

Al-Suyūṭī as a Sūfī

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In al-Suyūṭī's times, in the 9th/15th century, the Muslim scholar steeped in Sufism had become a somewhat familiar figure. Drawing from the great tradition of al-Junayd and al-Ghazālī, he merged within himself exoteric sciences and esoteric sciences, argumentative approach (*al-istidlāl wa l-burhān*) and intuitive discipline (*al-kashf wa l-'iyān*). The path had already been prepared by a large number of 'ulamā' mostly following the Ash'arī creed and belonging to the Shāfi'ī school of law. They constantly used the scholarly status they earned in various Islamic sciences in order to stress the superiority of spiritual knowledge and Sufism.

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī¹ was undoubtedly the most prominent scholar involved in *taṣawwuf* of the Mamlūk era, and he acted as a pioneer in this field. However, in as much as is possible, we need to consider whether al-Suyūṭī did in fact have tasted mystical experiences or whether he merely claimed to have done so, for we know that he claimed his prevalence in a lot of disciplines.

The nature of the commitment of al-Suyūṭī to Sufism

To al-Suyūṭī, the discipline of *Ḥadīth* represents "the noblest of sciences"², because it is related to the prophetic model, which for him is the only way to reach God. Although he worked and wrote extensively in the formal field of *'ilm al-Ḥadīth*, he stressed the fact that this knowledge should not be confined to books but rather, that it should be experienced with presence of heart, and brought to life from the inside. Little wonder, then, that he should have claimed to have seen the Prophet more than seventy times whilst in a waking state (*fī l-yaqāza*)³. Such visions (*ru'yā*) of the Prophet lends great charisma in Sufism. In one of those visions the Prophet came to visit him in his house and called him "*shaykh al-Sunna*"⁴. Subsequently al-Suyūṭī explained that, during a vision, one may be directly informed by the Prophet about the validity of a *ḥadīth*⁵. Thus al-Suyūṭī succeeded in gaining a personal and mystical relation with the spiritual entity of the Prophet. It is not surprising, then, that he should have attached importance to the complementarity between the esoteric and exoteric aspects of the Prophet, as he did in a work with an explicit title: *al-Bāhir fī ḥukm al-nabī bi l-bāṭin wa l-zāhir* (The Brilliance of the Prophet's Judgment on Exoteric and Esoteric Matters). So, as in other fields of his scientific involvement, al-Suyūṭī was a profoundly traditionalist *Sunnī* scholar: he was following the Prophetic model not only outwardly, but also at a deep inward level.

¹ On him, see Geoffroy, E., al-Suyūṭī, in EI², ix, 951-954.

² al-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-muḥādara* i, 155.

³ al-Sha'rānī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-ṣuḡhrā* 29.

⁴ *Ibid.* 28-29.

⁵ al-Suyūṭī, *Taḥdhīr* 50.

His initiatory affiliations

At the time of al-Suyūṭī several modalities of initiatory affiliation were accepted in the Sufi path. The most common and less demanding was that of *tabarruk*, in which the seeker was given the Sufi “mantle” (*khirqā*) through which he received a spiritual impulse (*baraka*) from a shaykh. This impulse was transmitted through a chain of *shaykhs* (the *silsila*) leading back to the Prophet, who is held to be the originator of all mystic teaching. Al-Suyūṭī informs us that he was clothed in the *khirqā* by Ibn Imām al-Kāmiliyya in 869/1465 who gave him a licence (*ijāza*) to bestow the *khirqā* on whomever he wished⁶. The chains of authority (*isnād*) of this investiture come mainly from the Aḥmadiyya, Qādiriyya and Suhrawardiyya branches⁷.

