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Taqwa

Encyclopaedia of Islam

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Taqwa, a term of Islamic religion denoting piety.

Etymology and Range of Meanings

Taqwa is a verbal noun from *taqa* ‘to fear [God]’, itself a secondary formation from form VIII of *w-k-y*, *ittaqā* ‘to fear [God]’ (see on this phenomenon, Wright, *Arabic Grammar*, I, § 148 Rem.b). From this same secondary formation is derived the adjective *taqi*, pl. *atqiya* ‘pious, God-fearing’, in fact a synonym of the form VIII participle *muttaqi*.

Depending on context, the denotations of the term in classical Islamic religious and mystical literature include ‘godliness’, ‘devoutness’, ‘piety’, ‘God-fearing’, ‘pious abstinence’ and ‘uprightness’. As a social ideal, *taqwa* originally connoted ‘dutifulness’, ‘faithful observance’, a meaning which was discarded in most later Islamic ethical thought. In the poetry of Labid (d. 40 AH/660 CE), for instance, the social connotation of *taqwa* as ‘moral behaviour’ or ‘reverential dutifulness’ with respect to one’s tribe or relatives appears to have fused with the Qur’anic religious ideal of ‘fear of God’, so that “concepts for a ‘respectful relationship’ between the members of a tribe and the ‘reverential behaviour’ towards God seem even to be interchangeable and identical” (M.M. Bravmann, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam*, Leiden 1972, 117), but this combination of social and spiritual meanings of *taqwa* is now obsolete.

The Persian dictionaries (cf. the references in Dihkhuda, *Lughat-nama*, s.v. *taqwa*) render the word as synonymous with the Persian *tarsidan* (‘fear’) and *parhizgari* (‘abstinence’), precisely the same connotations of *taqwa* found in early Muslim mystical theology. In English, various translations which approach the Islamic spirit of *taqwa* are ‘pious God-fearing’, ‘God-fearing piety’, ‘devout uprightness’ and ‘holy fear’; William Chittick has proposed the rendition ‘god-wariness’, a neologism which, he claims, “makes *taqwa*’s orientation toward God explicit, brings out the implication of being aware and mindful, and avoids the negative and sentimental undertones of words such as ‘piety’, ‘dutifulness’, and ‘righteousness’...” (*Faith and Practice of Islam. Three Thirteenth Century Sufi Texts*, Albany 1992, 12).

In fact, *taqwa* in many respects equals a particularly Protestant kind of religious notion, the spiritual significance of which is exactly conveyed by the Anglican ascetic and mystic William Law (1686-1761) in his *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, ed. P. Stanwood, London 1978, where he evokes that “true devotion” which requires that we “live as pilgrims in spiritual watching, in holy fear, and heavenly aspiring after another life” in one passage (31); and in

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another passage (256), insists that we “do everything in His fear and abstain from everything that is not according to His will”. As a religious concept in Islam, *taqwa*, as will be seen below, has definite extra-Islamic resonances.

William Law’s two principles of ‘fear of God’ and ‘abstinence’ from all ungodly affairs are found, in fact, in the earliest work in Persian on Sufism: the *Sharh-i Ta’arruf* by Abu Ibrahim Mustamli Bukhara (d. 434 AH/1042-3 CE), where *taqwa* is described as having “two principles: fear and abstinence. Thus the devotee’s attitude of *taqwa* towards God has two senses: either fear of chastisement (*iqab*) or fear of separation (*firaq*)”. The attitude of fear generates observance of the commandments of God, while “fear of separation” means that “the devotee is content with nothing less than God, and does not find ease in aught beside Him” (from the anonymous *Khulasa-yi Sharh-i Ta’arruf*, ed. ‘A. Radja’i, Tehran 1349 AH/1970 CE, 294, an 8th/14th century summary of this work). In an almost identical definition by the great Kubrawi master Muhammad Lahidji (d. 912 AH/1507 CE) in the *Mafatih al-i’djaz fi sharh-i Gulshan-i raz*, ed. Muhammad Rida Barzgar Khaliqi and ‘Iffat Karbasi, Tehran 1371 AH/1992 CE, 250, *taqwa* is described as the “fear of God regarding the final consequences of one’s affairs, or else fear of one’s own passional self (*nafs*) lest it play the brigand, casting one into the perdition of separation and being veiled from God”. After over half a millennium of theosophical speculation - from Bukhara’i to Lahidji - the two foundations of *taqwa*: fear and abstinence, remain completely intact.

