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In the Crucible of Ottoman *Tahqīq*: A Fifteenth-Century Case of Verifying Philosophy and Theology under Sufi Agnosticism

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Abstract

Verification (*tahqīq*) was a post-classical practice in Islamicate scholarship that sought ways to attain syntheses between rational and religious sciences. This article argues, however, that the early Ottoman practice of *tahqīq* was not limited to the “verification of theology and philosophy,” as it also included attempts to reconcile certain Sufi doctrines with philosophical theology. This tendency is evident in the works of fifteenth-century scholars, such as Sinān Paşa and his shaykh Vefā’, as well as al-Jāmī and Ibn Kemāl, all of whom tried to reconcile conflicting aspects of philosophy and theology under the overarching rubric of the Akbarī worldview. These cases demonstrate that Sufi *tahqīq* was already present very early in the development of Ottoman intellectual life, and that it was a diffuse and multi-variegated practice that drew upon the universalizing tendencies of Sufi agnosticism.

Keywords

Ottoman Sufism – *Tahqīq* – Sufi agnosticism

Introduction: The Origins of *Tahqīq* in the Early Ottoman World

As recent studies of extant manuscripts from the fifteenth-century Ottoman world have revealed, Ottoman learning was not monolithic. Many different domains of knowledge were studied at madrasas, and opposing doctrines were included in scholarly syntheses that encompassed a wide range of approaches in rational and religious sciences. Within this milieu, verification (*tahqīq*) was a form of contestation deployed to ascertain already established truths through the process of acquiring a thing's true existence, an essential way of knowing based on skepticism towards the past and openness to independent reasoning and syncretism.

Mostly remembered in the West for his military and political might, Sultan Mehmed II (d. 886/1481) was also a well-known patron of sciences, as he vied for prestige with contemporary Italian and Timurid rulers, famed for their scholarly and artistic patronage. The new emphasis on *tahqīq* in the early Ottoman imperial consciousness, therefore, had a political valence, in a manner similar to the role it played in the later Mughal emperor Akbar's ideal principle of "universal conciliation" (*ṣulḥ-i kull*). Like both Akbar and his Mongol ancestors, Mehmed II styled himself a universal ruler who stood above the distinctions of individual religions and performed this role through his syncretic patronage activities as "cosmic sovereign," a unifying conduit between the world and the divine.¹ Meanwhile, through the Sultan's initiatives, high standards of scholarly meritocracy were set in institutional charters and his Code of Law,² and the method of verification became an integral part of the intellectual production of the day, having become the fabric of "real scholarship" as opposed to "blind obedience" (*taqlīd*).

The Ottoman culture of Islamic sciences was dependent on text-based learning with roots in Il-Khanid and Timurid scholarship. The Perso-Islamic scholars in this tradition, who mediated between different aspects of Avicennan philosophy (*ḥikma*) and Ash'arite theology (*kalām*), were taken as role models, and they were often referred to under the epithet "verifier" by later Ottoman scholars.³ These Perso-Islamic "verifiers" produced texts that were

1 With regard to the Mughal cases of religious conciliation, universalism, and mixing of cultures (*āmīzish-e farhang*), see the articles by Sheffield, Moin, and Gommans-Huseini in *Modern Asian Studies*' special issue on Mughal political theology (May 2022). For parallels in Mehmed II's case, see Casale's "Mehmed the Conqueror between *Sulḥ-i Kull* and *Prisca Theologia*" in the same volume.

2 Abdurrahman Atçıl, *Scholars and Sultan in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, 2017), 59–82.

3 In praise of celebrated Persian scholars al-Tūsī and al-Jurjānī as "verifiers": İbn Kemāl, *Risāla ma'dūma li-bayān al-mūjib bi'l-dhāt*, Süleymaniye Library [SL], MS Ayasofya 4794, f. 234b; 'Alā'

extensively employed as handbooks of Avicennan philosophy at Ottoman medreses, and many celebrated Ottomans followed their method and, in some cases, criticized their views by revising their verifications.

In a curious passage in his *Kashf al-ẓunūn* (“The Removal of Doubt”), encyclopedist Kātib Çelebi (d. 1068/1657) distinguished the fifteenth century as the pinnacle of scholarly production in the Ottoman world, stressing the scholarly pride and integrity of Ottoman scholars, as well as their finesse in being able to verify differing intellectual traditions objectively – without deeming them to be inconsonant in the framework of religious doctrines. Setting the fifteenth-century world as an imagined golden period, Kātib Çelebi singled out a specific group of distinguished Ottoman scholars, *ehl-i taḥqīq* or “people of verification,” who could mediate between different schools of thought without prejudice and investigated the truth more deeply through critical evaluation of various epistemological sources. He further hailed this special group as having combined Avicennan philosophy (*ḥikma*) with the Islamic doctrine (*sharīʿa*) – listing four generations of scholars from Mollā Fenārī to İbn Kemāl, including Ḥocazāde and Kāḍizāde-i Rūmī.⁴

“Verification” became a technical term in the post-classical world that praised a scholar’s capacity to verify a particular position when ascertaining the truth in the face of a competing line of doctrines. The early modern philosophical-philological project of *taḥqīq* defined by El-Rouayheb/Melvin-Kouski includes a wide range of meanings and can be traced across a vast area from the Mediterranean to South Asia.⁵ This method allowed for independent inquiry, objectivity, and critical reasoning; an accomplished “verifier” (*muḥaqqiq*) was one who freely studied and synthesized the information derived from differing schools of thought when making scholarly claims.⁶

al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *Tarjuma-ye lawāmīʿ al-asrār*, SL, MS Ayasofya 2486, f. 3a. For İbn Mubārakshāh, see Ḥocazāde’s gloss on his *Sharḥ hidāya al-ḥikma*, SL, MS Laleli 2536, f. 1a.

