

Atif Khalil. *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2018. xii + 260 pages. ISBN: 9781438469119.

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*Translated by Faruk Akyıldız\*\**

Important works continue to be added to the literature on Sufism's formative period. Among the leading contributions are Feryal Salem's *The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunni Scholasticism: 'Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak and the Formation of Sunni Identity in the Second Islamic Century* (2016), Hacı Bayram Başer's *Şeriat ve Hakikat: Tasavvufun Teşekkül Süreci (Sharia and the Truth: Formative Period of Sufism; 2017)*, and Atif Khalil's *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism* (2018). While Salem's work deals with the formation of Sufism as a Sunni science through 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181/797) and the notion of asceticism (*zuhd*), Başer's work reveals how Sufism, as a spiritual jurisprudence (*al-fiqh al-bāṭin*), gained legitimacy among other Islamic sciences over the general conceptual analysis.<sup>1</sup> Khalil's reading of this period focuses on a single but central concept: *tawba* (repentance).

As a young scholar, Khalil's interests mostly focus on Sufism's early period. This work, a product of his holistic readings on that period, explores how these Sufis received the concept of *tawba*. Such conceptual studies are highly needed in Sufi studies, especially regarding this specific period. There is also a need for macro-level holistic studies of stations and states (*aḥwāl* and *maqāmāt*), as well as

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1 Feryal Salem, *The Emergence of Early Sufi Piety and Sunni Scholasticism: 'Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak and the Formation of Sunni Identity in the Second Islamic Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Hacı Bayram Başer, *Şeriat ve Hakikat: Tasavvufun Teşekkül Süreci* (Istanbul: Klasik, 2017).

individual micro-studies focusing on each station and state, for this period will be better understood only when the map of these concepts becomes clearer.<sup>2</sup>

This masterful 260-page work, which includes 60 pages of endnotes and a 16-page bibliography, deserves appreciation just in terms of the author's use of resources. Khalil has managed to use almost all of Sufi literature written during Islam's first four centuries. Some lesser known books, such as those by al-Khargūshī (d. 406/1015-1016), al-Sirjānī (d. 470/1077), and Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d. 470/1077), which are not very much used in Turkey's academic circles, are included in the conceptual analysis. The relevant secondary literature produced in Western languages has also been extensively utilized. As this book is dominated by an interdisciplinary view, linguistic, exegetical, theological, and historical sources are also present.

This work seeks "to bring to light approaches to *tawba*, commonly translated as "repentance," from the early period of Sufism" (2). In fact, the author succeeds so well in this regard that one can say that he has provided, by benefiting from this concept's centrality in understanding Sufism's formation, a new opportunity for researchers. Repentance is critical for understanding Sufism in general and its formative period in particular. As a matter of fact, as stations and states became much clearer over time, repentance's place in the Sufi wayfaring (*sulūk*) became clearer as well.

The work consists of two main parts and seven chapters. The first part, a brief introduction, deals with the etymological and semantic background of repentance in the Qur'anic context according to Toshihiko Izutsu's (d. 1993) method. The second part, which examines the early Sufis' various approaches to repentance, focuses on this concept as an inner conversion brought about by dispelling one's unawareness (*ghafla*), for it came to mean that one entered Sufism by this specific type of conversion, as was the case with Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 161/778) and al-Fuḍayl b. 'Iyād (d. 187/803). This occurs via an inner voice, an unexpected ordinary but striking piece of advice from someone, or legendary examples of bestowing a favor upon someone. He then discusses where repentance stands in the context of

2 One should note Sultan Adanır Salihoglu's *Sufilerde Bir Nefs Terbiye Yöntemi Olarak Açlık* (Istanbul: Hayy Kitap, 2019), which focuses on the concept of *jū'* (hunger), as a contribution to these conceptual studies. For case studies, see Mahmud Esad Erkaya, *Kur'an Kaynaklı Tasavvuf Kavramları* (Ankara: OTTO, 2017); Süleyman Derin, *Love in Sufism: From Rabia to Ibn al-Farid* (Istanbul: İnsan, 2008); Necdet Tosun, "İbn Arabî Öncesi Tasavvufta Halvet ve Uzlet" (MA thesis, Marmara University, 1995).

stations and states by following the elements of repentance, degrees, and contact with other stations and states through guidebooks written especially in the fourth century AH that compiled the words of previous Sufis.

In the fifth chapter, the author emphasizes these Sufis' various approaches by choosing four of the founding Sufis who spoke on repentance, namely, Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899), Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 297/909), and Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d. 324/936). He then tries to examine their perspectives through their relevant words in various sources, for they produced no independent treatises on this concept. These almost contemporaneous Sufis lived during the formative period of Sufism. The sixth and seventh chapters examine the views of al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), respectively, on repentance.

Up to this point, the book follows a chronological outline. The seventh (and final) chapter briefly mentions al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) view by referring to al-Makkī's influence on him, and brings the understanding of repentance up to the fifth century AH. Indeed, the author stated in the introduction that the book covers the period between the second and the fifth centuries AH with a special focus on the third and fourth centuries AH (2).

