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Entering the Prophetic Realm: ‘Abd Rabbihī ibn Sulaymān al-Qaliyūbī (d. 1968) on the Nature of Mediation (*tawassul*)

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Abstract: In his comprehensive work *Fayḍ al-wahhāb*, ‘Abd Rabbihī ibn Sulaymān al-Qaliyūbī (d. 1968) extensively explores the Prophet Muhammad’s role in theology and argues against interpretations influenced by Wahhābī thought. He emphasizes the prophetic realm, or prophecy and its traces, particularly the means by which believers can establish a connection with it. This article pays special attention to al-Qaliyūbī’s understanding of mediation (*tawassul*); that is, how the Prophet—by virtue of his elevated status, ordained by God—can serve as a means; similar to how a ritual prayer or any good deed ultimately serves as a means to draw closer to God. For al-Qaliyūbī, following the Prophet means not only regarding him as the founder of the religion, but also incorporating his spirit and character into one’s own life. This article proceeds in four steps: (1) It addresses the systematics of prophecy concerning practical ethics and how this realm can be entered; (2) It introduces the three-layered paradigm of later theology and al-Qaliyūbī’s work; (3) It explores the topic of what constitutes a means (*wasīla*) and the theological implications of using a means in prayer (*tawassul*); (4) It zooms in on the aspect of what qualifies a means to be used in an individual prayer.

Keywords: the means of approach (*wasīla*); prayer of mediation (*tawassul*); Muhammadan ethics; prayer (*ḍu‘ā*); love and veneration of prophets and saints; transmission and intellect; ‘Abd Rabbihī ibn Sulaymān al-Qaliyūbī; Kalam; Sufism; Wahhabism



Citation: Lützen, Florian A. 2023. Entering the Prophetic Realm: ‘Abd Rabbihī ibn Sulaymān al-Qaliyūbī (d. 1968) on the Nature of Mediation (*tawassul*). *Religions* 14: 1518. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121518>

Academic Editors: Ruggero Sanseverino, Besnik Sinani and Simon Dein

Received: 1 October 2023
Revised: 23 November 2023
Accepted: 5 December 2023
Published: 8 December 2023



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1. Introduction: The Systematics of Prophecy Concerning Ethics

The daily prayer Muslims recite, the so-called “Abrahamic prayer,” stands out as a testimony to the reverence accorded to the prophetic realm, not only in practice—since the ritual prayer itself is a prophetic instruction—but also in a profound metaphysical sense. In the first half of the prayer, Muslims pray: “O God, bless (*ṣallī*) Muhammad and the family of Muhammad, as You have blessed Abraham and the family of Abraham”. The problem with this common translation of the Abrahamic prayer is that the word “blessing” does not appear in the Arabic text versions of the Hadith that mention the prayer. The word “blessings” appears in the second half of the Abrahamic prayer, which basically repeats the first half mentioned above but uses the verb *bāraka*, which is the word more commonly translated into English as blessing. In the first half, the word *ṣallī*—which in other contexts is translated as “pray”—is used, so that the whole phrase would be translated as: “O God, pray over Muhammad.” This is not a good translation because God’s prayer cannot be of the same nature as that of created beings; hence scholars have interpreted this phrase as blessing or bestowing mercy upon the Prophet Muhammad especially, as this phrase also appears in the Quran (Quran 33:56; *Al-Rāzī* 1981, 25:228ff.). This interpretation is etymologically consistent because the Arabic verb *ṣallā* here carries the meaning of connection (*Al-Ṣāwī* 2006, 3:476f.).

The Muslim profession of faith, the *shahāda*, contains two declarations that encompass a similar reference. First, “there is no god except God”, and second, “and Muhammad is the Messenger of God”. If we contrast these two declarations, we see that the first carries a rather general theological meaning, which theoretically does not imply a specific tradition,

rite, or ethics, but rather confirms a belief; while the second is undoubtedly a concrete statement referring to a historical figure and declaring that he is the Messenger of God. The implication is that God sent this messenger bearing the message of the Quran and the Sunna, as Muslims have believed over the centuries. This may be rhetorical, but the hint is instructive when we consider that this profession of faith has not been changed to say: “and Muhammad *was* the Messenger of God”, although the Prophet left this life a long time ago. Obviously the *shahāda* reaches us via tradition, and for this reason alone it was not changed to the past tense later. Furthermore, there is no grammatical need to change the verb, as the process is self-explanatory: the Arabic sentence does not require a verb in the present tense, whereby the declaration becomes timeless in a sense. Thus, in the most fundamental texts of ritual and creed, we already find theological notions of prophecy; that is, the question of how God connects with His Messenger, and furthermore how humans can relate to this realm which, metaphorically speaking, is the space between humans and the divine.

This article feeds on two methodological deliberations, (1) a hermeneutical, which entails (2) a theological reflection. The concept of mediation in Islamic theology is strongly connected with the idea of what constitutes human beings and their condition; therefore, reading source material on the nature of practices such as prayer necessitates close examination regarding the goals and principles of doctrine. In general, studying religious practices carrying notions of ethics, as the prayer of mediation (*tawassul*) does, we are challenged with two fundamental dimensions of theology, the vertical and the horizontal. Religious practice is mainly vertical because of the implied devotional aspect, indicating the relation between God and the human; while ethics, without ignoring the vertical, puts weight on the horizontal aspect due to its focus on action. Thus, seeking to understand theological concepts of practical nature requires consideration of the textual evidence with all its conditions along with a deeper look into the doctrinal teachings concerned, and furthermore a reflection on the spiritual dimension, i.e., being mindful of the human experience.

In view of the methodological considerations, and before we turn to the subject of this article, exploring the nature of mediation (*tawassul*) and the premises thereof (which, in short, is to elucidate how the realm of prophecy can be entered), certain systematic issues need to be addressed, mainly concerning the perspective the subject requires regarding the position of prophecy in the religious sciences (*ulūm al-dīn*). We must not forget the intellectual challenge posed by the emphasis on the Prophet or the prophetic realm generally in Islamic theology, as this does not usually involve a direct relation between the sender and the receiver of the message, strictly speaking, but rather multiple layers of connections: God, as the sender reveals the message via a messenger (the Prophet Muhammad) to the receivers (the created beings), a message containing a book (the Quran), as well as the ways in which this book should be applied (the Sunnah). In addition, these interactions reach us through transmission (*naql*), which requires interpretation and assessment (*aql*), and, in a sense, all these connections are embedded in the two statements of the *shahāda*, which is an interwoven allusion: entering the door of prophecy or the prophetic realm means embarking on the route that eventually leads to faith in oneness (*tawḥīd*). The Moroccan scholar Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir al-Kattānī (d. 1929) authored a work dedicated to this question alone, of how the two statements of the *shahāda* are connected and that only the union of the implicit realms of these statements lead to an exhaustive understanding of religion (Al-Kattānī 2007).

In other words, this change in perspective, looking at the *shahāda* as one statement that reflects the connection between the two sentences, poses the fundamental challenge to the mind that is embedded in religion: How can religion be taught properly when the critical figure and paragon is no longer available in person, in day-to-day life? This is the case if we look at the traditions and cultures that shape our lives; we must recognize the importance of the outward aspect, which leads to the perception of religion—which is also a culture and a tradition in this sense—as something passed on by individuals. The prophetic message reaches us via transmission, through individuals, and therefore has a

strong social aspect. In this respect, the early scholar and master of Hadith ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) made the statement: “The transmission (*isnād*) is part of religion. If it wasn’t for transmission, everybody could say what he wants” (Ibn al-Ṣalāh 1986, 255f.; Davidson 2020).

On the other side of the spectrum, religion is an individual quest, a journey every human being undertakes in one way or another; it is the search for meaning, for experience, or for truth, as some people phrase it. Hence, if one seeks to establish a connection to the Prophet by which one becomes his follower, then one cannot neglect two particular perspectives: the aspect of tradition, leading back to the sources, the revelation, and its Messenger; and the aspect of meaning, the search for individual truth, which poses the question of how to take on this quest. What is interesting for the purposes of this article is that these two dimensions come together in a unique way when looking at the prayer of mediation (*tawassul*), as we will see, because a prayer, after all, is but the individual search for an answer, and invoking the Prophet Muhammad or another revered figure in it includes the revelational aspect.

