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Normative Spirituality in Wāḥḥābī Prophetology: Saʿīd b. Wahf al-Qaḥṭānī's (d. 2018) *Raḥmatan li-l-ʿĀlamīn* as Reparatory Theology

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Abstract: The Wāḥḥābī movement within Sunni Islam—a substantial section of the larger Salafi movement—has been often depicted in both western academic studies and Muslim polemical writings negatively as devoid of spirituality, obsessed with a particular creedal understanding that drives its well-known salvific exclusivism, and with rigid legalism. This depiction is partly due to Wāḥḥābism's historical opposition to Sufism, the branch of Islamic knowledge and practices that has theorized, defined, and delineated Islam's vision of the spiritual transformation taking place in the believer's journey towards God. That opposition notwithstanding, the article argues that beyond terminological distinctions, one can locate in Wāḥḥābī texts common Islamic themes of spiritual transformation. Primarily, such texts can be found in Wāḥḥābī publications of the writings of 13th century Damascene Muslim scholars like Ibn Taymīya (d. 728/1328) and his most celebrated student, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīya (d. 751/1350). Building on that tradition, Wāḥḥābī scholars have additionally produced texts that display core ideals of the Muslim spiritual goals. Such texts have additionally advanced the movement's theological concerns and have driven the efforts towards "the purification" of Islamic sources from what Wāḥḥābis deem to be heretical practices and beliefs accumulated throughout the centuries. Wāḥḥābī prophetological texts, the article argues, serve as primary sources where both Wāḥḥābī spiritual ideals and their sectarian reparatory agenda can be identified. The book of the late Saʿīd b. Wahf al-Qaḥṭānī (1952–2018), a well-known Saudi Wāḥḥābī author of the second half of the twentieth century, *Raḥmatan li-l-ʿĀlamīn Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh*, serves as a representative text of these aims and ideals. Wāḥḥābī spirituality, as identified in the work of al-Qaḥṭānī, has been depicted here as "normative spirituality" in order to point to its intended purpose of engendering praxis that is grounded in Islam's well-known notion of prophetic *imitatio*.



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Keywords: Sira; Muslim spirituality; Prophet Muhammad; Muslim prophetology; Sufism; Salafism; Wāḥḥābism; Saʿīd Wahf al-Qaḥṭānī; Ibn al-Qayyim; Ibn Taymīya; ittibā al-rasūl

1. Introduction

This article seeks to identify spiritual ideals, modes of spiritual articulation, and intended functions in a contemporary work of Wāḥḥābī prophetology, namely Saʿīd b. Wahf al-Qaḥṭānī's *Raḥmatan li-l-ʿĀlamīn: Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh* (Mercy to the Worlds: Muhammad Messenger of God). Arguing against a common depiction of Wāḥḥābism solely in terms of legalistic rigidity and creedal exclusivity, the article argues for broadening the academic framings related to the discourses and practices where Islamic spirituality is located, primarily by proposing to shift attention from a particular focus on terminology and labels in favor of an emphasis on stated ideals and intended outcomes in religious praxis. Highlighting briefly Wāḥḥābism's historical tensions with the larger Muslim spiritual tradition points to the complexity of the dialogical relationship with texts, scholars, and sages, a relationship that has been often complex and not always rejective. Building upon selective readings and renderings of the rich legacy of scholars, like Ibn Taymīya, and in this particular case, even more so on that of Ibn Taymīya's leading student, Ibn al-Qayyim,

Wahhābī scholars, like al-Qaḥṭānī, have produced works that serve to advance both Wahhābism's sectarian concerns and its understanding of Muslim spiritual ideals. Muslim prophetology—a category composed of the cumulative sub-genres of Muslim scholarly literary forms that address Islam's understandings of prophethood and its functions, of prophets and their missions and of Prophet Muhammad in particular, as the prophet that marks the end of divine revelation in human history—has been a well-known locus of both prophetic-grounded spirituality and of sharp sectarian divisions, divisions that to a large extent motivated the birth of Wahhābism (Āl al-Shaykh 1987, pp. 235–36; Ibn Ibrāhīm 1995, 28 passim).