Taqwa in the Qur’an and Hadith

In general Qur’anic usage, the moral virtue of *taqwa* denotes piety, abstinence and God-fearing obedience, suggesting the idea of a faith animated by works, and works quickened by a genuine experience of faith; in brief, such *taqwa* is the substance of all godliness. *Taqwa* is one of the most frequently mentioned religious concepts in the Qur’an, having entered into the world of Islam upon the very first appearance of the angel Gabriel to the Prophet. “Have you seen him who tries to prevent a servant when he would pray? Have you considered if such a one has any divine guidance or enjoins [others] to piety (*taqwa*)?”, Muhammad is asked in the very early *sura*, XCVI, 9-12, the first five verses of which were revealed in the cave on Mt. Hira near Mecca. An allusion to *taqwa* reappears in the second verse of the first *sura* revealed in Medina (II), where the Qur’an is described as “a guidance for all endowed with piety (*hudan li ‘l-muttaqin*)”. In XLIX, 10, the believers are described as “naught but brothers” and, in a kind of communal participation in their “pious vigilant awareness of God (*taqwa Allah*)”, are enjoined to establish fraternal peace amongst themselves. Another verse (IX, 123), devoted to the theme of being harsh on the enemies of Islam, assures believers that “God is with the God-fearing pious devotees (*ma’a ‘l-muttaqin*)”. This latter verse may be compared with the *hadith* which situates *taqwa* as the “aggregate of all good things” alongside *jihad* which is described as “the monasticism [of the Muslim]” (al-Kushayri, *al-Risala*, ed. Ma’ruf Zarif and ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Hamid Baltanji, Beirut 1990, 105).

Ultimately, salvation in both this world and the next is attained through *taqwa*; with it the saints gain “their deserts and are untouched by evil and they have no grief” (XXXIX, 61; an idea also repeated in X, 62-3); while those with *taqwa* “are driven into Paradise” (XXXIX, 73). The true



mosque must also be “built upon *taqwa*” (IX, 108-9) if it is to be consecrated (an echo of Luke, vi. 47-9?). This connotation of *taqwa* is echoed in an early Qur’an commentary by Mukatil b. Sulayman (d. 150 AH/767 CE) where *taqwa* is “considered as synonymous with *ikhlas*, pure sincerity, [and] *ittaqa* is translated as *taraka* in the sense of ‘to abstain’ from what is evil, such as disobedience (*ma’siya*) or associationism (*shirk*)” (P. Nwyia, *Exégèse Coranique et Langage Mystique*, Beirut 1970, 59).

While *taqwa* is, in particular, the universal measurement and the final criterion of the sincere religious life of the faithful Muslim who is enjoined to “avoid suspicion” and instead to “fear God” (*taqwa Allah*, XLIX, 12; cf. II, 41), in a more general sense *taqwa* appears as the common ecumenical characteristic of the universal man of faith, regardless of sectarian divisions and political differences based on nationality and ethnic origin in the verse: “We have created you male and female, and made you nations and tribes to know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing (*akramakum ‘ind Allah atqakum*)” (XLIX, 13). In al-Sulami’s recension of the text of the Qur’anic *Tafsir* ascribed to Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 148 AH/765 CE) (ed. Nywia, in *MUSJ*, XLIII/4 [1967], 181-230), the Imam explains the verse as follows (221): “the generous person (*al-karim*) is one who is, in truth, piously God-fearing (*al-muttaqi*), and one who is piously God-fearing is one who has severed all his ties to created things for God’s sake”.