Furthermore, these two dimensions are inseparable, since the transfer from one individual to another, from one generation to another, depends on the experience of individual truth. Thus, the modality of the experience, of how and by which means one should search for meaning, lies at the heart of religion. In his voluminous work *Fayḍ al-wahhāb*, ‘Abd Rabbihī ibn Sulaymān al-Qaliyūbī (d. 1968) undertakes quite an effort to depict this; that is, the importance of transmitting the religion by passing on not only the Quran and the Hadith, but all the sciences, including Sufism, the epitome of experienced religion (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:3–58), and thereby connecting the two dimensions, the outward and the inward. He asserts that transmission (*isnād*) is one of the special features of the Islamic religion and is responsible for preserving its soundness, and he even concludes that “transmission is proof for the religion” (Ibid., 4:23). Moreover, the key attribute of transmission is that it is traced back to the Prophet Muhammad (Ibid., 1:5).

In the terms of the Religious Sciences, this notion was usually subsumed under the general idea of the “quest for knowledge” (*ṭalab al-ilm*). The modalities of knowledge acquired by the seeker on this quest can be divided into three types: knowledge through the five senses (*ḥawās*), knowledge through the intellect (*aql*), and knowledge granted by God (*mawḥūb*). For example; according to Aḥmad al-Dardīr (d. 1201/1786), an important reference point and predecessor of al-Qaliyūbī (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 1:8f.), in his main theological treatise *Sharḥ al-kharīda al-bahiyya*; there are two rational ways of dealing with revelation, which is the ultimate expression of truth for the believer: through the intellect (“intellectual valuation”, *ḥukm ‘aqlī*), and through the senses (“habitual valuation”, *ḥukm ‘ādī*) (Al-Dardīr 2010, 124f.; Mosaad 2016, 127ff.). The third layer, which is today often described as “spirituality”, appears in al-Dardīr’s work in the last chapter on Sufism (*taṣawwuf*). In his rendering of Sufism, al-Dardīr calls it the science of the “life of the self” (Al-Dardīr 2010, 119), which is to say it is about healing “the heart and the limbs”. Interestingly, defining the subject (*mawḍū‘*) of Sufism, he refers directly to the Prophet: “The subject [of Sufism] are the Muhammadan ethics (*akhlāq*) in that they should be acquired” (Ibid., 263f.).

This three-layer approach, with the Prophet as a direct point of reference, mirrors what Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) eloquently mentions in his autobiography, when he speaks of the necessity of prophecy for all humankind. He explains that every human being is given the senses (*ḥawāss*) and the intellect (*aql*), and he adds a third layer—prophecy—which is above the intellect and can only be obtained by means of an inner eye, which must be trained just like the other gifts from God, the senses and the intellect. The senses enable us to perform empirical research, while the intellect allows us to understand metaphysical truths, but they both necessitate an effort, which involves repetition (empiricism) and rational thinking (contemplation). The same goes for the third layer, as the inner eye also needs to be trained, and this is the place where prophecy becomes necessary, because prophecy correlates to the metaphorical inner eye of faith, just as the senses need something

physical to sense and the intellect needs something metaphysical to grasp (Al-Ghazālī 2013, 7:66–70).

Of course, the idea that the inner dimension of religion is tantamount to prophetic ethics, as al-Dardīr states, has its origins in certain background. Sufism can be defined in a variety of ways; Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 899/1494) summarized it as follows: “Sufism was defined, explained, and interpreted in almost two thousand definitions and all of them are referred back to sincere intention toward God Exalted. All these [definitions] are different features of the same thing”. (Zarrūq 2004, 13) And certainly, Sufism constitutes Muhammadan ethics because it deals with the orientation of the believer; what reforms the self is the acquirement of the character traits which were perfected by the Prophet. It goes without saying that this ultimately refers to the Prophet Muhammad’s pre-eminent status among followers of Islam, which has created its own genres around his persona, which in this sense represent an “Exemplarist Moral Theory” (Zagzebski 2017; Alshaar 2023). A report cited often in this regard is the one of Aisha bint Abū Bakr, one of the first scholars and also the Prophet’s wife, related in a text transmitted by Muslim, Aḥmad, and Abū Dawūd. When she was asked about his character, she answered: “His character was the Quran” (Al-Hindī 1986, no. 18378)¹. With the Quran as the embodiment of God’s message of oneness, the Prophet implemented this belief by communicating the dos and don’ts in their many dimensions, thereby creating a moral and ethical example for generations to come: Muhammadan ethics, so to speak.

Systematic considerations are crucial when looking at practices such as the prayer of mediation (*tawassul*) for two reasons, as al-Qaliyūbī tells us in the introduction of his work. The first is that certainly all practices for which a revelational origin is claimed, need close examination regarding tradition (*naql*) and intellect (*aql*). That is to say that all teachings derived from the Quran and the Sunnah, and which are new in the sense that they did not exist in this form during the time of the Prophet (*mustahdaṭāt*), need clarification. This includes, he goes on, matters for which the scholars reached consensus (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 1:11). A famous example would be the gathering of people for the *tarāwīḥ*-prayer (a supererogatory prayer during Ramadan) in the time of the second caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. While the Prophet Muhammad used to pray this in private, ‘Umar took it to the mosque, a practice no one has doubted until today. We will return to this point in the next chapter of this article.

The second reason, stressed by al-Qaliyūbī in the introduction as well, is the spirit of our times, since the rapid changes due to colonialism and the Wahhābī movement pose a critical challenge for the religion: here, he refers mainly to the 20th century (i.e., the situation during his lifetime), but also the developments leading up to it (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 1:16f.). This is a broad field but needs to be addressed in this context; al-Qaliyūbī forthrightly states that the Wahhābī movement is a school of thought having adopted methods harmful to a couple of consensual matters of Islamic theology, only using some historically marginalized books of the Muslim tradition to prove their case: here, he refers to the works of Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792) (Ibid., 1:3–30). Concerning the subject of this article, the pertinence of the eminent station of the Prophet deserves mention concerning the spirit of our times as the role of prophecy has been repeatedly backgrounded over the past century (I assume that since the passing of al-Qaliyūbī in 1968, some developments have taken place but that the main issue is still the same).

In modern times, many people, researchers, and scholars have shifted their focus to intellectual–theological debates around the nature of God (theism vs. atheism, Christian vs. Muslim understandings, etc.) when asked about their avenue to faith, their religious belief, or the Islamic religion as a whole. In technical terms, I argue following al-Qaliyūbī, they have referred to the Kalam chapter of *ilāhīyāt*, which is the intellectual debate about the divine nature and how it appears in this world, referring to the first statement in the *shahāda*. In contrast to past centuries, today it is not that someone wants to explain or defend faith in a reasonable manner; this has been a practice since the beginning of Islam, although it

needs to be done carefully because the tools of Kalam are sharp and, if not wielded in the appropriate place and manner, might do harm rather than helping (cf. [Al-Sunbāwī 2001](#), 48f.). Yet knowing the appropriate time, place, and manner in which to speak again falls into the realm of individual experience—that is, prophetic ethics.

The difference lies in the way one chooses to expound one's own religious belief. If someone takes up the task of speaking about religion (even when the topic under discussion is explicitly something from the *ilāhīyāt*, such as the divine attributes), one is nonetheless never free of ethics; one is bound to good conduct and intentions, which are found in the prophetic realm again. But if one is asked about religion in general, or about one's conviction, then one has a choice. This choice, I assert, often still leads people to the metaphysics of *ilāhīyāt*, and to intellectual matters or ideas broadly speaking, while the same question posed to people prior to the advent of modernity would have been answered differently. Prior to the modern era, the avenue one would choose in one's own thought process when asked about something of religious importance was much more inclined toward prophetic teachings than toward an intellectual debate.

Proof of this is, on the one hand, the vast literature on the person of the Prophet, which created whole genres seeking to establish a connection with him, such as the *shamā'il* literature, selected-*ḥadīth* literature, or the hymns of praise (*qaṣā'id*). A vivid picture of the prominence of the prophetic presence in the premodern era provides a comparison from the history of religions, as Luca Patrici and others have argued. This comparison involves understanding the writings about the Prophet as the equivalent of Christian iconography—remembering, venerating, and interpreting the transmitted reports of his character, appearance, and actions ([Vimercati Sanseverino 2022](#), 182; [Gril et al. 2022](#)).