In the first part, Khalil looks at meaning realm of repentance in the Qur'ān but does not fully explain why he does so. In the introduction, he remarks that one who does not want to read first part can pass directly to the second part because the former is not essential to understanding the latter (10). This part could be related to the fact that Sufism, especially during the early period, was formed as a spiritual jurisprudence (*al-fiqh al-bāṭin*) and drew the limits of its epistemology with the Qur'ān and Sunna.<sup>3</sup> In the introduction, although the author states his intention to add this part to the book to "demonstrate the Qur'ānic background to many later Sufi ideas" (7), or in the second part "to understand the range of meanings *tawba* takes on in the Qur'ān so that we can then compare it with the sense it has in the Sufi tradition" (26), we think that it is better to emphasize this relationship in terms of the book's overall integrity.

3 al-Junayd al-Baghdādī's famous word on this subject has been a guide for the Sufis: "Our knowledge is bound by the *Kitāb* and the *Sunna*." See al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, ed. Ma'rūf Muṣṭafā Zurayk (Beirut: al-Maktabat al-Ashliyya, 2001), 431. Also see Erkaya, *Kur'an Kaynaklı Tasavvuf Kavramları*, 35-62. For a discussion of the possibility of Sufi knowledge and its relationship to the Qur'ān, see Başer, *Şeriat ve Hakikat*, 213-16.

Khalil follows the world of meaning as regards repentance in the early period, especially through al-Kharrāz, Sahl al-Tustarī, al-Junayd al-Baghdādī, al-Wāsiṭī, al-Muḥāsibī, and Abū Ṭalīb al-Makkī. Since these Sufis are among the founding figures of Sufism, they are highly representative. Their preferences are accurate in terms of the references made to their words or treatises. In addition, references are made to the later period of Sufism directly and indirectly, and to compare with the eminent names such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-‘Arif (d. 536/1141), Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandari (d. 709/1309), ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusi (d. 1143/1731), and Ibn ‘Ajība (d. 1224/1809) as a guide to grasp the issue. Thus a concept like repentance, which is difficult to explain and intense in its various psychological and spiritual dimensions, is reflected as if it were a self-experience.

Khalil’s preference for endnotes instead of footnotes makes reading his book a little bit tiring, for one is constantly going to the end of the book. Using footnotes in future editions would be a significant improvement. In addition, although those who want to follow his assessment of repentance in a holistic context in relation to other religious sciences will not find enough information, Turkish readers may be able to overcome this deficiency by benefiting from some recent studies.<sup>4</sup>

Although the book does not claim to capture the contexts of time and space, historical context could be added by making effective use of secondary historical sources like Ahmet T. Karamustafa<sup>5</sup> or Nile Green<sup>6</sup> did. One could also argue whether the space context played a role in the concept’s development. For example, were significant differences in the viewpoints between Baghdad’s Sufism and Khorasan’s *malāmatīyya*. Since these contexts remain incomplete, the historical developments, changes, and transformations of the concept cannot be followed. One can also say that the socio-cultural and political dimensions are neglected in the historical context, as the text focuses on textual analyses.

We cannot help mentioning that the term “Spanish mystic” (82), which the author used for Ibn al-‘Arabī, sounds rather strange. While the definition of “Andalusia” refers to geography, “Spanish” refers to an identity or *ethnie*. At best, this is anachronistic in the case of Ibn al-‘Arabī, who was not ethnically Spanish

4 See Ekrem Demirli, “The Problem of Periodization in Sufi Studies: The Struggle of Sufism to Become a Discipline Between the Religious Sciences and Metaphysics,” *Nazariyat Journal for the History of Islamic Philosophy and Sciences* 2, no. 4 (May 2016): 1-32. Also see Başer, *Şeriat ve Hakikat*.

5 See Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2007).

6 See Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

and was born in the geographical region known as Andalusia, not Spain. Therefore, “Andalusian Sufi” is more appropriate.

This guiding and eye-opening work for researchers provides an example of methodology in terms of showing how conceptual readings can be made in Sufi studies. Starting from a critical concept such as repentance, the formative period's concept map can become clearer as similar studies are made about, for example, *fanā'-baqā'*, *'ishq-maḥabba* (love), *ṣabr-shukr*, *walāya-nubuwwa*, *'aql*, *kasb*, *niyya* (intention), *riḍā*. On the other hand, this work can be a trigger for comparative studies with other Islamic sciences. In this context, for instance, one could mention the jurists' decision to exile Sahl al-Tustarī because of his opinion on repentance, or even a socially accepted name such as al-Junayd al-Baghdādī, was affected negatively by the movement of Ghulām al-Khalīl (d. 275/888), referring to Başer's periodization<sup>7</sup> of this concept with other Islamic sciences during the periods of “criticism, crisis and reconciliation.” In this respect, Khalil's book can show the way forward.

7 See Başer, *Şeriat ve Hakikat*, 31-40.