4 “[...] jamaʿa bayna al-ḥikma waʾl-sharīʿa” (Kātib Çelebi, *Kashf al-ẓunūn*, eds. Yaltkaya and Bilge, vol. 1 (Ankara, 1941), 680).

5 With regard to this term’s application to the study of classical Islamic sciences, Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 2017). Melvin-Koushki, however, extends its application to various occult sciences (“*Taḥqīq* vs. *Taqlīd* in the Renaissance of Western Early Modernity,” *Philological Encounters* 3 (2018): 193–249). The Ottoman philosophical *taḥqīq* in Kātib Çelebi’s case may not be less directly associated with “philological rigor” and “esotericism” as in Melvin-Koushki’s Timurid sense, and closer to the definition proposed by El-Rouayheb.

6 For the general practice of *taḥqīq* in Islamicate education, as well as its application in the post-Avicennan commentary/gloss tradition, Sonja Brentjes, *Teaching and Learning the Sciences in Islamicate Societies (800–1700)*, (Turnhout, 2018), 175–177; Robert Wisnovsky, “Avicennism and Exegetical Practice in the Early Commentaries on the *Ishārāt*,” *Oriens* 41, no. 4/3 (2013): 372.

Legitimizing the Sufi Epistemology: Ottoman Verifiers on the Sufi Method

The term *taḥqīq* was often used in tandem with *tadqīq*, from “examining with precision,” which indicated a scholar’s exactitude in argumentation and calculation.⁷ The emphasis on scholarly verification was a testament to the extent and well-roundedness of a scholar’s knowledge, a common topos employed in Ottoman biobibliographical sources. Ascertaining the truth of religious doctrines in a way that is consistent with the Avicennan worldview was a widely shared objective, giving rise to a number of scholarly and imperial debates during this “golden age” of verification.⁸

Kātib Çelebi’s passage may have referred more precisely to the verification of philosophical issues, yet some of the scholars on the list were also known to have produced, commented, and adjudicated on Sufi matters. As for the case of Sufi verification, the inclusion of Mollā Fenārī and İbn Kemāl in the list of “verifiers” was not by accident, since the message was that even the highest religious authorities in the Ottoman world were figures who arbitrated among differing scholarly approaches. As such, they saw Sufism as an autonomous discipline that had its own way of acquiring knowledge, neither resorting to philosophy nor theology, but vying for its own independent formula of truth.⁹

Meanwhile, the term *ahl-i kashf wa-taḥqīq* (often contrasted with *ahl-i zāhir* or *taqlīd*) was initially used for a select number of universalist Timurid scholars who synthesized Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrines with Sunnī theology, occultism, and Avicennan philosophy.¹⁰ Different from Kātib Çelebi’s later designation, the Timurid *taḥqīq* implied the concordance of natural, philosophical, scriptural, and mystical knowledge. Associating a distinct intellectual network of scholars who sought ways to prove the unity of *madhabs* and differing schools of

7 *Taḥqīq* referred to one’s sources and references in establishing a verified account of truth, while *tedkīk*, in the Ottoman context, was often used for scholars who produced works in mathematics and astronomy (e.g., Kātib Çelebi’s verifiers Kāḏizāde-i Rūmī and Mīrim Çelebi) to emphasize their precision in calculation. For Sa’dī Çelebi’s (d. 945/1538) use of “al-mawla al-mudaqqiq” for the former: Sami Arslan, “Bir Mecmua Müstensih Çelebi’nin Elinde Nasıl Mahkemeye Dönüşür?” *Millî Mecmûa* 17 (2020): 212.

8 Efe Balıkcıoğlu, “A Coherence of Incoherences: Graeco-Arabic Philosophy and the Fifteenth-Century Ottoman Synthesis of Philosophy with Sharia” (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 2019), 35–40.

9 Mollā Fenārī became acquainted with Akbarī views through his father’s alleged link to Ibn ‘Arabī’s student al-Qunawī (d. 673/1274).

10 On Timurid *taḥqīq*: Evrim Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran* (Cambridge, 2016), 98–99.

thought,¹¹ *ahl-i taḥqīq* was closely linked to Ottoman verifiers like Mollā Fenārī, Kāḏizāde-i Rūmī, and the jurist-mystic Şeyḥ Bedreddīn in various capacities.¹² As a category different from *faylasūf* or *mutakallim*, *muḥaqqiq* (one who realizes) was used to refer more specifically to high caliber Sufis associated with the Akbarī school.¹³

Sufism was an epistemological domain perceived to be independent from rational and religious sciences; this did not mean that philosophy, theology, and Sufism were absolutely exclusive categories in terms of instruction and scholarly formulation. Ottoman littérateur Taşköprizāde's encyclopedia of sciences, *Miftāḥ al-sa'āda* ("The Key to Happiness") included Sufism as a legitimate branch of science, by considering its aspect of direct experience (*dhawq*) as a viable source of acquiring knowledge.¹⁴ Having been construed as an alternative to the philosophical reason (*'aql*) and the theological revelation (*waḥy*), this term was understood to go beyond the emanative determinism of Arabic philosophy or the throughgoing occasionalism of God's whims. As in the case of mystical intuitionist knowledge (*ma'rifa*), the Sufi *dhawq* attests *knowledge by qualia*¹⁵ – the knowledge of presence gained through firsthand experience (via meditative contemplation).