This is corroborated by the research conducted regarding social perceptions of what Islam is and was across the globe. A. Kevin Reinhart has shown vividly how “lived religion” has changed in modern times since “Modernity is the age of standardization and homogenization.” ([Reinhart 2020](#), 128) What Reinhart calls “scripturalism” (*Ibid.*, 128 ff.) and which underlies much of a modern understanding of religion, is the phenomenon described above as focusing on intellectual matters and which stands in contrast to the practiced religion of premodern societies. Abdurrahman Taha has pointed this out from a philosophical–theological point of view, arguing that knowledge in Islamic theology is not complete without practice, i.e., without acting according to the knowledge one's religion is defective. Hence, “the intellect (*aql*) is viewed by the majority of Muslims as indication for acquiring knowledge which is accompanied by an effect on action (*amal*).” ([Taha 2012](#), 58).

On the other hand, proof of this shift in focus is found in the attention paid to practical traditions and ethics surrounding the tangible traces of prophecy; various practical traditions, such as visiting the Prophet's tomb as part of the pilgrimage, have developed since the early days of Islam to keep his spirit or presence alive. However, such practices have also increasingly been criticized in the modern age from two angles: (1) Intellectual debate, as noted above, the shift toward which is mainly due to the challenges of modern thought ([Gril et al. 2022](#); [Brown 2011](#)); (2) The Wahhābī movement, with its influence on Islamic theology ([Lumbard 2009](#); [Sinani 2023](#)). Similarly, the Prophet's presence in prayers has always been common practice for Muslims, in one way or another. Certainly, both aspects—the modern intellectual debate and the controversies between different factions of the Islamic schools of thought—have a long, entwined history, as the intellectual debate over the course of history has served as a counterweight to common practice among believers, although these lines are blurry in many cases. A good example of this is the puritanical, reformist Kadizadelis, who tried to reform the practical and intellectual landscape of Islam in the seventeenth century, although their efforts were met with much critical vigor ([El-Rouayheb 2008](#); [Sarıkaya 2005](#); [Ivanyi 2019](#)).

Concerning the state of research on the topic of mediation, it is noticeable that authors usually engage with this subject from a rather sociological or anthropological view; most of the studies touching on mediation, directly or indirectly concentrate on sainthood, Muslim practice, and various cults surrounding the veneration of saints ([Taylor 1998](#), 1999;

Marmon 1998; Vimercati Sanseverino 2014; Amri 2023). Mediation is also mentioned in contemporary writings when it comes to the Wahhābiyya, their critique of Sufi life and practice (Hoover 2020; Gharaibeh 2012). What is missing are studies taking the theological perspective into account, which is again a hint strengthening the aforementioned argument of a neglect of prophecy and its traces in modern times. However, regarding translation in research so far, it is worth mentioning that the Arabic *tawassul* has sometimes been translated with “intercession”, presumably borrowed from the Christian understanding and terminology. In this article, I use “mediation” since “intercession” is usually used for the Arabic *shafā'a*, referring to the eschatological intervention of the Prophet.

2. The Three-Layered Paradigm of Theology and the Work of al-Qaliyūbī

To segue into the matter of mediation, one crucial point needs to be remembered concerning practice and theory: Kalam is not a duty for every Muslim (*farḍ 'ayn*). Rather, it is a duty to be taken on by certain individuals who watch over Muslim intellectual life (*farḍ kifāya*). This is a pivotal point, because if Kalam is not for everybody, then what should the carpenter or the businessperson (or indeed, anyone who does not have the time or the capacity to delve into Kalam terminology) do? This question boils down to the knowledge that the common believer, the *muqallid*, possesses concerning their faith (not their practice). In *sunni* theology (i.e., from the Kalam perspective), all Muslims are asked to engage with doctrine to the extent of their ability (*ahliyya*); this does not imply knowledge of the technical terms, but rather knowledge of the basic teachings, of God, the prophets, the angels, the day of judgment, etc. (Al-Ṣāwī 2010, 42ff.). Hence, they are not obliged to partake intellectually in the theological debate: the doctrine of faith (*aqīda*) for everybody, taken mainly from the Quran and the Hadith, serves to establish a healthy connection in the believer's mind. Yet this connection, as mentioned above, encompasses three layers: senses, intellect, and spirituality. What are these three layers when it comes to the individual in general; that is, not on the scholarly level, but on the level of matters which concern everybody?

Variations on the three layers are helpful here, as seen from the perspective of Sufism, which concerns the individual. In this regard, one prominent reading of the three dimensions is that of *sharī'a*, *ṭarīqa*, and *ḥaqīqa*: divine law, the path to God, and spiritual reality (or truth). The law (*sharī'a*) takes the form of revealed norms, which are tangible to the senses, while the divine secrets of these norms—their reality or truth (*ḥaqīqa*)—are situated on the opposite side of the spectrum; they are a gift and the result of one own's efforts. The bridge between these two sides is the path on which the believer embarks; thus al-Dardīr calls the path (*ṭarīqa*) in which someone travels to God “Sufism with regard to practice” (Al-Dardīr 2010, 264). In other words, the divine law is a guideline that provides a sensible foundation, mainly experienced through the body, while the path to God involves following the prophetic instructions and aims at refining character or true sincerity (*ṣiddīqiyya*) (Ibid., 267).

For the individual, scholar or not, the ascent implied in these three layers—senses, intellect, and spirituality—circles around Muhammadan ethics in order to cultivate the individual's core character; it is based on the law and directed toward higher truths. Formulated in the language of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), this is to say that since the norms of divine law constitute an individual duty, such as the ritual prayer and fasting during Ramadan, the inner norms do too; such inner norms include sincerity (*ṣidq*), patience (*ṣabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), trust in God (*tawakkul*), and love (*maḥabba*) (Al-Zabīdī 2012, 1:264). Here, we reach a critical juncture that connects the systematics of the three-layer concept of religion with the subject of this article: just as the sciences of Fiqh and Kalam necessitate scholarship (that is, profound knowledge of a topic), so does the science of Sufism. Viewed as individuals, a person asks a Faqīh about the norms of divine law, a Mutakallim about the norms of doctrinal theology, and a Sufi about Muhammadan ethics; this paradigm was established centuries ago (Spevack 2014, 38–49).

Taking this step, looking at the ambassadors or representatives of the different aspects of religion opens up an understanding of what mediation in the Islamic religion constitutes. In a broad sense, it simply entails remembering the paragons of faith in a meaningful way, be they the prophets or other revered figures following their example. This ties into what was mentioned in the introduction: that the prophetic message is carried forth by individuals, and that these individuals' knowledge depends on their efforts to understand the message. Taking a practical example: if the Prophet were alive today, Muslims would certainly want to visit him, but since he has left this world, we are directed to his inheritors and to those who follow his message. Moreover, just as the Prophet's companions (*ṣaḥāba*) gave him gifts and honored and revered everything they received from him (teachings and everyday objects alike) (Gril 2006; Daḥlān 1991, 135f.), people today might bring home a cup he drank from or a piece of clothing he wore at some point.

To sum up what has been said so far, prophecy and, by extension, the prophetic realm hold a prominent place in the systematics of Islamic theology. Looked at from the perspective of the sciences—Fiqh, Kalam, and Sufism—which put the individual in direct conversation with the divine, Sufism can be labeled Muhammadan ethics, since the Prophet is generally viewed as the master of all masters, and all Sufi lineages attempt to trace their roots back to him. From the individual perspective (that is, how each believer can apply the sciences to their daily life), the prophetic realm is mainly found in the path to God (*ṭarīqa*), the second of the three layers. The shift from the third to the second layer is only logical, because a view of the sciences from the perspective of the sciences is the meta-perspective rooted in the endeavor to understand the prophetic and Quranic teachings. On the other hand, looking at the individual and applying divine law to one's actions, the path to God in Sufi practice (practical ethics), and reality for the higher truths one can only experience as a gift, means looking at how human beings experience the world. In other words, the prophetic realm could not take the place of the third layer of the individual quest, because this constitutes the human being in its perfected form—the Prophet Muhammad is called the “beautiful example” in the Quran (Quran 33:21), which in Sufism is interpreted as the perfect human being. Expressed in modern terms, we could say that the individual aspect generates a sort of anthropocentric vision insofar as it concentrates on human action and how this connects to the divine, whereas the perspective of the religious sciences generates a theocentric vision (cf. Chittick 2007).