The idea of *taqwa* as specifically the *Islamic* species of piety appears in the Prophet’s saying: “Faith is naked and *taqwa* its dress” (*al-iman ‘uryan wa-libasuhu al-taqwa*) (cited by ‘Ayn al-Kudat Hamadani, *Tamhidat*, ed. ‘A. ‘Usayran, Tehran 1962, 325). From such traditions, it is evident that *taqwa*, as a religious concept, was seen to represent the robes of the Islamic faith, as well as to personify the very garments which cloak the Sacred appearing within diverse cultures and religions.

Taqwa and Iman

Taqwa was regarded as an essential element of the interior dimension of the act of faith, of *iman* ‘*an ‘ilm*, ‘enlightened faith’, (see L. Gardet, *IMAN*, at Vol. III, 1173). “The Prophet said: ‘Submission is public and faith is in the heart.’ Then, he pointed to his breast three times, repeating: ‘Fear of God (*taqwa*) is here, fear of God is here.’” (Ibn Hanbal and Ahmad b. Madja, cited by C. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, Albany 1985, 56).

As an element of Faith, *taqwa* thus embodies the purely internal and contemplative attitude of heart rather than merely external ritual practice; the same interiorisation of *iman* which is, in fact, reflected in XXII, 37, which, regarding such purely physical practices as the sacrifice of animals to feed the poor, a ritual part of the ceremony of Muslim pilgrimage, affirms that “it is not their flesh nor their blood that reaches God: it is your piety (*taqwa*) that reaches Him”. Commenting on this verse in his *Ihya’*, al-Ghazali notes that “What is meant here by ‘devotion’ (*taqwa*) is a quality that gains control of the heart, disposing it to comply with the commands it is required to obey” (cited in *Al-Ghazali. Inner Dimensions of Islamic Worship*, tr. Muhtar Holland, repr. London 1992, 35). Indeed, interpreting the Qur’anic reference to “heart-piety” (*takwa al-qulub*) in the same sura (XXII, 32), Ibn al-‘Arabi (d. 638 AH/1240 CE) was to point out that just as the



human heart is in constant fluctuation in every breath, so genuine *taqwa* must be understood as a kind of “‘pious-wariness-awareness’ of God with every breath, which is the ultimate end of what God desires from man” (*al-Futuhat al-makkiyya*, Cairo 1911, repr. Beirut n.d., ii, 672, 29-37); cf. Chittick’s definition and translation of *taqwa* cited above.

Taqwa was sometimes considered the supreme proof of the certitude of faith (*yaqin*). Abu Bakr al-Warrak, (d. 294 AH/906-7 CE), an early Khurasanian mystic, observed that “certitude (*yaqin*) is a light by means of which the devotee’s spiritual condition is illuminated. After he experiences such enlightenment, he is enabled to realise the rank of the pious (*muttaqin*)” (‘Attar, *Tadhkirat al-awliya*’, ed. M. Isti‘lami, Tehran 1372 AH/1993 CE, 538). Underlining the esoteric nature of piety in the spiritual life, al-Kalabadhi’s (d. 380 AH/990 CE) *K. al-Ta‘arruf*, Cairo 1933, 69, cites the statement of Sahl al-Tustari (d. 283 AH/896 CE), author of one of the earliest mystical Qur’an commentaries, that “piety is to contemplate mystical states in the act of isolation [from aught but God]”.

Such a radically interiorised outlook, which evokes *taqwa* as the soul of *iman* - piety as the inner life of faith - of course, was not always understood by exoteric members of the ‘*ulama*’. Ibn Taymiyya, an opponent of the Sufism of Ibn al-‘Arabi and scholastic philosophy, for instance, in his *K. al-Iman*, interprets piety in its most exoteric meaning, considering *iman*, *birr* (‘righteousness’) and *taqwa* to be synonymous with each other when used in an “absolute” sense in the Qur’an (as, for instance, II, 177, V, 2), holding that the believers (*mu’minun*) are equivalent to the God-fearing (*muttaqun*), who, in turn, are identical to the upright (*abrar*) (T. Izutsu, *The concept of belief in Islamic theology*, repr. Salem, N.H. 1988, 72-4).