Wahhābī scholars, like al-Qaḥṭānī, have sought to address their concerns and ideals by first grounding the prophetological narrative in the Taymīyan legacy, as represented in the prominent work of his student, in Ibn al-Qayyim's *Zād al-Ma'ād fī hadī khayr al-'ibād* (Provisions of the Hereafter in the Guidance of God's Most Virtuous Servant). The fact that it was considered early on an important text to the Wahhābī movement is shown by the fact that Ibn Abd al-Wahhāb, not a prolific author by the standards of Islamic scholarship, authored, nevertheless, an abridged version of the work (Bunzel 2023, p. 30). Second, in line with Wahhābī theological tenets, al-Qaḥṭānī condemns, in his text, practices of the veneration of Prophet Muhammad that Wahhābis deem heretical, like the *mawlid*, the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet (al-Qaḥṭānī 2006, p. 17; Katz 2007, pp. 170–73, 184–87). Additionally, he urges for an evaluation of the prophethood of Muhammad that avoids excessive devotion, a common theme in Wahhābī works on prophetology, indicative of their claim that traditional Sunni devotion to the Prophet goes against Islam's conception of divine sovereignty. Comparatively, however, the article argues that al-Qaḥṭānī's work portrays a light version of Wahhābī sectarianism in matters related to prophetology. Third, al-Qaḥṭānī advances Wahhābism's theological concerns by building the prophetological arguments and narrative on hadiths that have been approved and deemed authentic by celebrated Salafi scholars, like Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999), who in the second half of the twentieth century emerged as an iconoclastic figure in hadith scholarship, challenging canonized texts and established praxis (Brown 2007, pp. 121–34; Pierret 2013, pp. 37–38; Hmadeh 2021, pp. 64–75). Finally, al-Qaḥṭānī employed omission as a technique of silencing aspects of prophetology deemed heretical. Silencing, one can argue, takes place particularly in the source selection and in the choice to not cite or cite minimally prominent and relevant works of the Muslim scholarly tradition. Al-Qaḥṭānī's text, like similar texts of prophetological discourse, includes several sub-genres of Muslim prophetology. It additionally enters into a dialogical relationship with other authors and texts, something that is often located in the accompanying footnotes, rather than in the very body of the text. Noticeably, however, as it was mentioned above, comparatively to other Wahhābī works of prophetology, al-Qaḥṭānī has dedicated minimal attention to sectarian contentions. The themes and approaches for the most part are well within mainstream Sunni discourses.

The article sets to identify the discursive tools the author employs in order to address his stated objectives—primarily the attainment of knowledge about the prophet as a well-established Muslim spiritual ideal that carries salvific importance—and the intended normative outcome as indicative of the kind of transformations the author is urging Muslims to adapt. The ethical transformation that the author champions follows the condition of internal transformation that is meant to result from knowledge of the prophetic model. Al-Qaḥṭānī's work aims at familiarizing modern Muslims with their Prophet, his prophetic virtues, and his function in the overall Muslim understanding of the history of revelation. As the title shows, the author identifies “mercy” as the most distinctive virtue of the Prophet.

2. Muslim Spirituality beyond Sufism

Muslim spirituality is commonly held to constitute the area of religious ideals, transformations, ethics, and practices explored in the study and practice of Sufism. Sufism, however, has proven difficult to define (Ernst 1997, p. 1) and many scholars have opted to

describe elements through which Sufism can be recognized, rather than attempt to offer a single, all-encompassing definition of it (Chittick 2008, pp. 1–2; Buehler 2016, pp. 3–4). In one of the most important contributions to the study of the history of early Sufism in Western academia, Ahmet T. Karamustafa warns against employing categories, like “mysticism” and “spirituality” in defining Sufism in the absence of the acknowledgment of the “primacy of the ‘conditioning webs’ of history and culture”. To him, the spiritual and the mystical dimensions of Islam—or of any other religion for that matter—have to be discovered, described, and analyzed in particular contexts (Karamustafa 2007, p. vii). His concerns speak also to a history of euro-centric conceptualizations of categories, like “spirituality”. What then do we mean by “Muslim Spirituality”?

In the Arabic language, the *lingua franca* of Islamic knowledge, the term *rūḥāniyya* comes to mind as an immediate translation of “spirituality”, and it does have a contemporary popular usage with that meaning, a usage however that is not immediately helpful for the purpose of understanding the nature and features of the notion of spirituality in Islam. The term has been used to name very specific trends that predate the first Sufis (Karamustafa refers to them as “pneumatics”), trends that were denounced at times as heretical (Karamustafa 2014, p. 103). Michel Chodkiewicz has observed that in Sufi literature, *rūḥāniyya* has referred to “cosmic intelligences” in relation to the connection with the “spiritual entity” of a prophet or a deceased saint (Chodkiewicz 2012). Despite the importance such connections have in the Muslim spiritual tradition, the term remains restrictive. Sufi texts, on the other hand, offer a multitude of definitions of Sufism, emphasizing one aspect or another of the larger tradition. Nevertheless, certain common themes have emerged, and while they might not be inclusive of every manifestation of Sufism, they do speak of Sufism as the knowledge of the ways in which internal transformations are engendered, transformations that seek to achieve harmony with one’s ethical conduct, aiming at the realization of a state of being that is both cognizant of and pleasing to God (ʿĪsā 2001, p. 8). Arthur F. Buehler identifies Sufism as the knowledge that congruently facilitates a relationship with God and of a radical ethical transformation, which includes interpersonal interactions with the larger social environment (Buehler 2016, p. 4).