The prophetic message was sent into the world(s) because people are in need of guidance, which God provides to them in His mercy, as *ṣunṇī* theology has it (Al-Ṣāwī 2010, 140ff.). In theoretical terms, this implies the Prophet's pre-eminence, and since he is no longer with us in this world, in practical terms it lays the ground for the manifold traditions venerating his traces; whether with poetry (by remembering his character, sayings, and actions), or by sending blessings onto him. Although the decrease in these practical aspects in modern times is due to several factors, I have focused on two major factors above: the intellectualization of religious thought, and Wahhābī influence on both theology and ordinary believers. This article aims to expound the idea of practical Muhammadan ethics, which involves looking at a practical aspect along with its prerequisites in terms of the relationship between God and the human individual, taking this route through the prophetic realm. In the following pages, the practical aspect I want to showcase is the mediation (*tawassul*) one can seek in prayer by mentioning the Prophet himself, other revered people, or objects.

To investigate this topic, which has stirred scholarly arguments for centuries, I want to introduce the astonishing work *Fayḍ al-wahhāb*, written by the Azharī scholar ‘Abd Rabbihī ibn Sulaymān al-Qaliyūbī in the mid-twentieth century, as a guide for examining what mediation means. This work is characterized not only by intellectual vigor and careful argumentation, but also by a spirit of explaining religion in a way that affords respect to the many dimensions of the human experience; when treating any topic, al-Qaliyūbī usually changes perspective multiple times to cover different angles. This spirit is also evident in the style he employs; his work is accessible, and he does not rely too much on

quotations from other scholars, although a reader familiar with the terminology of the religious sciences will immediately recognize the author's experience throughout the work.

Al-Qaliyūbī was a prolific scholar from the Minya Governorate in Egypt who authored at least five books (some of them, such as the *Fayḍ al-wahhāb*, are quite voluminous and consist of many volumes). To my knowledge, no research on him exists in English or another language so far. However, some of his works are still available in Arabic print. In a eulogy printed in a work of al-Qaliyūbī on Hadith, the scholar Muḥammad Bakhīt al-Muṭīī (d. 1935) (Skovgaard-Petersen [2010] 2023), who was also the rector of Al-Azhar university for some time, commends him for his knowledge and analytic skills, while another scholar again emphasizes the quality of his work and goes on to say that it would be a duty for people involved in the sciences to disseminate al-Qaliyūbī's work due to its high value (Al-Qaliyūbī 1930, app. 1ff.). Overall, it seems that he lived a life dedicated to knowledge, teaching, and writing in the environment of Al-Azhar university.

Al-Qaliyūbī's six-volume work deals with many subjects, but its main goal, as he mentions in the introduction, is "the demonstration of the intellectual proofs in accord with the transmitted proofs," so that people who have left the "communal consensus" may return to the right way (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 1:11). Al-Qaliyūbī was shaken by the widespread misinterpretations in many fields of the Wahhābī movement, particularly regarding breaches and infringements, which is why he wrote such a lengthy refutation (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 1:3–20). This reflects, I argue, in theological language what was mentioned in the introduction about turning away from the prophetic realm in modern times and referring more and more to the intellectual realm of ideas, which can also be seen in the topics addressed in the work.

Al-Qaliyūbī begins his endeavor with some obligatory chapters on the prerequisites of knowledge, which take up volume 1. In volumes 2 and 3, he deals with misinterpretations regarding the essence of God and His attributes but a large part of volumes 2 and 3 revolve around the Prophet Muhammad, his pre-eminent station, and nature. After also having dealt with misconceptions of his persona in theology, he goes on to highlight the role of transmitting religion in volume 4. For transmitting religion, practice is intrinsically important, as shown, and al-Qaliyūbī mainly discusses practices derived from the sources, such as the prayer for the Prophet, the means of approach (*wasīla*), the prayer of mediation (*tawassul*), and the visit of the friends of God or saints (*awliya Allāh*) at their tombs. Volumes 5 and 6 deal, among other things, with Sufism and again different practices also involving the Prophet.

As a result, we could describe the underlying theme of the work as reconstructing or defending the prophetic realm in Islamic theology which includes, to be sure, the practical dimension. We could even say that redeeming practice is a major theme of the *Fayḍ al-wahhāb*. Al-Qaliyūbī is very clear in his purpose and, methodologically speaking, he wants to address how one should encounter practical elements that were not present in the beginning of the religion. The aim is "to delineate the intellectual evidence (...) and to explain the core aspect and wisdom of the Muslim consensus regarding matters that did not exist in his [the Prophet's] time, may God Exalted bless him and grant him peace, so that the believer may find serenity in his practice." (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 1:8). Thus, the expressed aim is to demonstrate what the Wahhābiyya, in particular, has gotten wrong and has subsequently forced onto Muslim thought, be it among scholars or the general public.

Interestingly, and fittingly for this article, al-Qaliyūbī closes the introduction to the work by emphasizing the subject of mediation (*tawassul*), which represents in a nutshell the identifying features of the theological schools for which he argues. He mentions these schools, which have probably accounted for the majority of *sunnī* thought throughout history, at the beginning of the introduction, referring to Taqī al-dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), Ibn Hajar al-Hayṭamī (d. 974/1566), and Aḥmad al-Dardīr, as well as to more recent scholars such as Muḥammad 'Illīsh (d. 1882), Muḥammad Bakhīt al-Muṭīī (d. 1935), and Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Makhlūf (d. 1936). Here, al-Qaliyūbī reflects a well-known divide between scholars who proclaimed harmony between scholarship and Sufism as it is transmitted via the Sufi movements or orders, similarly to the transmission of schools

in Fiqh, and scholars such as Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792) who were critical of various Sufi practices, to say the least (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 1:8f.; Al-Mālikī 1993).

3. The Means of Approach (*wasīla*) and the Concept of the Prayer of Mediation (*tawassul*)

The prayer of mediation (*tawassul*) appears in the earliest sources. One example that illustrates this quite vividly is the story of the scholar Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/795). It tells of the occasion when the Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr (d. 158/775) went on pilgrimage and visited the Prophet, asking the attendant scholar in front of the tomb: “O Abū ‘Abd Allāh, should I face towards the *qibla* [towards the Kaaba] in supplication or should I face towards the Messenger of God, may peace and blessings be on him and his family, in supplication?” Mālik answered: “Why would you turn your face away from him although he is your means and the means of your father Adam to God Exalted? Face him and ask for intercession through him, so that he intercedes for you with God. God Exalted says: ‘Had they, when they wronged themselves, come to you, and prayed for God’s forgiveness, and the Messenger had prayed for their forgiveness, they would have found God relenting and merciful’” (Al-Subkī 2008, 347).

In Muslim thought in general, this and similar stories were, and are still, quite common due to the overall evidence from the Quran, the Sunnah, and the teachings of the early generations of Muslims. An exception were scholars like Ibn Taymiyya who labeled the story about Mālik and the caliph an invention, saying that there is no evidence in the early records for this, but over time many scholars have disproven this claim quite regularly. The later scholar Muḥammad al-Zurqānī (d. 1710), for example, undertook an effort to show that this is a false accusation rooting in the conviction of Ibn Taymiyya, and that there is factual evidence for the story as the Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ (d. 544/1149) and ‘Ali ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Fihri—a scholar from the first generation of Mālikī jurists (Ibn Farḥūn 1911, 202)—transmitted it (Al-Zurqānī 1996, 12:194ff.).

To understand the rationale for the concept of mediation in prayer or supplication (*tawassul*), first the theological implication behind it needs to be explored. This is the Quranic notion of a means (*wasīla*), which in essence covers everything someone uses to draw closer to God. The general idea is that in this world, nothing works without a means, or without a chain of communicational actions, which is to say that the state of being in this world is a state of dependency; every created and therefore ephemeral being is dependent on something. This is also, al-Qaliyūbī tells us, the reason for the major Quranic emphasis on action, as can be seen in Quran 9:105: “Say, act! God will see your actions, and so will His Messenger, and the believers”; and especially in 99:7–8: “Whoever has done an atom’s weight of good will see it. And whoever has done an atom’s weight of evil will see it.” In other words, this emphasis on action stems from the fact that to reach any goal, humans need a means to attain it (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:129). And subsequently, to act is existential for human life just as taking a means is. This is quite a unique entry point for addressing the topic of the means of approach (*wasīla*) but al-Qaliyūbī is not only arguing for the legitimacy of the prayer of mediation, rather he seeks to reflect on the theological underpinnings beyond the legal question.