The legitimacy of the Sufi experiential knowledge also features in a conversation said to have taken place between Ḥocazāde and his Zeynī colleague Veliyüddīn oğlu Aḥmed (d. 902/1496–7) during a horseback excursion in the vicinity of Edirne. Aḥmed Paşa was known for his extreme Sufi piety, with no particular attraction towards women. One day, the Paşa asked Ḥocazāde how he would describe the taste (*lezzet/zevke*) of having sex. When the scholar answered that it could not be possibly explained by words, Aḥmed Paşa was baffled and insisted on another reply. Ḥocazāde then asked Aḥmed to describe the taste of honey, who hesitated for a moment without being able to describe it. From this, Ḥocazāde concluded that Aḥmed's celibacy was not due to his

11 Biṣṭāmī was a mystic-scholar based in Ottoman Brusa, known for his preoccupation with natural sciences, prognostication, and astronomical/astrological compendia with apocalyptic/messianic themes based on Timurid models. The earliest complete examples of Biṣṭāmī's compendia date to Mehmed II's early reign, suggesting the prevalence of millennial-universalist tendencies in the post-Mongol world (Cornell Fleischer, "Ancient Wisdom and New Sciences," in *Falnama: The Book of Omens*, eds. Farhad and Bağcı (Washington, D.C., 2009), 232–236).

12 Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks*, 100–106.

13 William Chittick, "The School of Ibn 'Arabī," *History of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. Nasr and Leaman, vol. 1 (London, 1996), 510–516.

14 Taşköprizāde, *Miftāḥ al-sa'āda*, eds. Bakrī and Abū al-Nūr, vol. 2 (Cairo, 1968), 345.

15 Broadly construed, *qualia* are the introspectively accessible, phenomenal properties of our experiences – a term that corresponds to what it is like for us to undergo the experience.

piety but his constant preoccupation with learning, insinuating that he was curious about sex from the beginning but chose to suppress it due to his pious and scholarly assumptions – thereby not having acquired firsthand experience in this case.¹⁶

This was not the only passage in which the master verifier acknowledged the veracity of the Sufi method of attaining certain knowledge: Ḥocazāde invoked the Sufi notion of “perfect love” (*ḥubb kāmīl*) in his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (“The Incoherence of the Philosophers”) when considering whether the Afterlife would be experienced materially or spiritually. He quoted Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) in asserting the shortcomings of understanding the Afterlife exclusively in terms of “mental bliss” (*ladhdha ‘aqliyya*). For Ḥocazāde, it was only the naive who believed that mental tasting could not encompass the love of God and, in reality, the truth about the otherworld lies only where the hearts of perfect men were filled with God’s commensurate love.¹⁷

Ottoman Verification in Action: Adjudicating Sufism

A central feature of the Ottoman practice of scholarly verification was “adjudication” (*muḥākama*), a post-classical genre through which scholars demonstrated their skills in arbitrating and synthesizing the views of past scholars. Of these, arguably the most famous is the *Tahāfut* adjudication between Ḥocazāde and Tūsī at the request of Sultan Mehmed II, which aimed at evaluating and amending al-Ghazālī’s (d. 505/1111) views within the context of the newly flourishing areas in philosophical theology.¹⁸ But there were a number of other adjudications in very different areas of scholarship, including logic,¹⁹ jurisprudence,²⁰ and Sufism. For example, a Naqshbandī scholar, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jāmī (d. 898/1492), penned an adjudication titled *al-Durra al-fāhkira*, (“The Precious Pearl”) which outlined the positions of philosophers and theologians with respect to the Akbarī worldview to further investigate the sciences of reality.²¹ Recent studies of the complicated history

16 Ḥoca Sa’deddin, *Tācū’t-tevārīḥ*, vol. 2 (Köstanṭīniyye, 1279/1864), 511–512.

17 Ḥocazāde, *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, ed. Ya’qūb (Beirut, 2018), 371.

18 Sait Özervarlı, “Arbitrating between al-Ghazālī and the Philosophers,” in *Islam and Rationality*, ed. Tamer, vol. 1 (Leiden, 2015): 375–397; Balıkcıoğlu, 348–360.

19 İbrahim Üçer, “Müteahhir Dönem Mantık Düşüncesinde Tanımın Birliği Sorunu,” *Kutadgubilig* 22 (2012): 97–122.

20 Şükrü Özen, “Molla Hüsrev’in *Velâ* Meselesi ile İlgili Görüşünün Osmanlı İlim Muhitindeki Yansımaları,” in *Uluslararası Molla Hüsrev Sempozyumu*, eds. Yücedoğru et al. (Bursa, 2013), 321–394.

21 Taşköprizade, *Al-Shaqā’iq al-nu’mā niyya*, ed. Furat (Istanbul, 1985), 262.

of Meḥmed II's commissioning of this work have observed that Jāmī was initially reluctant to undertake the project, and abandoned it after preparing only seven short sections outlining the Sufi perspective. He might have left the text unfinished due to the Sultan's alleged preference for philosophical sciences. He finished it only after the enthronement of Bāyezīd II (d. 805/1403) who, compared to his father, generally favored the Sufi approach.²²