The Mystical Theology of *Taqwa*

Taqwa as abstinence

In Muslim mystical theology, the general notion of *taqwa* is that of holy fearfulness, pious vigilance over and abstemious fear of following one’s passions; in a word, the heart’s awe of God who is ever-present in the contemplative life of the soul (cf. al-Sharif al-Djurdjani, *K. al-Ta‘rifat*, ed. I. al-Abyari, Beirut 1985, 90). Sahl al-Tustari’s maxim “There is no helper besides God; no guide besides the Prophet. There is no spiritual sustenance besides *taqwa*, nor any other work than patience (*sabr*)”, quoted by al-Kushayri, *Risala* (105), declares *taqwa* to be the mainstay, if not the very sustenance, of Sufi spiritual practice. In its perfect form, *taqwa* involves abstention from everything but God, for, as Ibn Khafif (d. 371 AH/981 CE) states, “Piety is to distance yourself from everything which distances you from God” (‘Attar, *Tadhkirat*, 578). The connotation of “*taqwa* as abstinence” is also captured in another al-Tustari maxim: “Whoever wishes to perfect his piety, tell him to refrain from all sins” (‘Attar, *op. cit.*, 313).

Taqwa as heart-abstinence

The contemplative interiority of *taqwa*, with the connotation of “*taqwa* as the heart’s abstinence” from all but God, is summed up in one of the earliest definitions of the term given by Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq that “for those who traverse the spiritual path (*ahl al-suluk*), piety (*taqwa*) is that



you do not find within your heart anything but Him” (al-Tahanawi, *Kashshaf istilahat al-funun. A Dictionary of the Technical Terms used in the Sciences of the Musalmans*, Calcutta 1862, ii, 1527). Abu Sa’id al-Kharraz (d. 277 AH/890 CE or 286 AH/899 CE), an important Sufi of the school of Baghdad, in his *K. al-Haqa’iq* devoted to the vocabulary of Sufi mystical experience on the two-fold levels of rational expression (*‘ibara*) and mystical allusion (*ishara*), combined this interiorised vision of *taqwa* with the more traditional Qur’anic understanding of the term in his statement that *taqwa* is “to have a heart vigilant not to let itself pursue passion, and a soul which guards itself against occasions of sin and error” (cited by Nywia, *Exégèse Coranique et Langage Mystique*, 289). Another leading member of the Baghdad school of Sufis, Abu ‘l-Husayn al-Nuri (d. 295 AH/907 CE), in the first chapter of his *Maqamat al-qulub* discovered and edited by Nywia, *Textes Mystiques Inédits*, in *MUSJ*, xlv/9 [1968], 132), in a section devoted to “the qualities of the house of the heart of the faithful believer”, mentions *taqwa* as the Light of Piety, the soul of Sufi ethics, for the contemplative “Light of Piety” illuminates both faith and works.

This interiorised concept of *taqwa* of the heart more or less disappeared but did not altogether die out from the vocabulary of Sufism after the 5th century AH/11th century CE. Thus Ruzbihan Bakli (d. 606 AH/1209 CE) wrote in his *Mashrab al-arwah* that “The root of God-fearing piety is detachment of one’s inmost consciousness (*sirr*) from everything but God, whether from the material or spiritual realms, during contemplation of the proofs of the divine Attributes and flashes of the divine Essence. In this manner, one’s inmost consciousness melts away before the onslaught of the majesty of the manifestation of the lights of Post-Eternity. That is the esoteric meaning of the Prophet’s saying: Faith is naked and *taqwa* its dress” (ed. N.M. Hoca, Istanbul 1973, 30).