Indeed, the ethical transformation is quintessential to this relationship with God (Heck 2017, pp. 298–324). Much of Islam’s spiritual knowledge has been concerned with the description of the states and stages of the spiritual journey (Knysh 2000, pp. 322–25; ʿĪsā 2001, pp. 137–95). Transformation of the self, the process of self-making and self-cultivation are quintessential markers and goals of spirituality (Faruque 2021, pp. 197–210). As Buehler has noticed, the transformative ideals of Sufism are shared also by many Muslims who do not identify as Sufis. While Sufism has been the branch of Islamic knowledge and practice that has posited this transformation at the heart of its concern and has offered rich theorizations of the processes through which said transformations can be achieved, one can argue that they remain at the heart of the Muslim religious ideals—including those Muslims that might insist on identifying themselves in opposition to Sufism. In her work on the women mosque movement in Egypt, a movement that has often been associated with the Islamist Islamic Awakening Movement (Lacroix 2011, pp. 37–80) and with Salafism, the late Saba Mahmood has shown how at the center of the concerns of the women participating in the movement was the achievement of piety, “the quality of “being close to God”: a manner of being and acting that suffuses all of one’s acts, both religious and worldly in character” (Mahmood 2005, p. 122). In this article, we set to identify similar ideals of Islamic spirituality in a representative text of Wāḥḥābism.

Wāḥḥābism is primarily known to scholars as a “counter-religion”, a reparative reform movement that rose in opposition to the defining features of post-classical Islamic scholarly and pietistic traditions (Bunzel 2023, pp. 92–126). To scholars, Wāḥḥābism—the name used for the Saudi branch of the larger Salafi movement (Commins 2015)—has been primarily concerned with creedal matters (Haykel 2009, pp. 38–9; Bunzel 2023), the establishment of orthopraxy (Mouline 2014, pp. 203–34), and often associated with sectarian militancy (Bunzel 2017, pp. 239–64). Wāḥḥābis have been portrayed in the scholarship as

one of the main factors behind the erroneous general public perception of Islam as obsessed with legalism, a legalism that stands in contrast to Islam's rich and pervasive spiritual tradition (Cornell and Lawrence 2023, p. xi). A defining feature of Wahhābism and the larger Salafi movement has been its enmity towards Sufism, Islam's primary spiritual tradition (Sirriyeh 1999, pp. 86–111; Gauvain 2015, pp. 33–58; Sinani 2023, pp. 489–522). This animosity is partly a result of Wahhābī creedal tenets, according to which Sufi practices of seeking the intercession of prophets and saints contradict one of the three tenets of Wahhābī creed on monotheism, namely *tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya* (monotheism of worship). Accordingly, Muslims who seek the assistance of prophets and saints are guilty of idolatry, given that, in Wahhābī understanding, they fail to worship God alone and attribute the ability to assist or forgive to creatures rather than exclusively to the Creator (Haykel 2009). Given the close association of the practices of tomb visitation (*ziyāra*) to Sufism, Sufis have been one of the primary targets of Wahhābī sectarianism.

On the other hand, it is well-known that the Wahhābī religious worldview is based largely—if at times selectively—on the teachings of late medieval scholars, like Ibn Taymīya and his leading student, Ibn al-Qayyim. The two are often associated with pre-modern critiques of Sufism. However, some of Ibn Taymīya's statements have led scholars, like George Makdisi, to argue that Ibn Taymīya had been initiated into the Qādirī Sufi order (Makdisi 1974, pp. 119–29). Additionally, as Arjan Post has shown, members of Ibn Taymīya's close circle of students had also been Sufis (Post 2016, pp. 156–87). Contrary to Makdisi's claim about Ibn Taymīya's potential association with Sufism, however, Ovamir Anjum has more recently argued that both Ibn Taymīya and Ibn al-Qayyim did not self-identify as Sufis, but they “endorsed Sufism devoid of mysticism, and wished to recover the earliest tradition of Sufism when mystical knowledge had not challenged the primacy of scriptural knowledge” (Anjum 2010, p. 185). Both these scholars referred to Sufi teachings in their works—something that critics of Wahhābism often point out in polemical exchanges (al-Rifāʿī 1984, 1999). They have additionally produced important works of Muslim spirituality (al-Jawziyya and Anjum 2019). It should be noted, however, that as Kokoschka and Krawietz (2013, p. 4) remind us in their appraisal of the influence of both Ibn Taymīya and Ibn al-Qayyim in contemporary Muslim thought, appropriations involve processes of combined adaptations and exclusions, and it is precisely in the selection process and the considerations that drive that selection where scholarly agency is affirmed.

Early Wahhābis, it should be noted, including Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, did not entirely deny the legitimacy of Sufism as one of the branches of Islamic knowledge and admitted to its importance as a method of ethical teaching and self-purification, which connects the heart to God, something that later Wahhābis have tried hard to downplay (al-Badāh 2010, p. 23). Like other aspects of Wahhābī teaching, which were formalized and theorized in a later period, early Wahhābī criticism of Sufism was underdeveloped and focused almost exclusively on the debates surrounding the intercession of prophets and saints and the related practices of tomb visitation (Peskes 1999, pp. 145–61). Even when later Wahhābī scholars, under the influence of Islamist post-colonial trends that sought to emphasize notions of cultural authenticity, increased their polemical attacks on Sufism, they largely maintained their deference for prominent pietistic figures of early Sufism (al-Fawzān 1985, p. 7). Admittedly, the Wahhābī corpus on matters of spirituality has been largely limited mainly to its reference to the Taymīyan legacy. However, there have been rare modern Wahhābī contributions to the field. In such rare contributions, more often than not, Wahhābis do not refer to the term “Sufism”, but to *sulūk*. The term refers to the spiritual journey of the wayfarer (*sālik*) in pursuit of God (Trimingham 1971, p. 140). By way of example, in his *al-Durrat al-Fākhira* (The Exquisite Perles), the prominent Wahhābī scholar of the first half of the 20th century, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Saʿdī (1889–1957), offers a brief explanation of what are commonly known as the stations of the spiritual path, which, as it was mentioned earlier, constitute central themes in Sufi manuals (al-Saʿdī 2006, pp. 30–38). In seeking to affirm the priority of revealed texts over personal insights, Ibn Taymīya defined *sulūk* strictly in terms of following the Quran and Sunna—the words and deeds of the Prophet Muham-