These multiple affiliations, as common as they were, could have variable impact from an initiatory perspective, and as such never replaced the personal relationship between a Sūfī master and his disciple⁸. So one might have received a number of *khirqā* (sometimes over thirty...) but could only have a *shaykh* of *tarbiya* at a single time. This was the case for al-Suyūṭī: his *shaykh* was Muḥammad al-Maghribī (d. 910/1504), a prominent Shādhilī master in Cairo at the time⁹. This shaykh did not leave any writings but he is reported to have given genuine spiritual teaching, influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī’s *waḥdat al-wujūd* (“Unity of Being”). The choice of the Shādhilī path did obviously not come by chance. In this *ṭarīqa*, which claims to inherit the spiritual method of imam Junayd of Baghdad, al-Suyūṭī found a balance between the external Law and the inner Way. He extolled the virtues of the Shādhilī way in an important work: *Ta’yīd al-ḥaqīqa al-‘aliyya wa tashyīd al-ṭarīqa al-Shādhiliyya* (“The upholding of the lofty Reality and the buttressing of the Shādhilī path”)¹⁰. Al-Suyūṭī himself acted as a Sūfī master with several followers¹¹. His main disciple, who served him for forty years, was called ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Shādhilī.

Al-Suyūṭī as a saint?

The question arises as to whether a Sūfī scholar (*al-‘ālim al-sūfī*) could claim sanctity (*walāya*) in the same way as “professional” Sūfī masters, who were appointed by a former master and were given the task of guiding people to spiritual realization (*al-taḥqīq*). According to the standards of sanctity in those times, we have no reason to doubt the sanctity of al-Suyūṭī. One of the major manifestations of sanctity was of course the gift of miracles (*karāmāt*). Several instances are related in sources about al-Suyūṭī¹². For instance, he was granted a supernatural favour not granted other scholars; “folding the earth” (*ṭayy al-ard*). This was the ability of crossing large distances in a very short space of time. His servant ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Shādhilī related in detail to the well-known Sūfī ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī how al-Suyūṭī took him once from Cairo to Mecca to pray the afternoon prayer in such a

⁶ al-Suyūṭī, *Khiraq*.

⁷ Sartain, *Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī* 34 ; Geoffroy, *Le soufisme* 516.

⁸ For the case of al-Suyūṭī, see Geoffroy, *Le soufisme* 202.

⁹ On him, *Ibid.*, index.

¹⁰ Two editions: Cairo 1934, and Beirut 2006.

¹¹ Geoffroy, *Le soufisme* 202.

¹² Sartain, *Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī* 98-100; Geoffroy, *Le soufisme* 171.

miraculous manner¹³. Among the supernatural favours attributed to al-Suyūṭī, one may also quote his predictions on the first Ottoman period¹⁴.

A pioneer in the defense of Sufism

Al-Suyūṭī is of course especially famous for presenting a strong and well-articulated defense for *taṣawwuf*. His personal commitment to the case led him to take advantage of his fame as a great *‘ālim* to spearhead a clear-sighted defense of Sufism and its masters, and to promote an enlightened Sunnism, experiencing the inner dimension of Muhammad.

In his aforementioned *Ta’yīd al-ḥaqīqa al-‘aliyya wa tashyīd al-ṭarīqa al-Shādhiliyya*, he praises the orthodoxy of this Sūfī path, which he ascribes to the sober method of al-Junayd¹⁵. In this book, he shows his profoundly deep grounding in Islamic scholarship, which allows him to juggle with Islamic and Sūfī doctrines. Through a careful process of integration and exclusion, he manages to present a consistent and homogeneous image of *taṣawwuf*. He always justifies his statements with scriptural sources (Qur’ān, *ḥadīth qudsī*, *ḥadīth nabawī*) in order to decisively counter attacks from critics of Sufism. For instance, he justifies Ibn ‘Arabī’s personality and doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, but in the same time lets someone else whom he quotes disapprove of the “absolute Unicity” (*al-waḥda al-muṭlaqa*) of Ibn Sab‘īn (who is, in al-Suyūṭī’s eyes, a philosopher much more than a Sūfī). Moreover, he uses evidence to distance genuine Sufism from any link with substantial union with God (*ittiḥād*) and incarnationism (*ḥulūl*). Al-Suyūṭī also gives credit to the gnostics (*‘ulamā’ al-bāṭin*) and regards exoterist scholars (*‘ulamā’ al-zāhir*) as generally being deficient¹⁶.