In this work, Jāmī emphasized the importance of the harmonizing of different domains of knowledge, giving examples of such syntheses by paradigmatic Sufi-scholars whom he called the "verifying Sufis."²³ With the exception of one reference where the verifying Sufis closely followed philosophers' "emanation of multiplicity,"²⁴ most of the positions he outlined combined (sometimes irreconcilable) doctrines from philosophy and theology. In his discussion of whether contingent beings have the capacity to exert their own power, for instance, he first outlines the contrasting views of Avicennan philosophy and Ash'arite theology, and then formulates a third view that synthesizes both aspects under Ibn al-'Arabī's mystical theology.²⁵ His synthesis asserts that the knowledge, will, and power of men are all God's attributes based on His unmediated creation via custom (*āda*), and all descend from the plane of absoluteness (God) to the plane of determination (the world) in accordance with "complete causes" (*ilal tāmma*) via certain levels of "preparedness" (*isti'dād*). In other words, the voluntary acts of men occur through God's power alone (Ash'arites) – but only after this power descends from certain planes called *marātib* (Akbarī Sufism) and becomes manifest via "preparedness" (Arabic Aristotelianism). Thus, not only did Jāmī's synthetic formulation combine Avicennan philosophy with Ash'arite theology, but also brought a third aspect, namely an Akbarī twist, such that he adopted this discussion into the terminology of Ibn 'Arabī's *waḥdat al-wujūd* or "unity of existence."²⁶

Nearly in all cases, Jāmī might have favored the Sufi position and construed his conclusions as a reconciliation of philosophy and theology; yet, in certain cases, as in this instance, it is surprising to see that he could be arguing, on the one hand, for the eternity of the universe and, on the other, that God's free

22 Ertuğrul Ökten, "Jāmī (817–898/1414–1492): His Biography and Intellectual Influence in Herat," vol. 1 (Ph.D. Diss., UChicago, 2007), 196; Hamid Algar, "Jāmī and the Ottomans," in *Jāmī in Regional Contexts*, eds. d'Hubert and Papas (Leiden, 2018), 72–73.

23 "Al-ṣūfiyya al-muḥaqqiqūn" in Jāmī, *al-Durra al-fākhira*, eds. Heer and Bahbāhānī (Tehran, 2003), 25, 40, and 45.

24 Ibid., 39–40.

25 For another case of Akbarī synthesis, Ulrich Rudolph, "Abd al-Rahmān al-Jāmī (d. 898/1492) on the Eternity of the World," *The Muslim World* 107, no. 3 (2017): 537–548.

26 For the terms borrowed from Akbarī Sufism in Jāmī: "The Absolute in its Absoluteness" and "The Shadow of the Absolute," in Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Berkeley, 1983), 23–38; 89–98.

will and power had a direct intercession in the acts of created beings – two positions that derive from the mutually incommensurate starting ontological standpoints of philosophy and theology.

In line with the universalist connotations of the Timurid *taḥqīq*, Jāmī's aim here was to compile a list of possible positions prevalent during his time, by making the Sufi synthesis transcend the opposing divisions of philosophy and theology. Nonetheless, his reconciliation of originally two alternative points of departure under the overarching rubric of Sufism could be seen as problematic from the perspectives of both domains, each constructing positions based on their own line of logic. The reference here also recalls Dimitri Gutas' recent point about the "suprarational qualities" of Suhrawardī's Illuminationism, which he deemed to be "para-philosophy."²⁷ It should be noted that Jāmī's primary intention was not to philosophize here, so his attempt was not precisely a pseudo-philosophical practice but "para-argumentative" due to the irreconcilability of some of his combinations that had a tint of overarching Sufi agnosticism.

In that context, the somewhat later Ottoman verifier İbn Kemāl's "verifying" treatise on God's necessitating existence is significant for its novel assessment of Jāmī's method of inquiry. In this text, İbn Kemāl argued that the way that the philosophers' cosmological worldview (expressed through their causal determinism and emanationism) made sense once Jāmī successfully reconciled it with the theologians' position under the overarching Akbarī synthesis: on the one hand, Jāmī preserved philosophers' emanationist cosmology but, on the other, regarded God as free-choosing like theologians. Thus, he legitimized both (irreconcilable) positions under the rubric of Sufism, which made sense on its own terms.²⁸

In the Crucible of Verification: Sinān's Casting Doubt on Reality

Fifteenth-century Ottoman scholars were extremely passionate about learning and did not shrink from questioning even the most obvious aspects of reality.

27 Dimitri Gutas, "Avicenna and After: The Development of Paraphilosophy," in *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th Century*, ed. Al Ghouz (Bonn, 2018), 47–49. For a well-constructed reply concerning Jāmī's case, Jari Kaukua, "Post-Classical Islamic Philosophy – A Contradiction in Terms?" *Nazariyat* 6, no. 2 (2020): 14–15.

28 *Majmū' rasā'il al-Allāma Ibn Kamāl Pasha*, ed. al-Bakrī, vol. 7 (Istanbul, 2018), 51–52. For İbn Kemāl's take on Akbarī theosophy, Tim Winter, "İbn Kemāl (d. 940/1534) on Ibn 'Arabī's Hagiography," in *Sufism and Theology*, ed. Shihadeh (Edinburgh, 2007), 137–157; for his "lettrist" *taḥqīq*, Melvin-Koushki, "Towards a Neopythagorean Historiography," in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, eds. Saif et al. (Leiden, 2021), 380–419.

A case in point is a story told about the celebrated scholar Hızır Beg (d. 863/1459), referred to as a “verifier” by later generations, and remembered²⁹ for his standing as the first locally-educated Ottoman Turkish scholar perfectly fluent in Arabic and well-equipped in Islamic sciences.³⁰ His famous work *Al-Qaṣīda al-nūniyya* (“The Eulogy of the Letter *Nūn*”) provided judgments about the theological doctrines of his day, including different opinions by certain Mu’tazilites and Ash’arites culminating under the Māturīdī syncretism.³¹ He trained many other fifteenth-century Ottoman luminaries similarly remembered as verifiers, such as Hocaẓāde and Kaṣṭalānī (d. 901/1496),³² his esteemed assistants at Brusa’s prestigious Sultāniye madrasa. In addition to his students, Hızır Beg raised three exceptional sons who all reached high levels of expertise in various branches of science, along with successful careers in bureaucracy and Sufism. Among them was the “virtuous verifier”³³ Sinān Paşa (d. 891/1486), who rose to the rank of vizier and briefly served Meḥmed II as his grand vizier. He is remembered for his great erudition and many works in a range of sciences, but also for his later disillusionment with academic and bureaucratic careerism and eventual refuge in Sufi asceticism.