mad (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, vol. 19, pp. 273–74). The spiritual path to him, and by extension to modern claimants of the Taymīyan legacy, like the Wahhābīs, has a foundational normative grounding. We do find this notion also among prominent representatives of the Sufi tradition, described by Buehler as “juristic Sufism” (Buehler 2011, pp. 43–62). In addition to being anchored in this kind of Taymīyan understanding of spirituality, the Wahhābī normative spiritual writings are rarely found in treatises specifically dedicated to *sulūk*, like the one by al-Saʿdī. More often than not they are scattered in works of different genres, prophetology being one of them.

3. Muslim Prophetology (*al-ʿulūm al-nabawīyya*) as a Contested Field of Modern Muslim Thought

Al-Qaṭṭānī’s *Mercy* has been categorized as a work of *sīra al-nabawīyya*, or prophetic biography. The categorization, however, is problematic. As mentioned earlier, Muslim Prophetology (*al-ʿulūm al-nabawīyya*) refers to the cumulative categories of knowledge that explicate Muslim understandings of the mission of Prophet Muhammad in particular and prophethood in general. It is composed of the following subfields of Islamic knowledge on prophethood: knowledge of the life-story of Prophet Muhammad, often referred to as “the biography of the Prophet” (*sīrat al-nabī*); knowledge of the Prophet’s outward description, his ethics, his lineage, and his qualitative names (ʿilm al-shamāʾil); knowledge of the virtues and merits of the prophets—including Prophet Muhammad (ʿilm al-faḍāʾil); knowledge of the proofs of his prophethood as indicated by his miracles (ʿilm al-dalāʾil); and knowledge of the Prophet’s distinctive characteristics (ʿilm al-khaṣāʾiṣ) (al-Qadūmī 2016, pp. 35–36).

In reality, however, the distinctions between these different literary forms are not clearly defined. Mareike Koertner has pointed out, for example, that the *dalāʾil* literature has been considered at times as a sub-genre of *sīra* (Koertner 2018, p. 91; Zouggar 2018, pp. 172–85). This relation of the abovementioned categories of Muslim prophetology and the *sīra* is also implied by Michele Petrone in his study of the *khaṣāʾiṣ* literature (Petrone 2022, p. 198). At times, the term *sīra* is used as an all-encompassing term for texts of prophetology that include several of the literary forms mentioned above, as in the case of the celebrated *al-Shifā bi-taʾrīf huqūq al-Muṣṭafā* (Healing Through Recognition of the Rights of the Chosen One)—written by Qāḍī (the Judge) ʿIyāḍ (d. 544/1149). That is true also for al-Qaṭṭānī’s work we analyze in this article. *Sīrat al-nabī*, however, has a fundamentally chronological nature, an important feature useful in order to distinguish it from other literary forms that are also at times labeled as ‘*sīra*’. In addition to the categories mentioned above, such texts also address aspects of creed-like the belief in the infallibility of the Prophet (ʿiṣmā) and normative aspects related to the status of the Prophet, like apostasy resulting from disbelief in him or from attacks against his figure (ʿIyāḍ 2013).

As Ruggero Vimercati Sanseverino has noted, the central motivating drive for the *Shifā* was Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ’s intention to “induce love for the Prophet in the Muslim community” and the general theme of the text is veneration (*taʾzīm*) of the Prophet (Vimercati Sanseverino 2021, p. 153). As he has observed, given the centrality of the veneration of the Prophet to Muslim spirituality, it is not surprising that scholars who have been concerned with the exploration of this theme in western academia have been those interested in the study of Sufism (Schimmel 1975, pp. 213–27; 1985). Additionally, in his discussion of the *Shifā*, Vimercati Sanseverino points at two central functions of Muslim prophetological literature, namely that love for the Prophet is central to the Muslim spiritual tradition and that this spiritual tradition has a normative character (Vimercati Sanseverino 2021, p. 155).