The scholar Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā‘ī was involved in a *fitna* in 864/1459 when he attacked Ibn ‘Arabī in a tract entitled *Tanbīh al-ghabī ilā takfīr Ibn ‘Arabī* (“Warning to the Dolt that Ibn ‘Arabī is an Apostate”). Scholars opposed him in a variety of ways, but due to his eminence, only al-Suyūṭī, due to his managed to counter him in a tract entitled *Tanbīh al-ghabī bi tabri’at Ibn ‘Arabī* (“Warning to the Dolt that Ibn ‘Arabī is innocent [of these accusations]”). In this reply al-Suyūṭī adopts a very nuanced position: he considers Ibn ‘Arabī to be a very great saint, but he states that the reading of his writings should be forbidden to incompetent people and disciples ignorant of Sūfī terminology¹⁷.

For posterity, however, it is above all in his legal pronouncements or advice (*fatwā*) that al-Suyūṭī appears as an advocate of Sufism: he was the first Muslim scholar to have given formal consideration to the discipline of *taṣawwuf* within the field of fatwa formulation¹⁸. In his collection *Al-Ḥāwī lil-fatāwī*, he delivers a great variety of statements on spiritual matters. For instance, he gives preeminence to mystical science over legal science, bestows inspiration (*ilhām*) and spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) a legal status: both have to be considered as “juridical proofs” as long as they don’t run counter to a recognized point of law. He links unveiling and

¹³ al-Sha’rānī, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-ṣuḡhrā* 30-31; Geoffroy, *Le soufisme* 296.

¹⁴ Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’* v, 218; al-Sha’rānī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 30-32.

¹⁵ al-Suyūṭī, *Ta’yīd* 68-69.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷ See also Geoffroy, *Le soufisme* 461.

¹⁸ A Sūfī *‘ālim* from Bejaya (current Algeria), al-Wansahrisī (d. 914/1508), did the same in his own collection, but this scholar is much less known than al-Suyūṭī ...

spiritual vision (*ru'yā*) to the process of Revelation (*waḥī*) and asserts the possibility of seeing the Prophet and angels, stating that many of his contemporaries denied the reality of vision because they neglected Revelation and the Muḥammadian model (the *Sunna*) and preferred to focus on rational and philosophical sciences. He sees the highest form of worship in the invocation of God (*dhikr*) and shows that one must interpret the sayings of the Sufis and not stop at their superficial meaning: *ta'wīl* applies to Sūfī words as well as to Quranic verses...He maintains also that saints have the gift of ubiquity, gives scriptural grounds for the initiatory hierarchy of the saints, and so on.

He indeed opened the way for later '*ulamā*' to write Sūfī *fatwā*, up to our days. Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974/1567) explicitly acknowledged his influence, and he still stressed the position dedicated to Sufism in his own fatwas¹⁹. The same may be said about Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ramlī (d. 957/1550) and Najm al-Dīn al-Ghayṭī (d. 983/1575). Some Sūfī scholars of the 20th century followed in the wake of al-Suyūṭī. *Shaykh al-Azhar* 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd (d. 1978), for instance, issued 43 fatwas shedding some light on the most important aspects of Sufism²⁰. More recently, 'Alī Gumu'a, a previous grand mufti of Egypt, published a collection of one hundred fatwas²¹, many of them dealing with spiritual issues.

Following in the footsteps of Imam al-Ghazālī, al-Suyūṭī seems to have foreseen the legalistic and literalist sclerosis that was to take hold of the Islamic world. This degeneration was already present and nascent in al-Suyūṭī's age and was to give birth to the modern fanaticisms of our times. His fatwas and his writings are astonishingly relevant to us since they defend celebrating of the Prophet's birthday (*Mawlid*), using a rosary (*sibḥa*) or performing invocation aloud (*al-dhikr al-jahr*). Not to mention those which justify the doctrine of the « unity of Being²² », or those who state the superiority of inspiration and esoteric knowledge over any formal science, be it profane or religious science.

To al-Suyūṭī, love will always prevail over law, and that is precisely what makes him a Sūfī. Someone once asked him whether a believer who does not observe the Law (*'aṣṭ*) could enter Paradise for the sake of his love for the Prophet. His answer was 'yes'²³.

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¹⁹ See his *Fatāwā ḥadīthiyya*.

²⁰ *Fatāwā 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd* ii, 327-408.

²¹ *al-Bayān limā yashghal al-adhhān* (« The Clarification about the questions which worry the mind »).

²² Ibn 'Arabī is nowadays much better understood and much more extensively studied in the West than in Muslim countries.

²³ al-Suyūṭī, *al-Ḥāwī lil-fatāwī* i, 388.

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