn fi iftirāq al-ṣaḥāba wa l-ṭabī'in* (Clear Unveiling of the Differences among the Companions and Successors); (3) *Tanwīr al-ʿuqūl fi qawā'id al-uṣūl* (Illuminating Minds on the Fundamental Principles); (4) *al-Anwār al-jalliyya fi aḥkām al-sharī'a l-tanzīliyya* (Manifest Lights on the Rules of the Revealed Law); (5) *Latā'if al-minan fi aḥkām al-sunan* (Subtle Gifts on the Rules of the Sunna); (6) *al-Irṣād fi l-qiyās wa l-ijtihād* (Guidance on Analogy and Legal Reasoning).
- 4 Kharūṣī 1883: 5.
- 5 Ibid.: 5–6.
- 6 Ibid.: 6.
- 7 Nasafī 1843.
- 8 Laqānī 1967.
- 9 Kharūṣī 1883: 14.
- 10 Ibid.: 34.
- 11 Ibid.: 24–25.
- 12 Ibid.: 43–49; Kharūṣī 1953: 216.
- 13 Kharūṣī 1883: 413.
- 14 Ibid.: 66.
- 15 Ibid.: 127–128.
- 16 Kharūṣī 1953: 310–311.
- 17 Ibid.: 123. The story is in Sūra 27: 17–28.
- 18 Kharūṣī 1883: 412–413.
- 19 He most likely means 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (reigned 99/717 to 101/720), who is commonly cited as the exception to the irreligious nature of Umayyad rule.
- 20 He means *al-Kashf wa l-bayān* (Qalhātī 1980), written in the 11<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century.
- 21 A Shī'ī scholar named Muḥammad b. Khalaf is mentioned in Ibn Ruzayq as appointed by Sayyid Sulṭān b. Aḥmad (reigned 1792–1804) as co-administrator with Sulṭān's young son Sālim over Bahrain after Sulṭān's conquest of Bahrain. However, the hatred of the Sunnī 'Utūb, according to Ibn Ruzayq, led them to attack the fortress and force out both the young prince and his Shī'ī regent, who returned to Muscat, and Bahrain returned to local rule. Ibn Ruzayq 1992: 429–430. I do not know if this is the same person as the one Nāṣir mentions.
- 22 Sa'dī 1983–1989, X: 333–392. Perhaps this is *al-Ikhlāṣ bi-nūr al-ilm wa l-khalāṣ min al-zulm*.
- 23 Shaykh Sālim al-Kharūṣī and Shaykh Ismā'il al-Aghbarī, both officials in the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Oman, insisted in a private interview in January 2010 that *ilm al-sulūk* was an integral part of Ibaḍī religious life in Oman long before Abū Nabḥān, but he was the first to express his mystical inclinations publicly.
- 24 Kharūṣī 1818a, 1818b.
- 25 Kharūṣī 1850: 7; Kharūṣī n.d.: 5.
- 26 The longer poem may be found at [http://mrrekaz.blogspot.com/2012/01/blog-post\\_9300.html](http://mrrekaz.blogspot.com/2012/01/blog-post_9300.html). The poem and a series of commentaries on it in Arabic have been collected in Maḥmūd 2009. The poem has been translated into English in Arberry 1952 and analyzed in Homerin 2011, 177–242.
- 27 Kharūṣī 1828. Nāṣir renamed Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poem.
- 28 Kharūṣī 2011.
- 29 Kharūṣī 1953: 48; Kharūṣī 1848: 42.

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