This is relevant to our investigation despite the fact that, as Martin Riexinger has argued, representative texts of Wahhābī prophetology, like Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb’s *Mukhtaṣar sīrat al-rasūl* (The Abridged Biography of the Messenger), were written as refutations of the dominant, pre-modern devotional literature on the Prophet, of which the *Shifā* served as a prime example (Rixengier 2022, p. 46). He makes elsewhere the case that Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb did this by omission, meaning that he did not include prominent themes and reports prevalent in the pre-modern prophetological literature, which contradicted his

theological worldview. Rixiengier points additionally to the inclusion in the *mukhtaṣar* of the story of how idols first appeared in Mecca as an illustration of the core concerns of the Wahhābī movement (Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb 1993, p. 19; Rixiengier 2013, pp. 108–12).

Later Wahhabism, as I have argued more at length elsewhere, developed a more comprehensive critique of dominant Sunni, pre-modern prophetology, problematizing especially the reports over the distinctive characteristics (*khaṣāʾiṣ*) of the Prophet. In their view, the tradition was guilty of deifying the Prophet, attributing him qualities and abilities that are unique to God, blurring in this manner the distinction between Creator and creation. This excessive devotion of the Prophet, Wahhabis have argued, has introduced in Islam a Christian-like problem—referring to the deification of Jesus in Christianity. Seeking the Prophet’s intercession, asking forgiveness from him, beseeching him for his assistance, believing he has partial knowledge of the unseen, attributing to him a presence in creation after his passing—to mention but the most poignant contentions—resulted for Wahhābis in failing to realize Islam’s uncompromising monotheism (*tawḥīd*), by failing to recognize God’s sovereignty (Sinani 2023).

Prophetology, therefore, constitutes for Wahhābis a contested field, certainly one of the most important ones in terms of their reformist vision, one in which they have intervened—as in other fields—as a reparatory force intending to produce texts purified from what Wahhābis consider to be innovatory contaminations accumulated upon the prophetic teaching through the ages. Saʿīd b. Wahf al-Qaḥṭānī’s (d. 2018) *Raḥmatan li-l-ʿĀlamīn* serves as an illustrative example of the Wahhābī vision of prophetology as both a vessel of spirituality and locus of reform.

The Wahhabi challenge to the dominant Sunni prophetological tradition is by no means the only form of contestation to have emerged in the modern age in relation to the way Muslims have come to think of prophethood and Prophet Muhammad in particular. The advent of colonial modernity gave rise to trends leading to a secularization of the image of the Prophet (Vimercati Sanseverino 2020, pp. 353–80), including but not limited to omitting accounts of prophetic miracles or attempting to rationalize them. The recent work of Andrew Hammond on the origins of modern Islamic thought have highlighted the centrality of the concept of prophethood in the contestations between the views of Muslim modernist reformers, like Muḥammad ʿAbduh, and those of traditionalist scholars, like the last Shaykh al-Islam of the Ottoman Empire, Muṣṭafa Sabrī (Hammond 2023, pp. 94–105). Likewise, the recent work of Mahsheed Ansari, on the thought of modern thinkers, like Muhammad Iqbal and Said Nursi, offers additional insight into this aspect (Ansari 2023). The work of al-Qaḥṭānī does not address in any meaningful way these competing Muslim conceptions of the Prophet and prophecy. However, his work clearly shows an awareness of present debates, especially as it is reflected by the critical citations of prominent modern Muslim texts on prophetology, as that of the prominent modernist scholar Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1996), titled *Fiqh al-Sīra* (The Normative Understanding of the Prophet’s Biography).

It should be noted that the emergence of modernist and Wahhabi prophetology have given rise to rich responses from traditionalist scholars—guardians of the pre-colonial dominant schools of Sunni theology, jurisprudence and spirituality (Brown 2014, pp. 13–14). The prominent Syrian traditionalist, Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (d. 2013), states as much clearly in his *Fiqh al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (al-Būṭī 1991, pp. 10–11). Likewise, scholars, like the Saudi Hadith and Sufi scholar, Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī (d. 2004) authored works of prophetology that re-affirmed the theological validity of pre-modern scholarship. A prime representative work that seeks to affirm the orthodoxy of pre-modern Muslim prophetological scholarship is al-Mālikī’s *Muḥammad: al-Insān al-Kāmil* (Muhammad: The Perfect Man). It is beyond the immediate scope of this article, however, to engage with their contributions.¹

4. The Author and the Text

Saʿīd b. Wahf al-Qaḥṭānī was a Saudi mosque preacher and author of several works. Born in the southern region of ʿAsīr, al-Qaḥṭānī did not have the tribal and regional belong-

ing often needed to climb in the highest institutions of Saudi religious bureaucracy. He studied with the former Mufti of Saudi Arabia ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Bāz (1912–1999) (Böttcher 2013, p. 469) and he held a doctorate from the College of the Foundations of Faith at Ibn Sa‘ūd University in Riyadh, the most important Wahhābī institution of learning. Like his MA thesis, his doctorate focused on the topic of missionary work (*da‘wa*). He became known, however, as a prolific author, penning some 80 books and treatises. His *Ḥiṣn al-Muslim* (Fortress of the Believer), a compilation of prayers and litanies selected from hadith collections, became his best-known work. It was distributed around the world, equipped with translations and transliterations in respective languages, aimed at helping individual Muslims from around the world to recite them in Arabic, while acquiring the meaning in their respective languages. The *Fortress*, like other texts he authored, emphasize the author’s claim that the content is based on Qur’anic scripture and the authenticated reports of the Prophet’s practice as testified through his statements and actions, his Sunna (al-Qaḥṭānī 2007, p. 4). The claim is central to the larger Salafi self-imagination, where the scholars claim that their sole role is to connect the contemporary Muslim to the moment of revelation, having discarded the interpolations resulting from the encounters with other cultures and religions through the centuries.