A means or *wasīla* appears in the Quran in 5:35: “O you who believe! Be conscious of God, and seek the means of approach (*wasīla*) to Him, and strive in His cause, so that you may succeed.” Again in 17:57, it says: “Those they call upon are themselves seeking means of access (*wasīla*) to their Lord, vying to be nearer, and hoping for His mercy, and fearing His punishment.” While the second verse is framed as part of a discourse between those who believe and those who deny the message, and would hence lead this discussion in another direction, the first verse is clearly addressed to the Prophet’s followers. This general expression of a means is striking, as it suggests a method or principle behind the phrasing. Al-Qaliyūbī explains this verse by saying that using a means correlates with the basic nature of human beings (*fiṭra*): if someone wants to draw closer to something, then

they are in need of a means. Carried over into the relationship with God, this indicates that a means brings someone closer to God, in that they either do what is righteous or refrain from what is prohibited (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:128f.).

Here, a question arises due to the appearance of the second aspect of a means (refraining from what is prohibited), which is expressed in the question: Does refraining from something count as a means as well, since not doing something could not be characterized as an action? Diving deeper into exegesis is helpful here. Al-Qaliyūbī quotes Fakhr al-dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), who, in his interpretation of 5:35, explains that all of God's commandments (*takālīf*) are one of two kinds: (1) Refraining from what is prohibited, (2) Doing what is demanded; he assigns the first category to God-consciousness (*taqwā*) and the second to the means of approach (*wasīla*). He then goes on to say that God-consciousness (*taqwā*) is mentioned before the means because "refraining from something means leaving things in the non-existing state [in which] they are," and conversely, "an action is to bring something into existence, to attain something." This is inevitably so, he tells us in conclusion, because the world is constructed in this way (Al-Rāzī 1981, 11:225).

In what follows, al-Rāzī addresses the point that refraining from what is prohibited is presumed to be a good deed in theology as well. He responds by appealing to practical ethics: if one refrains from a prohibited action for the sake of earning God's satisfaction, then it becomes a good deed. Nevertheless, there are layers to this, since by their actions Muslims are commanded to acquire good character traits and avoid bad character traits. In thought, this entails reflecting on God's oneness, prophecy, and the return to God on the one hand, and refraining from uncertainties in this regard on the other. In addition, this pattern applies to training the self, and the Sufis (he uses the word *ahl al-riyāda*, "people of training the self"), in place of the linked terms "refrain and act", use terms such as "emptying (*takhliya*) and acquiring (*tahliya*)", or "vanishing (*maḥuw*) and awakening (*ṣaḥuw*)", or "effacement (*fanā*) and subsistence (*baqā*)". Ultimately, he draws a line to the *shahāda*, saying that this principle of negation followed by affirmation also explains why the statement "no god but God" first denies the existence of any deity alongside God; this reflects the condition of the world, and of the human being therein (Al-Rāzī 1981, 11:225).

Aḥmad al-Ṣāwī, the main student of Aḥmad al-Dardīr, sums up this argument in his exegesis: "God-consciousness means conforming to the obligatory commandments and refraining from prohibited transgressions. And to seek the means of approach is everything that brings [one] closer unrestrictedly" (Al-Ṣāwī 2006, 1:560). In the end, Al-Rāzī says no less: "The aim of seeking means to Him in attaining His satisfaction is through acts of worship (*ibādāt*) and obedience (*ṭāʾāt*)" (Al-Rāzī 1981, 11:226). As a result, a means is anything that brings someone closer to God, including refraining from something for God's sake, because with the right intention, refraining from something becomes an action.

Al-Ṣāwī subsequently specifies the means on this basis: they are, for example, "the love of the prophets of God and His friends (or saints), almsgiving, visiting the beloved people of God, supplications, holding family ties, increasing remembrance of God, etc." (Al-Ṣāwī 2006, 1:560). This quotation indicates the shift from a means to what mediation (*tawassul*) is, but it also requires clarification, as he mixes elements of a practical nature, such as almsgiving, with elements that are clearly of a metaphysical nature, such as love of the prophets. Also, the friends of God or the saints (*awliyā*) appear prominently right after the prophets; arguably if the prophets can be a means, then they can also be used in this way. In addition, we have to ask how love of the Prophet can be a means in practice. For answers, we must look at some of the Hadiths that al-Qaliyūbī cites in this respect (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:137ff.).

The notion of a means and respectively mediation is also mentioned in the sayings of the Prophet himself. For example, while going to the mosque he said: "O God, verily I ask You by the truth (*bi-ḥaqq*) of those who ask You and by the truth of my walk [. . .] that You save me from the fire and that You guide me to the garden" (transmitted by Ibn Māja and Ibn Khuzayma with a variation in the Musnad of Aḥmad; Al-Hindī 1986, no. 41535, 41552). Again, he once said in a prayer, which is transmitted in variations by Muslim, al-Bukhārī,

and others: “In the name of God, by the saliva of ourselves and by the dust of our earth, heals our Lord” (Al-Hindī 1986, no. 5748, 28535). And in another prayer transmitted by al-Ṭabarānī and Abū Nuʿaym, he said: “O God, by my truth and the truth of the prophets who came before me, forgive my mother Fāṭima bint Asad” (Al-Hindī 1986, no. 34425). Probably the most articulate report concerning this was transmitted by al-Tirmidī, Ibn Māja, al-Ḥākim, Aḥmad, and others: A blind man comes to the Prophet asking him for a prayer to heal his blindness. The Prophet advises him first to be patient, but then, when the man insists, teaches him this prayer: “O God, verily I ask You, I turn to You through Your Prophet Muhammad, the prophet of mercy, O Muhammad, truly through you I turn to my Lord in my concern so that you take care of it. O God, accept his intercession in my case.” (Al-Hindī 1986, no. 3640, 16816).

In these reports, God is clearly addressed via a means, and a means used in a prayer constitutes a prayer of mediation (*tawassul*). In the first prayer, the Prophet makes a request of God by means of people who themselves make requests of God or pray to Him. In the second prayer, he evokes the two substances that make up human beings—water and earth—which the famous commentator mentions as a possible interpretation (Al-ʿAsqalānī 2005, 13:176f.). In the third prayer, he clearly calls on the Prophets’ pre-eminent station. Finally, in the fourth prayer, the Prophet teaches one of his companions to mention him explicitly as a prophet and a mercy; referring to Quran 21:107, where the prophet is called a “mercy for the worlds”; when he requests something from God.

These reports answer one of our questions to a certain extent, since the means the Prophet uses in these reports are already different in nature: while the phrase “by the truth of the prophets” indicates a theological teaching, the saliva and earth as well as the walk to the mosque are apparently material means. Al-Qaliyūbī expounds on this, arguing that a means can be either material (*māddiyya*) or incorporeal (*maʿnawī*), whereby material means involve a reference to the sensory apparatus (*ḥissiyya*) that enables us to work and live our lives. Incorporeal means, on the other hand, refer to spiritual matters (*rūḥiyya*) “such as God’s wisdom in sending messengers or directing the servants to God Exalted through faith” (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:129). These two layers of being are manifested in the ritual prayer, for example, as this is an outward form which affects someone’s faith. This is the case because the divine commandments aim to establish a connection between the two realms; they can be considered separately, but only for the purpose of clarification.

Incorporeal means appear especially clearly, al-Qaliyūbī goes on, when it comes to sending forth the prophets, as the Quran says in 3:31: “Say, if you love God, then follow me, and God will love you.” What he wants to say here is that the prophetic realm appears not only in the commandments, such as the exhortation to ritual prayer, but also in the metaphysical world (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:129). Following the Prophet is the door to God’s love, and love is surely not a material means. Developing love for the Prophet is a key element in understanding the concept of prophecy (Vimercati Sanseverino 2022, 172–79), to which we will return below. For al-Qaliyūbī at this point, it is important to recognize that the outward and the inward dimensions are connected. Material means practiced through the body, as in ritual prayer, can serve as a vessel for incorporeal spiritual means, and incorporeal means can serve to bring about practical deeds that are rewarded, and “this reward can only be accessed via the means which God Exalted revealed for His servants” (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:130). This reflects the age-old question of what comes first, belief or practice; what is certain in this respect is that these dimensions correspond to each other.