The “people of verification” (*taḥkīk cānibi*) were associated with constantly casting doubt on certain positions with the intention of providing sounder proofs. The ambitious Sinān was said to have pulverized every proposition in the “crucible of verification” (*pūte-i taḥqīq*), thereby silencing his opponents by ascertaining every piece of information provided in a debate.³⁴ His radical skepticism annoyed others to the extent that Hızır Beg often complained about his son’s obsession with challenging even the most firmly established premises.³⁵

One day, while eating together, Hızır observed sarcastically that if Sinān had the chance, he would even cast doubt upon the sensory properties of the copper bowl in front of him, such as its color and shape.³⁶ Sinān quickly

29 *Sharḥ al-‘allāma al-Ḥayālī ‘alā al-nūniyya*, ed. al-Malibārī (Cairo, 2008), 262.

30 *Al-Shaqā’iq*, 91; Osman Ergin, “Medreselerde öğretim tarzına bir bakış,” in Ünver, *Fatih Külliyesi ve Zamanı İlim Hayatı* (Istanbul, 1946), XXI.

31 *Sharḥ al-‘allāma*, 241; 263.

32 For the Kaṣṭalānī reference, al-Kafawī, *Katā’ib al-‘alām*, Library of Iranian Parliament, MS 87847, f. 217a.

33 “Al-fāḍil al-muḥaqqiq” (Ibid., f. 219b).

34 Mecdī, *Ḥadā’ikü’ş-şakā’ik*, ed. Özcan (Istanbul, 1989), 193–194.

35 “[...] vālidī irād-ı şükük meslekine [...] ve taḥkīk cānibine meyl ile deyü serzeniş ider idi” (*Tāci’-t-tevārīḥ*, 498).

36 Likewise, George Berkeley’s subjective idealism states that sensation is neither an act nor an object of sound perception (Phillip Cummins, “Berkeley’s Ideas of Sense,” *Noûs* 9.1 (1975), 60–61). Also, for comparison, see David Hume’s arguments from the relativity of senses based on the early modern conception of “perception,” Aleksandar Pavković,

retorted that his senses could lead to the misperception of any object, since they did not involve any affirmations about its reality. Upon hearing this, Hızır Beg, out of anger, struck his son on the head with the bowl, asking him how he could be so dubious about the bowl's existence if he felt its stiffness on his head [Figure 1].³⁷

For Sinān, the errors of sensory impressions lead one astray in the face of reality (*girçek; in concreto*), which is the primary motivation behind his “verifying” skepticism.³⁸ His position was that one can only claim *by convention* that a certain bowl is made out of copper. One can never be sure about the real qualities of a particular object since one always perceives them through inherently deceptive sensory experiences.

Life of a Verifying Sufi-Scholar: Sinān and His Shaykh

The rise of Sufi networks through the establishment of religious and social structures in parallel to the state was an important legacy of the post-Mongol politics in the Islamicate world.³⁹ The period witnessed changing political identities and allegiances due to the localization of regional power structures with ties to certain Sufi networks, and nearly half of the major fifteenth-century scholars recorded in Ottoman biobibliographical sources had an official connection to a particular Sufi order through shaykhs.⁴⁰

The category of Sufi-scholars was thus a common sociotype, shaped by one's personal ties to charismatic shaykhs. Since order affiliations were not standardized in the early Ottoman world, Sufi networks were fluid and inclusive.⁴¹

“Hume's Arguments from the Relativity of Sense-Perception,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1989): 261–270.

37 *Tācü't-tevārîh*, 498.

38 “Girçek buyirdiğüniz aglât-ı havâssdan olmak ihtimâliyle vâkı'an şekk ve şübhe itmeğe mesâğ ve mecâl vardır” (*Hadâ'ikü's-şakâ'ik*, 194; *Katâ'ib al-'alâm*, f. 219b).

39 Marshall Hodgson, “The Unity of Later Islamic History,” in *Rethinking World History*, ed. Burke (Cambridge, 1992), 171–206; Ahmet Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley, 2007).

40 Note that such dictionaries (e.g., *Taşköprizâde*) include separate sections on the lives of Sufi shaykhs. The Ottoman intellectual context cannot be understood without appreciating the influence of Sufi networks on the learned class. Hans Mayer, “Osmanlı Devletinde Ulemâ-Meşâyih Münâsebetleri,” in *I. Milletlerarası Türkoloji Kongresi Tebliğleri*, trans. Zamanlı, vol. 1 (İstanbul, 1973), 56–60.

41 Fenâri was known to have formal and informal ties to a number of Sufi orders and mystics (*Tācü't-tevārîh*, 413–414 and 426; Cavid Baysun, “Emîr Sultan'ın Hayatı ve Şahsiyeti,” *Tarih Dergisi* 1–2 (1950), 82).



FIGURE 1 Hızır Beg hits Sinān in the head with a copper bowl, after the young skeptic cast doubt upon the necessary knowledge of a bowl's copperness when perceived through the senses.

REPRODUCED FROM MUḤTESIBZĀDE, *TERCEME-I ŞAKĀ'IK*, MS TOPKAPI 1263, F. 124B.