Given that, as mentioned earlier, the work of Ibn Qayyim has been immensely influential in Wahhābī scholarship and particularly because one of Ibn Qayyim’s work, *Zād al-Ma‘ād*, served as a major reference to the work we analyze here; a few words should be said about this important work of Muslim prophetology. Offering an equally important and rare overview of the various themes addressed in the vast literature Ibn al-Qayyim left behind, Birgit Krawietz categorizes this work as a work of *sīra*, under the “Enacting a Prophetic Orientation in Everyday Life” category. However, she points out that several contemporary authors regard this voluminous work as more than just *sīra*, some of them considering it a work of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and others as an encyclopedia that encompasses theology, *sīra*, *fiqh*, and other fields (Krawietz 2006, pp. 55–58). Except for the short section in the very beginning, however, the work lacks a chronological order, which is identified by Vimercatti Sanseverino—as quoted earlier—as the distinctive marker of *sīra*. This voluminous work of Ibn Qayyim offers a combination of biographical information regarding the Prophet Muhammad, prophetic-grounded normativity (*sunna*), and aspects of his personal conduct that are commonly found in the *shamāil* literature. All this information, however, is presented in service of Ibn Qayyim’s central epistemological principle, namely that human salvation, human felicity in this world and the hereafter (*lā sabīl ilā al-sā‘āda wa-l-falāḥ, lā fī-l-dunyā wa lā fī-l-ākhirā*), knowledge of good and evil (*ma‘ rifa al-ṭayyib wa-l-khabīth*), and knowledge of how to attain God’s pleasure (*riḍā Allāh*) are attainable only through knowledge, affirmation of belief, and obedience to the prophetic guidance (*ma‘ rifa al-rasūl, wa mā jāa bihi, wa taṣdīq fīmā akhbāra bihi*) (al-Jawziyya 2009, p. 22). That is what motivates for Ibn Qayyim the need for knowledge of the Prophet Muhammad.

As Qamaruddin Khan (1964, pp. 521–30) has noted, writing in opposition to Shiite teachings that claimed that the primary function of prophecy was the establishment of a just political order, Ibn Taymiyya argued that the primary function of the Prophet was that of providing religious guidance, reciting God’s verses, purifying the believers, and teaching them the Quran and the Sunna (Q 3:164). In Ibn Qayyim’s *Provisions*, the phenomenon of prophecy is indicative of the nature of divine action. First, he argues that in everything in creation, God chooses only what is good, pure, and virtuous (*ṭayyib*). Second, prophecy as an act of divine selection is reflective of God’s intervention in history. Ibn Qayyim presents the event of the Muhammadan prophethood as an act of divine selection, reflected by the selection of the city of birth (Mecca), his lineage (going back to Abraham), of those who nursed him and later took care of him, and so on and so forth. God’s selection of the Prophet, like the selection of the most virtuous days, times and places of worship, are indicative likewise of divine bounty, a manifestation of goodness that is available to those who are willing to be receptive of divine favor (al-Jawziyya 2009, pp. 12–21). Precisely because prophecy is indicative of the nature of divine intervention in history, the choice of

the Prophet—one of the names of the Prophet Muhammad is Muṣṭafa—The Chosen One—the very act of selection, and the wisdom and power it implies is indicative of Divine Lordship (*al-ikhtiyār wa-l-takḥṣīs fihi dālān ‘alā rubūbiyatihi ta’ ālā*).

In his *Mercy*, al-Qaḥṭānī grounds his epistemological approach slightly differently, by emphasizing the essence of the Prophet (his mercy), rather than the function of his mission (felicity in the hereafter). One can argue that for all practical purposes, they represent the same essential reality. However, in Ibn al-Qayyim’s *Provisions*, the believer is encouraged to “sculpture” oneself according to the prophetic model because this is indispensable for one’s salvation (*idṭrār al-‘ibād fawq kul ḍarūra*) (al-Jawziyya 2009, p. 22). On the other hand, as we try to show, in al-Qaḥṭānī’s *Mercy*, the believer is invited to shape oneself according to the prophetic virtues because of what the Prophet represents as a manifestation of divine mercy. The difference, it is argued, rests in the subtle quantitative difference in the relationship the believer establishes with the prophet not only because of what he *offers*, but perhaps even more so because of what he *is*—a mercy to creation.