***Taqwa* in the Spiritual Stations of Sufism**

From the late 3rd AH/9th CE to the 5th AH/11th CE centuries, *taqwa* was regularly featured in classifications devoted to the spiritual transactions (*mu‘amalat*) or moral virtues (*akhlaq*) of the Sufis’ spiritual journey, being closely aligned to the analogous concepts of fear (*khawf*), asceticism (*zuhd*), and abstinence (*wara’*). Al-Harith al-Muhasibi (d. 243 AH/857 CE) propounded in his *K. al-Ri‘aya* that all piety stems from fear and dread of God Almighty. According to him, “Obedience [to God’s commands and prohibitions] is the road to salvation, and knowledge is the guide to the road, and the foundation of obedience is abstinence (*wara’*), and the foundation of abstinence is God-fearing piety (*taqwa*), and the foundation of that is self-examination (*muhasaba*), and self-examination is based on fear (*khawf*) and hope (*radja*)” (Margaret Smith, *Al-Muhasibi, an Early Mystic of Baghdad*, Cambridge 1935, 89, 112). If *taqwa* appears in this description as an essential “foundation” of ascetic theology, the emphasis on piety is even more accentuated later on in the same book: “O brother, let Godliness (*taqwa*) be your chief concern, for it is your capital stock, and works of supererogation beyond that represent your profit” (*ibid.*, 129), cf. also Massignon, *Essai sur les Origines du Lexique Technique de la Mystique Musulmane*, Paris 1928, 149.

Al-Muhasibi’s emphasis on piety-as-godliness in early Islamic mysticism was formally integrated into the Sufi methodological approach to the spiritual stations (*maqamat*) in al-



Kushayri's *Risala* (91-140), where *taqwa* is placed fourth among the first ten spiritual stations, in the following sequence: [1] repentance (*tawba*) → spiritual struggle (*mujahida*) → spiritual retreat, withdrawal (*khalwa*, *'uzla*) → God-fearing piety (*taqwa*) → abstinence (*wara'*) → asceticism (*zuhd*) → silence (*samt*) → fear (*khawf*) → hope (*radja*) → [10] grief (*huzn*). Despite al-Kushayri's traditional classification of *taqwa* among the rudimentary spiritual stations of the Path, the term often seemed to fall out of usage among some of the later classical authors who wrote on the *maqamat*. Thus, there is no mention of *taqwa* (whether as a station or a technical term) in Nicholson's index of technical terms to his critical edition of al-Sarradj's (d. 378 AH/988 CE) *K. al-Luma'*, nor in the *Kut al-qulub* by Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 386 AH/996 CE), nor in the *Tabakat al-sufiyya* of Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 412 AH/1021 CE), nor in 'Abd Allah Ansari of Harat's (d. 481 AH/1089 CE) manual on the *Stages of the Sufi Wayfarers*, nor even in Abu Mansur Isfahani's (d. 417 AH/1026 CE) *Nahj al-khass*, which had considerable influence on Ansari's theory of mystical stations.

The early notion of the fundamental place of *taqwa* in the ascetic theology of Islam does sometimes resurface in later works, particularly those written in the Persian language. In his treatise *Sad maydan* ("The hundred fields", in *Manazil al-sa'irin*, 299-300), which Ansari also devoted to the mystical stations, he set up *taqwa* as the sixteenth station, subsequent to the field of abstinence (*wara'*), in the following order: [11] self-examination (*muhasaba*) → awakening (*yakza*) → asceticism (*zuhd*) → detachment (*tajrid*) → abstinence (*wara'*) → God-fearing piety (*taqwa*) → spiritual transactions (*mu'amalat*) → mindfulness (*mubalat*) → certitude (*yaqin*) → [20] insight (*basira*). The field of *taqwa* [16] is described as follows:

"Those who fear God with proper piety (*muttaqiyan*) are three [kinds of] men: the lesser, intermediate, and the great.

"He who possesses the least degree [of *taqwa*] does not corrupt his profession of divine Unity with associating others with God (*shirk*), or debase his sincerity (*ikhlas*) with hypocrisy, or contaminate his worship with innovation (*bid'a*).

"He who possesses the medial degree does not vitiate his service (*khidma*) with false shows (*riya'*), or adulterate his sustenance with food of a doubtful nature, or let his mystical state (*hal*) become perverted by heedlessness.

"He who possesses the greatest degree does not blemish his gratefulness with complaints; or dilute his sins by arguments [of his innocence], or ever cease to be beholden to God for His grace towards him."