Of course, in a ritual prayer, the physical act is accentuated, whereas in the Hadith (“O God, verily I ask You, I turn to You through Your Prophet Muhammad, the prophet of mercy”) and in the story of Mālik ibn Anas mentioned above, the focus lies instead on a spiritual means. The fact that the ritual prayer is unanimously accepted as a means to draw closer to God goes without saying, but if, as shown above in al-Rāzī’s interpretation of 5:35, a means includes the above-mentioned layers and dimensions, then as long as it involves acts of worship or pious deeds, there is theoretically nothing to be said against these types of prayers. On the contrary, they align with the principle that every created being

is dependent on something, hence why would a Muslim not rely on God's Messenger? This comes down to the question that appears in the story of Mālik and al-Manṣūr: Why should I turn to the Prophet when I can turn directly to God? Yet this phrasing ignores the human condition and reveals a rather simplistic understanding of the relationship between human beings and God. None of the scholars who argue in favor of mediational prayers have said that believers should only pray in this way. Instead, they say that in addressing God, calling on that which is dear to a person is an acceptable act from a normative point of view, so long as this accords with revelation.

To illustrate this, al-Qaliyūbī engages with critiques of the concept of mediation raised by the Wahhābīs concerning some relevant Quranic verses, which reveal a flawed understanding of how humans address the divine. Quran 40:60 says: "Pray to Me, and I will respond to you." These critics also like to mention a famous Hadith in which the Prophet says: "If you ask, ask God. And if you seek help, seek help from God" (transmitted by al-Tirmidī, Aḥmad, and al-Ḥākim; [Al-Hindī 1986](#), no. 5691). Understood verbatim, as the critics understood it until today, this would negate any sort of mediation; one should address prayers only and straightforwardly to God ([Gharaibeh 2012](#), 22). But is that what the Prophet meant when he uttered these words? And what is the story behind the Quranic verse; that is, what is the goal and the meaning of a prayer or a supplication?

To this, al-Qaliyūbī replies that the critics miss the point of a prayer (*duʿā*) because God is neither in need of any prayers, nor is He speaking about oneness vs. multiplicity in 40:60; rather, God is explaining something about the relationship between human beings and the Creator. Approaching verse 40:60 in this way, in combination with other verses such as 4:32 ("and ask God for His favor"), al-Qaliyūbī argues for a completely different understanding. Looking through the lens of this verse, which says that humans should ask God for His favor, what could be a greater favor than sending the prophets? Thus, such means can or should be used in prayer. In conclusion, he states that these verses in particular emphasize the concept of using a means to draw closer to God, and in them we find "the essence of mediation" ([Al-Qaliyūbī 1967](#), 4:130).

This becomes even clearer when we look at the above-mentioned Hadith: "If you ask, ask God. And if you seek help, seek help from God." Again, focusing on the topic of oneness and obsessing over a possible breach of it should not cloud one's judgment when interpreting prophetic reports. A meaningful interpretation of this Hadith, according to al-Qaliyūbī, is possible if we remember that human beings can lose their inner direction when they face life's trials. He gives the example of someone falling ill and going to see a physician. Zayd, let us call him, deems it necessary to see a doctor because he feels ill and wants an expert opinion. At the doctor's office, he will mention his complaints and his pains, and none of this is prohibited, but is rather obligatory in the nature of medicine. Waiting for the doctor's response, he will then hope or even pray aloud: "O God, let him have the cure, inspire him with good judgment, and provide him with the diagnosis."

In this example, our fictional Zayd remembers that all healing ultimately comes from God, although it might seem to be coming from the doctor or the medicine. In this sense, the Hadith reminds us that even if we seek help directly from other people, we must not forget the higher authority that stands behind the agent (here, the doctor) and is evident in his power or skill. From this perspective, the prophetic report is a clue to understanding the nature of a means and its function in the world. Medicine is a means, and making use of it should not distract from the Creator's power, but renouncing it due to the danger of mistaking the doctor for God makes no sense whatsoever. Hence al-Qaliyūbī rephrases the Hadith as follows: "If you ask a created being, don't forget the Creator" ([Al-Qaliyūbī 1967](#), 4:131).

Al-Qaliyūbī subsequently hints at reports about early Muslims that imply the dangers of a false understanding of divine unity or oneness (*tawḥīd*). This is important and relevant, because the critics do have evidence to support their claims that mentioning something or someone besides God in prayer is equivalent to addressing something or someone else. But this evidence in most cases appears in the context of polytheism, which raises the

question: Can a Muslim who believes in the oneness of God and the prophetic message fall under the category of a denier (*kāfir*), in the same sense as the Prophet's opponents, who did not assert God's oneness? The short answer is definitively no, since pronouncing the *shahāda* and the five pillars of Islam generally protects Muslims from that assertion. So this is merely a doctrinal issue, which emerges in the words one prays when one calls on the Prophet, for example, as in the Hadiths mentioned above. Here, we need to remember that the Islamic religion arrived in a polytheistic context, and that Muslims at that time did not always understand the message immediately. This is why not only Quranic verses, but also Hadiths, insist on God's oneness and rhetorically unmask the problems inherent in a polytheistic worldview. Considering the evidence overall, the immersive and profound nature of revelation in the Quran and the Sunnah appears to traverse the circumstances from the time of revelation to today.

To add one example from the Kalam tradition, which seeks to clarify the matter rationally, one can differentiate between obedience (*tā'a*), service (*qurba*), and worship (*ibāda*). As Ibn al-Amīr al-Sunbāwī says in his gloss, we assume that someone can be obedient to a ruler (*amīr*) and serve him, but not worship him. In the case of prayer, however, if it is performed out of a commitment to the divine command, then it is obedience; if one seeks proximity to mercy, it is service; and when it is performed as a way of attending to God and humbling oneself, then it is worship (Al-Sunbāwī 2001, 25). Once again, this demonstrates the notion that, with regard to the divine, we need to change our perspective if we wish to take seriously the command not to believe in anything besides God. Simply insisting on the notion that we should do nothing to give the external impression of associating any other thing with Him does not free a person from believing in a ruler's all-encompassing power, for example, and indeed revering him to the degree of worship. And vice versa, calling on the Prophet in a prayer does not imply that the person who prays is questioning God's unity.

The individual prayer is given high priority in the Quran; here, the individual relationship between God and His servant is of primary concern, as shown in depictions of the prophets and their struggles. Yet the Hadith corpus also has much to offer in this respect. One Hadith reports that the Prophet once said: "Prayer (*ḍu'ā*) is the essence of worship"; he then cited Quran 40:60: "Pray to Me, and I will respond to you." According to another report, he said: "Prayer is the core of worship." And yet another version says: "The noblest worship is prayer" (transmitted by Aḥmad, Ibn Abū Shayba, al-Ḥākim, Ibn Ḥibbān, Ibn Māja, al-Tirmidī, Adab of al-Bukhārī; Al-Hindī 1986, no. 3113–15). Of course, taking this to the next level, worship has only one goal, which is oneness (*tawḥīd*) (see Quran 51:56). In this sense, praying and making a request of God is "the ultimate means itself to the One you seek your concern from." Al-Qaliyūbī goes on to say that this is the essence of religion: to turn toward the Creator (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:132f.) Hence, understanding the nature of a means is connected to the concept of religion itself.

To sum up this section so far, we can say that human beings require means to do pretty much anything, and that means range from material things to spiritual means, such as the prophetic message or God's act of sending the prophets. In the next step, given that Muslims are asked to pray to God and ask Him for his favor, the means is employed because prayer represents the human reaction to the divine action of creation. As a result, Muslims since the dawn of Islam have called on the Prophet to ask God for something. This is supported by Hadiths in which the Prophet himself teaches this concept of mediation, making a request of God according to the truth of something, such as the prophecy of God's Messenger. In this vein, we might ask whether it is possible to extrapolate a principle from this concept, or whether we have evidence that the companions used this idea of mediation and developed it further. This was indeed the case; this concept was extended, just as later scholars developed guidelines predicated upon interpretations given by the Prophet's companions.