Al-Qaḥṭānī’s pietistic approach to the prophetological discourse, perhaps it should be noted, is not determined by the nature of the genre. Whereas much of Muslim prophetology is pietistic in nature, there are other approaches available. Another Salafi scholar during this period, the prominent Jordanian author of several texts of creed, ‘Umar Sulaymān al-Ashqar (d. 2012), for example, takes a different approach by employing some of the same source material from the *shamāil* or the *dalāil* in order to address what Muslims believe regarding prophets and prophethood (al-Ashqar 1989, pp. 119–61). Despite the convergence of these literary forms, therefore, the choice of the approach is indicative of al-Qaḥṭānī’s scholarly goals.

In his *Mercy*, al-Qaḥṭānī presents the qualities of the Prophet—mainly his mercy and compassion—as the elements that shaped the message of Islam and the experiences of the people who came into contact with him or his followers. Al-Qaḥṭānī identifies mercy as the defining feature of the Muhammadan prophethood, as established in the Qur’an (Q 21:107). From this central feature of his prophethood emerges the beneficiary nature of the Prophet’s mission, of which, first and foremost being guidance that results in salvation (Q 7:158). This divine guidance, which is channeled through the Prophet, as al-Qaḥṭānī points out, is not limited only to believers, but to all humanity, and not exclusively to humans, but to the spirits (*jinn*) as well (Q 4:29); it is not limited only to the Arabs, but to the entire humanity. The ethical virtues of the Prophet are identified as technologies of guidance (Q 68:4), which function to facilitate people’s encounter with the truth of the divine invitation. The ethical virtues of the Prophet also take an exegetical role in relation to scripture, since—as we are told in a hadith—they were shaped according to the Qur’an: “His ethics were [shaped according to] the Quran (*kāna, khuluquhu-l-qur’ān*)” (al-Qaḥṭānī 2007, p. 50).

Like other works of prophetology, al-Qaḥṭānī’s *Mercy* includes different prophetological sub-genres, among them sections of *sīra* (al-Qaḥṭānī 2007, pp. 14–55) —even if in a condensed form, *shamāil* (ibid., pp. 57–103, idem), or the descriptions of the Prophet’s features, both external and internal, and *dalāil* (ibid., pp. 277–311), or the proofs of prophethood as affirmed by the account of his miracles. As the title indicates, however, al-Qaḥṭānī puts the focus on the prophetic quality of mercy (*rahma*) and the accounts from the Prophet’s mission that illustrate the quality of mercy in his dealings with others occupies most of the book. The all-encompassing nature of the Prophet’s mercy is detailed in accounts of his relations or encounters with different types of characters, friends and foes, Muslims and non-Muslims, orphans, poor, weak, and sick, boys and girls, spirits, and animals. The chronological account of his biography is woven together with aspects of his life that serve to demonstrate his prophetic virtues. Echoing other works of Muslim prophetology, the author provides accounts that demonstrate the Prophet’s generosity, commitment to justice, qualities of leadership, like forbearance and forgiveness, his wisdom and careful deliberation, and his patience and humbleness. What theological purpose do these accounts serve? Why does al-Qaḥṭānī put mercy at the center of his narrative? What kind of prophetologi-

cal images emerge and what kind of normativity do they seek to engender? What kind of distinctive forms of virtue emerge from such prophetological accounts?

In the Quran, the notion of salvation is often found embodied in the meaning of divine forgiveness (*maghfirah*). The attainment of God's forgiveness and love, in the Quran, is conditioned on following the Prophet (*ittibā al-rasūl*), as stated in Q 3: 31. The believers are directed in the Quran towards this relationship between the emulation of the prophetic example and the attainment of God's acceptance: "Indeed, you have in the Messenger of God a beautiful example for those who hope for God and the Last Day, and remember God much" (Q 33: 21). Elsewhere the Quran describes the Prophet as having an exalted character (Q 68:4). For the believer, therefore, the path to salvation and divine acceptance, to forgiveness and divine love, is a path demarcated through the process of molding one's self, one's behavior, and one's character according to the prophetic model. The minute details Muslims have recorded and seek to emulate from the life, manners, and outlook of the Prophet are manifestations of this very idea. That is the reason why prophetological literary forms, such as al-Qaḥṭānī's work, are meant to be normative, to entice a certain reaction of the reader, with the desire to encourage an active engagement of self-making according to the prophetic model.

A natural outcome of *ittibā al-rasūl* is the desire to imitate the Prophet's ethical conduct and to embody his character traits, which is organically linked to the quality of one's faith. As one prophetic hadith, quoted by al-Qaḥṭānī states, "The most accomplished believers are those who have sound ethics" (*akmal al-mu'minīn imānan aḥsanuhum khuluqan*). In another hadith, ethics are linked directly to devotion. Asked about deeds that lead people to paradise, the Prophet reportedly responded "Devotion to God and sound ethics" (*taqwā-llāh wa ḥusn al-khuluq*). Drawing on Ibn Qayyim's four-fold definition of ethics in his *Madārij al-Sālikīn* as composed of forbearance, honesty, courage, and justice and their derivative virtues (like generosity and humbleness), he presents examples from the *sīrah* in order to illustrate ways in which the Prophet demonstrated these very virtues (al-Qaḥṭānī 2007, p. 116).