As a key technical term or spiritual station, *taqwa* is rarely present in any late classical Sufi texts - among some of the more important of which may be mentioned are Abu 'l-Nadjib al-Suhrawardi's (d. 563 AH/1168 CE) *Adab al-muridin* (ed. N.M. Harawi, Arabic text with Pers. tr. Tehran 1363 AH/1984 CE), and 'Izz al-Din Mahmud Kashani's (d. 735 AH/1335 CE) *Misbah al-hidaya wa-miftah al-kifaya* (ed. Djalal al-Din Huma'i, 2nd ed. Tehran 1325 AH/1946 CE); it is even absent from Shihab al-Din Abu Haf's 'Umar al-Suhrawardi's (d. 632 AH/1234 CE)



'*Awarif al-ma'arif*, which formed the literary model for Kashani's book, and was later to become the foremost manual of Sufism in the Indian subcontinent.

Wherever the term turns up in later works it is usually considered as a necessary corollary of *wara'* or *zuhd*. For instance, in Sa'id al-Din al-Farghani's (d. 699 AH/1300 CE) *Masharik al-darari. Sharh-i Ta'iyya Ibn Farid* (ed. Djalal al-Din Ashtiyani, Tehran 1979, 150-1), *taqwa* is placed among the stations belonging to the first of three ascending degrees of "annihilation" (*fana*). The first degree of *fana* involves annihilation by means of "faring through and realisation of the spiritual stations, stages and mystical states such as repentance (*tawba*), self-examination (*muhasaba*), contemplative vigilance (*muraqaba*), spiritual struggle (*mujahada*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), God-fearing piety (*taqwa*), abstinence (*wara'*), asceticism (*zuhd*) and similar related degrees...." As in al-Kushayri's schema, al-Farghani's classification places God-fearing piety among those virtues which the mystic must struggle to realise by *his own* will; for aspirants still bound in the bonds of egocentric personality, *taqwa* is a knife to cut through the cords of 'Selfhood'.

In the writings of the Persian mystics of the Kubrawi School, the virtue of *taqwa* featured quite prominently. In his monumental conspectus of Sufi doctrine, the *Mirsad al-'ibad* (ed. M.A. Riyahi, Tehran 1352 AH/1973 CE, 257-60), Nadjm al-Din Razi (d. 654 AH/1256 CE) cites some twenty qualities (*sifat*) with which the disciple must be characterised in a chapter devoted to "the conditions, manners and qualities of a disciple", and here *taqwa* is the fifth of his *suluk*; and a similar conception of the place of *taqwa* in Sufi ethics appears in the third book of the *Kashf al-haqa'iq* (ed. Ahmad Damghani, Tehran 1359/1980, 131-2) - "an exposition of the conditions for wayfaring (*suluk*) the mystical path" - by Razi's fellow Kubrawi Shaykh 'Aziz Nasafi (d. between 1281-1300). As in the Rule of St. Benedict, for the Persian mystics of the Kubrawi order, God-fearing piety had come to be viewed as an essential virtue in the practical ethics of the master-disciple relationship, so that religious devotion is indistinguishable from unhesitating obedience to the order's superior.

***Taqwa's* Apophysis in Mediaeval Sufism**

In the mediaeval period, the master-disciple relationship and the role of the master in spiritual practice, and, in particular, the need for the novice to be guided by an enlightened master, came to the forefront of Sufi theory and practice, replacing the previous emphasis on the ethics of *taqwa* as the cornerstone of spirituality and devotional worship in Islam. Jalal al-Din Rumi stated that "The gnostic is the soul of the Law (*shar'*) and religious piety (*taqwa*): gnosis is the fruit of past ascetic effort.... He [the gnostic] is both the command to righteousness and righteousness itself; he himself is both hierophant and mystery" (*Mathnawi*, ed. and tr. Nicholson, vi, vv. 2090, 2093). This redirection of Islamic piety towards cultivation of, and concentration on, the elect "Perfect Man" (*al-insan al-kamil*) with the consequent devaluation of the devotee's own private ascetic vigilance is visible in the thought of most Sufi poets of the Mongol period. One such poet, Mahmud Shabistari, in his *Gulshan-i raz* thus describes the Perfect Man as "endowed with praiseworthy qualities, celebrated for knowledge (*'ilm*), asceticism (*zuhd*) and piety (*taqwa*)" (*Madjmu'a-yi athar-i Shaykh Mahmud Shabistari*, ed. Samad Muwahhid, Tehran 1365 AH/1986 CE, v. 351), relegating *taqwa*, as did the classical masters of the School of Baghdad, to being a