Due to their doctrinal emphasis on incessant learning, teaching, and ritual practice, Zeynī shaykhs especially attracted many scholars with a solid background in madrasa career, including Sinān. Other than eating, praying, and sleeping, a Zeynī disciple was expected to dedicate his life to ritual practice which entailed repeating his assigned liturgy (*wird*) or, alternatively,

to constant studying and teaching of rational and religious sciences.⁴² Sinān, in addition to his Sufi leanings shaped by his ties to the Zeynī verifier⁴³ Şeyh Vefā' (d. 896/1491), penned a number of works in Avicennan philosophy, theology, and mathematics, including thematic super-glosses on widely used madrasa handbooks.⁴⁴

The overall Zeynī attitude towards scholarship was not monolithic,⁴⁵ and some branches were open to the synthesis of different schools. Sinān's master Vefā' (d. 896/1491) was known for his wide interest in various sciences, including magic squares (*awfāk*) and politico-religious forecasts (*rūznāme*), as well as his tendency to interpret other sciences under Sufi discursivity by way of acknowledging Ibn 'Arabī and Avicennism. Vefā's work in the genre *Melhāme*, which gave prognostications about future events or dispositions based on the revolution of the planets, proves that he acknowledged the theory of secondary causes originally purported by Aristotelian-Avicennan determinism – a view corresponding to Akbarī cosmology.⁴⁶ A Zeynī disciple, Sinoplu Safāyī (d. 940/1534) praised Vefā as the perfect spiritual guide, and the premier holder of verification, in a famed couplet:

*He is verily a verifier and an examiner [of truth]
The perfect [spiritual] guide, the most deserving⁴⁷*

During the fifteenth-century, Sufism had a huge impact also on etiquette, which shaped Sinān's moral and scholarly commitments. Sinān's personality was often described by various words and phrases relevant to Sufism, such as the aforementioned *ma'rifa*/*'irfān* and *dhawq*, as well as '*abd* (God's servant),

42 Reşat Öngören, *Tarihte Bir Aydın Tarikatı Zeyniler* (Istanbul, 2013), 178–176; 196.

43 For Mehmed 11's Arabic endowment charter, Abdülkadir Erdoğan, *Şeyh Vefā* (Istanbul, 1941), 20.

44 Such works included *Hikma al-'ayn*, *Tajrid al-i'tiqād*, *al-Ishārāt*, and *Sharh al-mawāqif*.

45 Al-Ḳudsi's (d. 856/1452) critical attitude towards Akbarism was significantly distinct from his disciple Vefā's (Cankat Kaplan, "Debating Heresy: Changing Perceptions of Zayniyya Dervishes" (Master's Thesis, Şehir Üniversitesi, 2017), 68–72).

46 For such Graeco-Arabic references, *Faysal Melhame-i Şeyh Vefā* (Master's Thesis, Marmara Üniversitesi, 2001); Faysal Atasoy, "Şeyh Vefā ve Yedi Yıldızın Ahkāmı Risalesi," *Turkish Studies* 5, no. 1 (2010): 154–177. For Sinān's reference to Vefā's verification of heavens (*şems-i semā'-ı tahkik*), *Tazarru'-nāme*, ed. Tulum (Istanbul, 2014), 821. Also, for the uses of Vefā's *rūznāme*, see A. Tunç Şen, "Manuscripts on the battlefields," *Aca'ib* 2 (2021), 92–94.

47 "Müdakkıkdür muhakıkdür muhakkaḳ / Mükemmil mürşid-i kāmildür elyak" (Safāyī, *Manzūme-i Vasāyā-i Şeyh Vefā*, SL, MS Ayasofya 2154, f. 11a; Mustafa Kara, "Hocazāde'nin Gönül Dünyası," in *Uluslararası Hocazāde Sempozyumu*, eds. Yücedoğlu et al. (Bursa, 2011), 30). For the politics of panegyrics among Zeynī social links, Oscar Aguirre-Mandujano, "The Social and Intellectual World of a Fifteenth-Century Poem," *JOTSA* 7, no. 2 (2021): 57–58.

and *zuhd* (ascetic renunciation).⁴⁸ *Ma'rifa* was a keyword used in binary opposition to *'ilm* (*scientia*), and Sufis typically placed gnostic or experiential wisdom above bookish or speculative knowledge when praising a fellow Sufi-scholar.⁴⁹

While the order of Zeyniyye held the renunciation of worldly politics as one of its core moral doctrines,⁵⁰ it nevertheless received the official support of Mehmed II and his grand viziers⁵¹ in building lodges and residences in Brusa and Constantinople.⁵² However, the imperial favors were reversed after Mehmed's death, especially due to Vefā's and the Zeynī grand vizier Karamanī Mehmed's political support for Prince Cem in his unsuccessful fight for the throne against his brother Bāyezīd II, who supported the Khalwatī faction.⁵³

A Zeynī was expected to stay away from worldly affairs and refuse bureaucratic appointments – but there were notable violations.⁵⁴ During his time as a vizier, Sinān fell out with Mehmed II and was immediately removed from his position at court. His punishment was particularly harsh: The Sultan sent a physician to give him fifty lashes a day, and Sinān was recorded as having lost his mind due to the humiliation. It was by the intercession of the scholar Hüsāmzāde (d. after 893/1488) that the lashes stopped and, owing to this intervention, he was afforded a dual appointment to the relatively minor provincial madrasa and judgeship of Sivrihisār. It was only following Bāyezīd II's enthronement that he received a post at the prestigious Dārülḥadīş in Edirne with one hundred aspers a day, a post on par with his reputation.⁵⁵

Sinān's Overarching Synthesis: A Case of Sufi Agnosticism?

The Sufi worldview was influential in the crafting of certain Ottoman political treatises. Figures like the Ottoman Sufi-jurist Muşannifek and the historian

48 *Tācü't-tevārīḥ*, 499.