Affirming the role of the Prophet as a role-model (*uswah li-kuli muslim*), al-Qaḥṭānī offers concrete areas of emulation: the Prophet's devotion in prayer (*ṣalāh*), his commitment to fasting (*ṣawm*), his generosity in giving charity (*ṣadaqah*), in his struggle in the battle ground (*jihād*), in the perfection of arranging his daily affairs (*ḥusn mu' āmalatihi*), in his ethical conduct (*khuluq*), in his abstinence (*zuhd*), in his scrupulousness (*warā'*), his mediation (*tawasut*) (al-Qaḥṭānī 2007, pp. 45–53). Many of these categories would be easily found in well-known Sufi manuals. A Sufi master of the twentieth century, 'Abd al-Qādir 'Īsā (d. 1991) detailed in his well-known work, *Ḥaqāiq 'an al-taṣawwuf* (Realities of Sufism) the itinerary of the spiritual path, going through the stations of attainment of self-accountability (*muḥāsaba*), truthfulness (*ṣidq*), sincerity (*ikhlaṣ*), patience (*ṣabr*), scrupulousness (*warā'*), renunciation (*zuhd*), the state of being pleased with God's decree (*ridā*), reliance in God (*tawakkul*), and gratitude (*shukr*) ('Īsā 2001, pp. 145–95). That is not to say that the differences between Sufis and Wahhābis are insignificant, or that there are not plenty of areas of severe disagreements, exchanges of heated accusations, built upon a history of conflict and at times violent confrontations. Afterall, 'Īsā wrote his book in response to the sectarian attacks against Sufis. Those differences, however, do not preclude a Wahhābī search for a genuine spiritual transformation that is grounded on the prophetic example.

Vimercati–Sanseverino has lamented that more often than not modern conceptions of *ittibā* have been reduced to the normative and formal aspects of what following the Prophet has entailed, failing, in his view, to explore the rich theologically anthropological nuances that emerge from the link between *being* a Muslim and *following the Prophet* (Vimercati Sanseverino 2022, p. 86). Indeed, that kind of exploration would be hard to find in texts, such as al-Qaḥṭānī's. That reductionism notwithstanding, this example of Wahhābī prophetology, as we have attempted to show, intends precisely to engender a process of self-transformation (and self-realization) that emerges from an internal commitment to follow the Prophet as a way of attaining God's mercy, acceptance, salvation and forgiveness.

Al-Qaḥṭānī's *Mercy*, therefore, based largely on Ibn Qayyīm's *Zād al-Ma'ād*, as well as on a large corpus of hadith collections, should be considered an example of Wāḥḥābī spirituality, a form of spirituality that is certainly normative, one which manifests a clear sectarian agenda, but that it is, nevertheless, concerned primarily with the believer's aspiration to have a relationship with God and it is manifested in relevant forms of ethical formation.

5. Conclusions

Whereas the Wāḥḥābī movement has often been depicted in western academia (as well as in much of the Muslim polemical exchanges) as devoid of spirituality, a characterization that comes from a history of Wāḥḥābī opposition to Sufism, the article has argued against that assessment. Wāḥḥābī spirituality is grounded within a set of acceptable texts, primarily hadiths, that are otherwise exclusionary to the much larger corpus of the Muslim spiritual tradition. However, Wāḥḥābī spirituality, as we have attempted to show, maintains the same core characteristics of the larger tradition, namely a search for a relationship with God through the achievement, active nurturing, and qualitative increase in one's piety, awareness and devotion to God, and the embodiment of corresponding ethical conduct. The life of the Prophet Muhammad as recorded in the texts of *sīrat al-nabī*, the descriptions of his outward and inward characteristics in texts of *shamā'il*, an increased appreciation of his prophetic status through knowledge of his miracles in the *dalā'il* literature, and the awareness of his distinctive status in the *khaṣā'iṣ* literature have served as primary repositories of much of the Muslim prophetic-grounded manifestations of spirituality. This has been reflective of the Quranic exhortation leading towards prophetic emulation (*ittibā' al-rasūl*). Texts like al-Qaḥṭānī's *Mercy*, echoing a long established Muslim tradition of prophetological texts that encompass elements from all the literary forms that constitute *al-ʿulūm al-nabawīyya* serve as primary examples of Wāḥḥābī ideals of prophetic-grounded piety and ethical formation.

Wāḥḥābī spirituality is often reactionary, posited against much of the larger tradition, reductive in its normative and textual restrictions, and sectarian. Nevertheless, the article has argued that these characteristics do not preclude the movement's search for internal piety and corresponding external ethics.

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Note

- ¹ See (ʿAlawī al-Mālikī 2018). For more on al-Mālikī's polemical exchanges with Wahhabi scholars on aspects of prophetology see (Besnik Sinani 2023). "Devotional Extremism (ghuluww)? Muḥammad ʿAlawī al-Mālikī and the Debate Over the Veneration (taʿzīm) and the Characteristics (khaṣā'iṣ) of the Prophet Muḥammad in Saudi Arabia", in (Amri et al. 2022).

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