rudimentary but not insignificant principle of the Sufi ethical system. However, a discernible difference in accentuation has occurred, so that the Perfect Man is the source of piety rather than piety being the animus of individual spirituality. Ultimately, the Perfect Man may decide to dispense with all pious fear as well, since he is “free of the ties of master and disciple, beyond all asceticism (*zuhd*) and all the fictions of piety (*taqwa*)” (*ibid.*, v. 862).

In the works of Sa‘di and Hafiz, the two greatest Persian Sufi lyricists, another kind of de-accentuation on individual piety is evident, with *taqwa* often denigrated as a kind of spiritual attitude characteristic of cold-hearted ascetics (*zahid*) and formalist preachers. “Wherever the Sultan of Love appears, no power is left in the arm of *taqwa*,” asserts Sa‘di in the *Gulistan* (ed. Kh. Khatib-Rahbar, Tehran 1348/1969, 337), and in his *ghazals* he cries out: “Stand on your feet, so we can cast aside this blue [Sufi] cloak/Throw to the winds of antinomianism this idolatry which bears the name of piety (*shirk-i takwa-nam ra*)” (*Ghazalha-yi Sa‘di*, ed. N. Izadparast, Tehran 1362/1983, 23). Sa‘di probably knew of al-Kushayri’s notion that “the root of *taqwa* is fear of all idolatrous associationism (*al-shirk*)” (*Risala*, 105), and in this verse no doubt merely wished to criticise the element of self-consciousness which *taqwa* often engendered in less sincere adepts, re-evoking the classical concept of *taqwa* which had recognised the need to develop an apophatic discourse capable of expressing the interior subtleties of its ideal (Abu Bakr al-Wasiti, d. 320 AH/931 CE, a member of the Baghdad School, stated “piety is that you piously abstain from your own [self-indulgent] piety”, cited in ‘Attar, *Tadhkirat*, 745).

This paradoxical approach to the classical ideal of piety in Islam, expressed - in order to avoid metaphysical reification - in the wish to transcend the dichotomy of piety/impiety, godliness/ungodliness (understanding the affirmation of faith and piety as a subtle form of delimitation, an idolatry of a mundane doctrine instead of adoration of the Transcendent), is best expressed in the poetry of Hafiz, as in the following verse:

In the way of the Sufi it’s total infidelity
to put your trust in knowledge and piety;
Although a pilgrim boasts a hundred arts
Just the same, he must have trust.

(*Diwan*, ed. Khanlari, 2nd ed. Tehran 1362 AH/1983 CE, 559).

Elsewhere he asks: “What relation does libertinism (*rindi*) have to purity and piety (*taqwa*)? /How wide the gap between the priest’s homily and the rebeck’s refrain!” (*Diwan*, 20). In another place, he boasts, “So many nights I’ve strayed from Piety’s path (*rah-i taqwa*) with harp and duff/but now they say, I’ll set my foot on the straight and narrow path - indeed, a likely tale” (*ibid.*, 324, no. 154 l.2), scorning to sully the honour of his *dervish* cloak by following the pedestrian rites of canonical piety. Indeed, Hafiz’s libertinism seems a far cry from the religious sentiment of Abu ‘l-Darda (d. 32 AH/652-3 CE), the celebrated Companion of the Prophet greatly venerated by early Sufis, who was reported to have preferred piety (*taqwa*) above forty years of ritual worship and observances (*‘ibada*) (Massignon, *Essai*, 158).



With Hafiz and his followers, the austere ideals of early Islamic piety reached both a moral threshold and a metaphysical apex, as the journey from Qur'anic religious concept to ascetic doctrinal ideal based on fear and abstinence, to the interiorised Sufi notion of piety as the faith of the heart, culminated in the irony of the paradox which dissolves the mystic's need for the *scala perfectionis* of his own *via negativa*.

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