One quite famous report has it that the second caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 24/644), once said (as transmitted by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Aḥmad, and al-Ṭabarānī; Al-Hindī 1986,

no. 37297) when a drought struck the people: “O God, when we were struck by a drought in the time of our Prophet, we asked You (*natawassal*) through our Prophet, and You gave us water. Today, we ask You through the uncle of our Prophet [al-‘Abbās], give us water!” In another version, transmitted by al-Ḥākim and Ibn ‘Asākir, the phrasing is different: “O God, this is the uncle of Your Prophet, may the blessings and peace of God be with him, we turn towards You through him, give us water!” (Al-Hindī 1986, no. 37298). Having mentioned this report from Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, al-Qaliyūbī quotes Maḥmūd al-Alūsī (d. 1802), who said: “After all this I don’t see any problem with mediation to God Exalted through the station of the Prophet, may the blessings and peace of God Exalted be with him, in life or death [...], it is as if they said: ‘O my God, I ask You by the station of Your Prophet [...].’ Or, as if they said: ‘O my God, let Your love for him be a means for my concern’” (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:136f.).

Al-Alūsī had changed his opinion on this matter, as al-Qaliyūbī tells us, but subsequently understood the idea very well. Addressing the doubts his reader may have, Al-Qaliyūbī quotes him again, saying that the Prophet’s companions “were close to an age when mediation through idols was still ongoing.” That is why “they were reserved in terms of mediation through people who are not alive anymore.” Once the people became acquainted with the spirit of the religion, the early generations adopted the concept of mediation. This principle “affects the mediation through the station of others than the Prophet, may the blessings and peace of God Exalted be with him, there is no issue with this as long as the person serving as a means is known for his station with God Exalted” (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:136).

This step has had a great impact on the history of Muslim piety and practical ethics. Today, prayers including God’s Messenger or one of God’s friends (*awliyā*) are widespread, and they always have been. However, mediation (*tawassul*) should not be conflated with another prayer, the “call for help” (*istighātha*), which involves asking God for something but addressing one of God’s friends in direct speech. This is a related topic, but it would go beyond the scope of this article. Interestingly, al-Qaliyūbī does not deal with *istighātha* either after or even in the context of mediation; he addresses it after dealing with subjects concerning holiness and the bearers thereof (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 5:69ff.). This makes sense, insofar as a clarification of the nature of holiness and its bearer, the friend of God, is necessary before diving into this topic.

What al-Qaliyūbī does instead, after dealing with the principle of mediation, is to address various Muslim practices, such as reading the Surah *al-Fātiḥa* for someone or visiting the friends of God at tombs in mosques and other places. His aim in these chapters is not exactly what one might expect, which would be a justification for these practices, relying on evidence drawn from tradition and intellectual debate. While he does provide evidence, of course, and discusses the rational side of the matter, he nevertheless gives it a very different spin. As in the case of mediation by means of the Prophet and God’s friends, he develops a principle that he then expounds based on doctrinal teachings in *sunni* theology. In a certain way, this turn toward the practical aspects of life is very consistent: mediation means seeking help by spiritual means, while practices relating to God’s friends, such as visiting tombs, signify seeking help through material means. All of these aspects deserve to be investigated in their own right, but in the following section I shall put forth one aspect which substantiates the concept of mediation: the notion of what qualifies someone to serve as a means.

4. Permissible Mediation and the Truth of the Means

In the Hadiths mentioned above, which legitimate the practice of mediational prayers in general, one element appears to be special in that it seems to signify why the Prophet chose one particular means over others. This element is the words “by the truth of” (*bi-ḥaqq*); for example, in the report: “O God, verily I ask You by the truth (*bi-ḥaqq*) of those who ask You and by the truth of my walk [...] that You save me from the fire and that You guide me to the garden.” He also said: “O God, by my truth and the truth of the prophets who came

before me, forgive my mother Fāṭima bint Asad. “Al-Qaliyūbī addresses this under the heading: “Mediation is permitted because of the truth of the person used as a means.” Of interest to us here is the final part of this sentence: “the truth of the person used as a means” (*bi-ḥaqq al-mutawassal bihī*), which helps us to better understand the nature of mediation.

The Wahhābīs go so far as to declare that anyone who prays a prayer of mediation by means of someone who is believed to be a righteous servant is in fact a denier (*kāfir*) and a polytheist (*mushrik*). This verdict has layers to it because the Wahhābīs’ grand role model, Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), had a nuanced view of the matter; he did not throw out the concept of mediation completely because he was aware of the above-mentioned reports and the Quranic evidence, but he was generally very hostile to the idea (Ibn Taymiyya 2004, 1:101–107). Al-Qaliyūbī deals with these arguments and counterarguments quite extensively (e.g., Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 6:146ff.). The Wahhābīs have been and continue to be particularly infuriated by mediation by means of people who are believed to be saints, friends of God (*awliyā Allāh*), or simply God’s righteous servants (*ṣāliḥūn*). In *sunnī* theology, on the other hand, the permission for such mediation is old news; al-Qaliyūbī has the support of the majority of scholars in asserting this (Daḥlān 1991; Al-Haythamī 1992; Al-Mālikī 1993).

He takes the Wahhābī denial as an opportunity to explain a very fundamental aspect of theological ethics, a practice which leads to mediation in the end: this is the understanding of what the word “truth” (*ḥaqq*) means (“reality,” “right”, or “dignity” would also be good translations). He begins with textual evidence; the Quran says in 30:47: “It is incumbent (*ḥaqqan*) on Us to help the believers.” Incumbent here, he explains, is used in the sense that God promises to help, as it is also said in Quran 21:104: “a promise binding on Us. We will act.” In other words, God uses a language humans can understand, but incumbency and promise imply His will, not that He is bound to principles; the latter would mean that He is neither all-knowing nor all-powerful. One Hadith illustrates this when God’s Messenger speaks with Mu’adh ibn Jabal. The Prophet asked Mu’adh: “Do you know what the right of God is over His servants and what the right of the servants is over Him?” He answered: “God and His Messenger are more knowledgeable.” The Prophet said: “The right of God over His servants is that they worship Him and do not associate something with Him. And their right over Him is, if they do this, that He does not cause them anguish” (transmitted by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, Muslim, and Ibn Māja; Al-Hindī 1986, no. 238).

Along with the Hadiths in which the Prophet prays and uses the phrase “by the truth,” on the one hand al-Qaliyūbī wants to showcase the different layers of the Arabic word truth (*ḥaqq*), but on the other he wants to emphasize the fact that in these texts, humans do have a say and a role, that they are not mere material for the divine will. God bestows blessings and special status on human beings, as in Quran 30:47, in which the believers are helped truly or rightly; that is, God gives agency to humans, as we see clearly in the Hadith concerning Mu’adh. It is true that God is absolutely free in His actions, but He also chose to give humans a say in this world, which is commonly known as free will; yet in this context, al-Qaliyūbī points to the stations to which humans, by their willpower, are able to ascend, if God wills. These stations are in turn the truth (*ḥaqq*) of a person, as mentioned in the Hadiths (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:137f.)

Al-Qaliyūbī then goes on a tangent to make the point that one big misunderstanding is rooted in Ibn Taymiyya’s interpretation, namely that mediation must only occur by means of living people, whether prophets or righteous servants. Al-Qaliyūbī denies this outright, mainly because this would imply that the deceased have truly died, while the Quran and the Hadith argue for exactly the opposite. The Quran says: “Ask those of Our messengers We sent before you: ‘Did We appoint gods besides the Most Gracious to be worshiped?’” (Quran 43:45) Here, al-Qaliyūbī asks rhetorically whether God seeks to direct His Messenger to prophets who have left the earth. This is supported by the Hadith: “O God, by my truth and the truth of the prophets who came before me, forgive my mother Fāṭima bint Asad”, because the Prophet Muhammad explicitly mentions the prophets who came before him.

In the Quran, al-Qaliyūbī continues, the fact is that God gives agency to created beings who act according to His commission. Otherwise, when God directs Moses to al-Khiḍr, a friend of God (see Quran 18:65ff.), could we not say that Moses should have gone to God directly? And what about Solomon, who asks the people around him to bring him the queen of Sheba's throne (Quran 27:38)? Surely Solomon should have asked this of God? And in the story about the cow in the Quran, Moses orders the Israelites commissioned by God to slaughter a cow as compensation, then they ask God through him, and ask again, until they become to know it, etc. Did they turn away from God by asking Moses, or was this precisely the divine intent? In all of these examples, al-Qaliyūbī explains, created beings are directed toward other created beings to learn about the signs of God in this world, so that they become familiar with the oneness within themselves—that is, true faith in God's unity (*tawḥīd*) (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:138ff).