49 Sinān regards *ḥikma* under *ma'rifa* in the hierarchy of epistemologies (*Tazarru'-nāme*, 76).

50 Öngören, 175–177.

51 Süheyl Ünver “Mahmud Paşa,” in *Fatih ve İstanbul* 2, no. 7 (1954): 193; Çiğdem Kafescioğlu, “The Ottoman Capital in the Making” (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 1996), 105–120.

52 Tursun Beg, *Tārīḥ-i Ebū'l-Feth*, ed. Tulum (Istanbul, 1977), 74–75. For the water source endowment in Brusa, see the court registers from 876/1472 in Kâmil Kepecioğlu, *Bursa Kütüğü*, vol. 4 (Bursa, 2009), 277.

53 Hasan Karataş, “Onbeşinci Yüzyılda Karamânî Ulemâ ve Meşayih İlişki Ağları Üzerine Tespitler,” in *Osmanlı'da İlim ve Fikir Dünyası* (Istanbul, 2016), 283–298; Öngören, 141–145; 200–201.

54 *Ibid.*, 175–178.

55 *Tācü't-tevārīḥ*, 499.

Şükrollāh, as well as Sinān, wrote treatises replete with Sufi discursivity.⁵⁶ This period saw the vernacularization of texts, with a plethora of new books produced in Persian and Turkish, including two popular works on Sufi morals in verse by Sinān, *Ma'ārifnāme* and *Tazarru'-nāme*. Weaving popular traditions that reflected Sinān's interest in vernacularized Sufi verse (as in Kaygusuz 'Abdāl) via rhyming apothegms,⁵⁷ the former work was more a mirror for princes but, simultaneously, a manifesto of Sufi moral maturity that referenced social attitudes and rules of propriety.⁵⁸ Likewise, his *Tazarru'-nāme* dwelled on issues of Sufi ethics and the role of dervishes in society, responding to some criticism against mysticism through a series of orations and praise poems, the last being dedicated to Vefā'.⁵⁹ Sinān's eventual disillusionment with political power and careerism might have led to the composition of these two moral treatises, both of which were also framed as a social and moral critique of his times.

Sinān was often under attack for his wide range of practices that synthesized differing religious denominations. Molla Gürānī (d. 893/1488), a close associate of Mehmed II and a master jurist, implied that he and his shaykh, who were known to have recited the *basmala* out loud, were not proper Hanafites and thus not competent in sound judicial opinion. A hearing was organized in the presence of leading scholars, in which Sinān eloquently asked whether there was anyone who could challenge his shaykh's sound judgments on religious practice, providing that Vefā' was well-versed in Quranic exegeses and the principles of religion. No one was able to refute this.⁶⁰

Sinān seems to have employed the term "verification" under the overarching rubric of Sufi morality – especially when distinguishing virtuous scholars who went beyond the limits of exoteric sciences (as in Sufi *ma'rifa*) from those who never arbitrated different domains of knowledge: "On the outside they call themselves "scholars," but they are ignorant in essence. Because they know of

56 Hüseyin Yılmaz, *Caliphate Redefined* (Princeton, 2018), 33–38.

57 Ahmet Karamustafa/Cemal Kafadar, "Books on Sufism, Lives of Saints, Ethics and Sermons," in *Treasures of Knowledge*, eds. Necipoğlu, Kafadar, and Fleischer, vol. 1 (Leiden, 2019), 450; Karamustafa, "Kaygusuz Abdal: A Medieval Turkish Saint and the Formation of Vernacular Islam in Anatolia," in *Unity in Diversity*, ed. Kasimov (Leiden, 2014), 337; Zeynep Oktay Uslu, "The *Shathīyye* of Yūnus Emre and Kaygusuz Abdāl," *Turcica* 50 (2019), 15.

58 He penned the text at an old age when, despite his ascetic disposition, he felt an urge to share his views on socially moral behavior (Sinan Paşa, *Ma'ārif-nāme*, ed. Tulum (Ankara, 2013), 58).

59 For Sinān's praises to Vefā', Aguirre-Mandujano, "Poetry and Politics: Literature and Culture at the Early Ottoman Court" (Ph.D. Diss., UW-Seattle, 2018), 91–109.

60 *Al-Shaqā'iq*, 177 and 239.

a bit of terminology, they assume that they know things for certain by way of speculative reasoning (*‘ilm*); yet they are unaware that [mystical] intuitional knowledge (*ma’rifā*) is not something to be uttered, and that its verification cannot be acquired through books.”⁶¹ For Sinān, verification in Sufism went beyond the contingencies of the philosophers’ so-called “sound proofs” based on mere reason. Ascertaining truth through Sufi discursivity was the only antidote that would bridge the fallacies of the mind.⁶²

Sinān’s aim in producing popular Sufi moral works in verse was not simply to make a case for the supremacy of Sufism over other domains of knowledge (philosophy and theology) but to show that these domains could coexist with one another under the overarching worldview of Sufi agnosticism. For instance, he employed nuanced references to specific scholarly doctrines on the nature of physical composition. Two such examples appear in his use of Graeco-Arabic vocabulary in his Sufi works, which evidenced that, as a Sufi agnostic, he freely referenced Aristotelian-Avicennan concepts, such as hylomorphism (*mādda-şūra*), alongside the opposing theological worldview of atomism (*zerre*, the infinitesimal particle). The coexistence of such irreconcilable worldviews, far from an inconsistency in Sinān’s system of thought, signified something more far reaching, that is, the attitude that differing explanations of physical phenomena – whether hylomorphism or atomism – could survive interchangeably under a Sufi synthesis. This suggests that Sinān was agnostic about the theories regarding the physical world to the extent that he acknowledged both worldviews at the same time, using them interchangeably.⁶³ The philosophical worldview did not necessarily clash with Sufi wisdom, and certain Ancient Greek thinkers, including Plato/Eflātūn, were considered saints whose wisdom was incorporated into Islamic lore and political writing.⁶⁴ As such, Sinān did not hesitate to include a chapter in his

61 “[...] ammā şunlar ki zāhirde ‘ulemā’ dirilirler ammā ma’nide cühelā’ dururlar [...] birkaç ıstılāhāt bildiklerinden ‘ilmleri var şanurlar [...]haberleri yok ki ma’rifet bābı dimekle olmaz / ve taḥkik kitabı yazub okunmaz” (*Ma’ârif-nâme*, 210).