People are constantly learning, and according to doctrine, the Quran teaches how they can develop a sense of the truth through the messengers as prototypes, as those who know the divine revelation that leads to faith. This idea crystalizes in the Messengers' love, reverence, and obedience, which is again the rationale behind verses such as 4:80: "Whoever obeys the Messenger is obeying God." The "Messenger is not God", al-Qaliyūbī remarks, "but should be obeyed". Did God "oblige His servants to associate something with Him?" The same goes for verse 3:31: "Say, 'If you love God, then follow me, and God will love you.'" God brings the Prophet into focus so that the people learn about faith, thereby turning them toward a created being. But in reality, as al-Qaliyūbī concludes, He directs them to faith via the route of prophecy (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:140). At this point, we can see quite clearly that, as mentioned in the introduction, practice in the sense of prophetic ethics is directly correlated with a higher principle: the orientation toward prophecy not only includes an outward aspect of following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, but also the inward aspect of acquiring knowledge of the divine taking the route via the prophetic realm.

At long last, al-Qaliyūbī tells a story from his own experience to describe the whole process: how the prophetic realm (represented here by the tomb of the Prophet's grandson al-Ḥusayn), is physically and spiritually accessible today. Once a man influenced by Wahhābī thought came to him and asked: "Should I leave God and visit our Master al-Ḥusayn?" He answers: "In which direction do you want to leave God?" When the man remains silent, he continues: "Who created al-Ḥusayn?" The man answers: "God." Al-Qaliyūbī continues: "Who grants my wish at him [at the tomb]?" The man says: "God." He asks again: "And who gives me love of him and creates the desire to visit him?" Of course, the man replies: "God." Al-Qaliyūbī concludes: "This means I go to God, i.e., to a source of His blessings, which He has granted His servants in existence. He [God] instructed them [created beings] to concentrate on them [the blessings]" (Al-Qaliyūbī 1967, 4:140).

This story completes the circle, highlighting the meaning of truth in the verses and Hadiths mentioned above. As a result, truth is what the believer finds when they seek the blessings with which God ordains certain people. Finding some truth in the teachings or stories of "our Master al-Ḥusayn", for example, may lead to a love for him, to a connection. Visiting him then (the tomb), following this train of thought, becomes a simple matter of intensifying the relationship, hoping for more insight. In other words, returning to the topic of mediation, it is God's blessings that are sought in a mediational prayer, as when someone prays: "O God, by the love of our Master al-Ḥusayn, I ask You for guidance." This person seeks to evoke the strong connection between the Prophet's grandson and God, in which the supplicant believes, based on the wisdom they might have found in al-Husayn's sayings or in stories about him.

In general, this subject is not easily accessible via the intellect since it is an intuitive process to some extent and encompasses the human experience. This should not come as a surprise, as practical norms of worship according to Islamic theology—such as ritual prayer or fasting—are also primarily devotional acts, and while there may be a rationale for them that is open to the intellect, there need not be, as scholars have always known. This

is especially important today, at a time when the intellect seems to be all-encompassing, or is presumed to be all-knowing, and when emotional intelligence is simultaneously devalued. However, Islamic practical ethics—such as the prayer of mediation or the visit of the Prophet’s tomb—draw heavily on virtue ethics and storytelling, all of which aims to establish a connection with or a love for the good character traits found in the paragons of faith (Zargar 2017; Taylor 1998). While the scope of this article does not allow me to address this topic here, it certainly calls for further research.

5. Conclusions

The goal of this article was to expound on the nature of mediation and its function in opening a door to prophecy and its traces, or what I have called the prophetic realm. The exploration of the systematics of the canonical sciences of theology in section one and two has shown that the Sufi layer can be viewed as Muhammadan ethics, insofar as the Prophet embodies the perfect example of the accomplished character, according to Muslim consensus. The spirit of the modern era has shifted the focus that was previously applied to the prophetic realm, as is currently manifested in intellectual vigor and concretely in Wahhābī thought. The intellectual approach, which in and of itself is not to be condemned, has nevertheless alienated tangible thought and literature concerning prophecy, and—in combination with Wahhābism—has delivered a blow to Muslim scholarship and public life.

One element which lost credibility as part of this development is surely the prayer of mediation or *tawassul*. The concept of mediation rests on the Quranic injunction to use a means (*wasīla*) for worship. As I have shown in section three, al-Qaliyūbī uses this concept to lay out an intelligible method for such a prayer. His classification of means into material and spiritual means is especially compelling; in this way, the prophetic realm becomes tangible in different layers: physically, e.g., through ritual prayer and fasting, as well as the traditional visit to the Prophet’s tomb during the pilgrimage; and spiritually, since Muslims are asked to establish an inner connection via love and obedience to him, to become his followers. Thus, the spiritual means constitute the basis for the prayer of mediation.

The Hadith in which the Prophet teaches someone this prayer: “O God, verily I ask You, I turn to You through Your Prophet Muhammad, the prophet of mercy”, vividly illustrates the origins of what has developed into the prayer of mediation. As the example of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb shows, the idea of finding mediation by means of someone other than the Prophet (in this case, the Prophet’s uncle, al-‘Abbās), was also not foreign to the early generations; thereby, a principle for the concept of mediation in prayer was developed by the scholars. Contrasted with another prophetic report, the picture becomes theologically complex: “If you ask, ask God. And if you seek help, seek help from God.” If both of these reports are correct, then the latter requires clarification. Al-Qaliyūbī’s interpretation argues that this testimony only makes sense if it is put into the context of the human condition: human beings in this world are asked to cultivate their faith, and therefore must not forget who ultimately provides for them; as we have seen in the above example drawn from medicine, even if it seems that a physician has healed a person, ultimately it is God who grants healing.

When we take individual prayer into consideration, this truly poses a challenge. After all, prayer (*du‘ā*) is a deeply personal act, and in a way signifies what religion stands for: the relationship between the servant and the Lord. In general, this can be seen as a therapeutic tool, to use today’s language (in the sense that prayer is ultimately connected with an answer to a question or a request, and therefore relief), and from this angle as well, it seems unsustainable to expect that someone should not mention people who are dear to them in a prayer to God. On the contrary, according to al-Qaliyūbī, as Quran 5:35 asserts: “O you who believe! Be conscious of God, and seek the means of approach (*wasīla*) to Him, and strive in His cause, so that you may succeed.” That implies, if spiritual means also count as means, then prophecy and even the Prophet himself constitute a preferable subject to be included in a prayer.

The fourth section addressed the meaning of the term “truth” (*ḥaqq*) in the Quran and the Hadith regarding the prayer of mediation. Al-Qaliyūbī’s answer is that this wording zooms in on the matter, so to speak: someone’s truth is that which God gives them as a favor or a blessing (in its highest form, this is the prophetic message). This links the question of what is a means to the individual prayer or the quest to cultivate one own’s faith via the acquisition of good character traits. For example, reading stories about the early Muslims might inspire one to visit the tomb of Lady Zaynab, the daughter of the Prophet’s daughter Faṭima, which many people presume is located in Cairo. Such a visit can then serve as proof of the visitor’s dedication to the wisdom found in stories about Zaynab, and consequently the bond is strengthened; and the visitor may even be rewarded, according to al-Qaliyūbī, due to the special place she holds in the eyes of God.

The scope of this article has only allowed me to provide a small glimpse into al-Qaliyūbī’s world of thought, as this is revealed in his works. His work is in full accord with that of his predecessors, such as al-Dardīr and al-Ṣāwī, placing significant weight on the prophetic realm, which encompasses the traditions concerning God’s friends, *al-awliyā* as well. In these few pages, I have examined only one aspect of al-Qaliyūbī’s broader theology. He has much more to offer, such as when he speaks of the Prophet Muhammad’s station, writing in an accessible style and discussing the many different views of the matter, but nevertheless tying this all together in quite a unique synthesis of rational thought and spiritual reflection. Another strong aspect of al-Qaliyūbī’s work is his explanations for the interplay between practices and faith, which we have touched only superficially here, concerning how practice, faith, and storytelling are interconnected.

Funding: The APC was funded by the University of Tübingen.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Hadiths in this article are cited according to ‘Alī al-Muttaqī al-Hindī’s concordance, *Kanz al-‘ummāl fī sunan al-aqwāl wa-l-afāl*. The numbers are the same across all editions because they originate with al-Hindī himself.

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