62 “Eger dersen ki “ḥākim de ‘aql ile bilüb durur / hükemānıñ şu mücerredāt dedüğü onlardır” // dutalım ki “aql ile bilinür bunlar zemāndan ve mekāndan mücerred imiş / ammā gerekmez mi taḥkik olunsun mücerredüñ ma’nası ne imiş” (*Ibid.*, 140–142).

63 For references to the competing theories of hylomorphism and atomism, *Taẓarru’-nâme*, 88; *Ma’ârif-Nâme*, 751.

64 For the Muslim Plato in the pre-Ottoman lore, Suzan Yalman, “From Plato to the *Shāhnāma*,” in *Sacred Spaces and Urban Networks*, ed. Yalman and Uğurlu (Istanbul, 2019), 119–140; Cemal Kafadar, “Osmanlı Siyasal Düşüncesinin Kaynakları Üzerine Gözlemler,” in *Modern Türkiye’de Siyasal Düşünce*, ed. Alkan, vol. 1 (Istanbul, 2001), 23–24.

Ma'ārifnāme in which he compiled the Muslim Plato's words of contemplative wisdom on how to lead a morally viable life.⁶⁵

Stretching the Definition: An Ottoman Case of Sufi Verification as Agnosticism?

The fifteenth-century Ottoman world was an age of arbitration and synthesis in scholarship, in which scholars sought to reconcile the alternating theories encompassed in three large categories of thought: philosophy, theology, and Sufism. The prevalent use of verification stemmed from the fact that there was an extensive corpus of scholarship, if not an oversaturation of alternating doctrines inherited from Perso-Islamic madrasas, which accumulated from the twelfth century onwards. This huge corpus encompassed many strands of thought from philosophy to Sunnī theology with nuanced discussions among differing schools, and the fifteenth-century Ottoman scholars followed this trend in scholarship, ascertaining the truth through arbitrating among past formulations. On different occasions, many Ottoman verifiers, including Hocaẓāde, İbn Kemāl, and Taşköprizāde, acknowledged the autonomy of Sufi epistemology as a legitimate scholarly domain.

Ottoman verifiers were also adamant skeptics who were good at casting doubt upon any proof by challenging fellow scholars to give more precise formulations. In this context, Sinān might not be a verifier in Kātib Çelebi's "Avicennism-oriented" sense, but his utilization of canonized doctrines from philosophy and theology led him to employ these epistemological domains more freely in tandem with the Sufi worldview. Jāmī's adjudication vied for the superiority of the Sufi thesis, and certain Sufi-scholars from this period, like Sinān and Vefā', also saw Sufism as an overarching domain which bridged the defects of philosophy and theology. In some cases, a verifier could be agnostic about a particular doctrine without giving an exact opinion, yet for the sake of verification, he would enumerate all possible positions that could be argued, sometimes without evaluation.⁶⁶ In Sinān's case, competing philosophical and theological doctrines could be used interchangeably as long as they were construed under the overarching rubric of Sufi universalism.

65 For the Platonic words of wisdom, *Ma'ārif-Nāme*, 398.

66 Following Rāzī's method, Jurjānī listed all scholarly views along with possible objections to each debate without choosing one necessarily (Ömer Türker, *Şerhu'l-mevâkıf* (Istanbul, 2015), 18).

There were indeed different shades of verification, and this phenomenon was not limited to the madrasa but was also visible in the vernacularized Sufi manuals in verse, as in Sinān's case, and elsewhere. Recent studies on the Maghreb have shown how certain North African scholars from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries arbitrated among theology and Sufism, seeking different ways of reconciliation in their formulations of free will, causality, and divine knowledge.⁶⁷ *Taḥqīq* as a scholarly operative practice was applied to various sciences, yet the earlier Timurid connotation of the term, dependent on the Akbarī synthesis, seems to have prevailed in certain Ottoman cases. Not only did the figures in this study, such as Jāmī, Şeyḫ Vefā', and İbn Kemāl, affirm Akbarī principles in their own verified syntheses, but also Sinān, the disciple of Vefā', bridged the doctrinal divergences between Avicennan philosophy and Sunnī theology by implying both traditions' interchangeability under the rubric of Sufi agnosticism. As a way of affirming universal truths beyond formal texts, *taḥqīq* included scientific universalism, scholarly arbitration, and encyclopedism as common grounds for early modern Islamicate ideologies, which were often shaped by the prevailing religio-political imperial visions, as well as the doctrinal accumulations and crossovers among various domains of knowledge – including but not limited to the universalizing tendencies of Sufism. These instances of Sufi arbitration in Ottoman scholarship suggest that the limits of verification in the Ottoman fifteenth century were far more extensive than previously imagined, and that the nature of the scholarly synthesis it engendered demands further research.

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67 Justin Stearns, "All Beneficial Knowledge is Revealed," *Islamic Law and Society* 21 (2014): 49–80.