

RELIGION AND  
MYSTICISM  
IN  
EARLY ISLAM

Theology and Sufism in Yemen

The Legacy of Aḥmad Ibn 'Alwān

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# INTRODUCTION

This book explores the development of Islamic mysticism in Yemen from the beginning of Islam until the demise of the Ottoman Empire and into the modern period. It focuses on the religious-political struggle; the interplay between the Shī‘ī, Sunnī, and Sufi traditions; and the cultural and intellectual debates. It also describes the rise and development of Sufi institutions with special attention to the theology, Sufism, and legacy of perhaps the greatest religious and mystical thinker of premodern Yemen, Aḥmad b. ‘Alwān (d. 665/1266).

Ibn ‘Alwān lived during the period of Yemen’s momentous transition from the rule of the Egyptian Ayyūbid dynasty (569–626/1173–1228)<sup>1</sup> to that of their Rasūlid lieutenants (626–858/1228–1454), who declared their independence from the Egyptian Ayyūbids in 632/1234. As a renowned scholar and mystical visionary, Ibn ‘Alwān’s interactions with the ruling elites of both dynasties were marked by tension and ambiguity. Their representatives held him in high regard and listened carefully to his advice and admonitions, yet they resented his critique of their governance. Ibn ‘Alwān’s contribution to the development of Islamic mysticism, theology, and spirituality in Yemen was wide-ranging and varied. He left behind a substantial body of writings on various aspects of Islamic mysticism, theology, law, and Qur’ān exegesis, and he was also an accomplished mystical poet, whose poems have continued to enjoy great popularity among Yemeni Muslims up to the present day. Although Ibn ‘Alwān died seven and a half centuries ago, his tomb remains the object of a colorful annual pilgrimage attended by hundreds of visitors from far and wide. This fact alone serves as the best testimony of his continual relevance to the lives and aspirations of all in Yemen, from the rural peasant to the urban intellectual.

Given Ibn ‘Alwān’s great stature as an intellectual and spiritual beacon of the Yemeni nation, it is not surprising that his life and work have

become the subjects of many academic studies in Yemen and other Arab countries. However, these studies have not yet succeeded in placing his intellectual and spiritual legacy into the broader historical, political, and social context of his epoch. They are, for the most part, thoroughly descriptive and do not depart substantially from the legendary image of Ibn 'Alwān constructed by medieval Yemeni chronicles and hagiographies. Nor is there any comprehensive examination of his religious and social convictions and their impact on the religious and intellectual life of Yemen in the subsequent centuries. This study not only rectifies this omission by reconstructing his historical persona but also demonstrates the ways in which Ibn 'Alwān's semilegendary image has been appropriated by representatives of various political, religious, and intellectual trends in modern Yemeni society, from Islamists to secular nationalists.

In seeking to adjust Ibn 'Alwān's figure to their disparate polemical and ideological agendas, the spokesmen of these movements have produced an extremely diverse array of images of the medieval Sufi master. Some have seen him as a courageous defender of the downtrodden against the depredations of the oppressive and unscrupulous Rasūlid rulers, while others portray him as an otherworldly recluse and visionary who took little interest in the affairs of the imperfect world around him. My study examines these varied images of Ibn 'Alwān, and juxtaposes them with his persona as described in medieval chronicles and biographical collections to better understand the construction of his legacy in Yemen.

Paradoxically, despite his ubiquitous presence in Yemeni folklore and intellectual discourse, it is only quite recently that some of his major literary, theological, and mystical works have been edited and published. Prior to the democratic revolution of 1962, those works were banned by the conservative Zaydī (Shī'ī) rulers of Yemen who took a dim view of Sufism, which had traditionally derived its vitality from the Sunnī community of the country. After the revolution, Ibn 'Alwān's legacy was resurrected and, before long, became embroiled in the debates over the future of the country among secular Marxists, liberal nationalists, and staunch advocates of an Islamic order.

In dealing with Ibn 'Alwān's life and work I briefly examine the history of Sufism in Yemen and beyond. Since this history is yet to be written, I hope that my study of one of Yemen's most consequential representatives will become an important first step in this direction. Emphasis will be placed on the creative aspects of Ibn 'Alwān's intellectual output. Studying Ibn 'Alwān's thought through his poetry is a key point

of entry to situate his work in the spiritual and intellectual context of his age. Although his work mainly focused on mystical ideas, one can also observe Ibn ‘Alwān’s thought in his fearless attitude toward the rulers of the Rasūlid dynasty. This book is also designed to identify and analyze the status of Sufism in Yemen before, during, and after the Rasūlid dynasty. If this study contributes to a better understanding of the society of Rasūlid Yemen and Ibn ‘Alwān’s theological and Sufi teachings, its purpose will have been served.

Chapter 1 is a general survey of the intellectual, cultural, and political atmosphere of Yemen leading up to the prosperity of the Rasūlid age. I discuss Yemen’s political and social environment in the early moments of Islam and explore how the Rasūlid princes came to power as a result of a coup d’état. The rulers of this dynasty evolved into generous patrons of literature, arts, and religious establishments, creating the ideal conditions for the emergence of Yemen’s Sufi movement. I portray the relationship between the Rasūlid authorities and the Sufi masters in light of their mutual interests, and examine why the cosmopolitan environment of Rasūlid Yemen was quite appealing to some “monastic” Sufi masters.

The cultural milieu of medieval Yemen, particularly its theological and juridical schools, receives significant attention. I examine the significance of the Shī‘a as represented by two major sects, the Ismā‘īlīs and the Zaydīs. Both sects are studied from the viewpoint of theology, doctrine, and literature. I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of the history of the Sunnī community in Yemen and its doctrines, with special reference to the four major Sunnī schools of law, the Shāfi‘īs, the Ḥanbalīs, the Ḥanafīs, and the Mālikīs.

Chapter 2 traces the origins of Yemeni Sufism from the earliest days of Islam, when Sufism as a coherent set of practices had not yet emerged, to the seventh/thirteenth century and the rise of the Rasūlid dynasty. Here I explain the latent forms of asceticism in Yemen that provided the foundations for the formation of mystical tradition that culminated in the age of Ibn ‘Alwān. This chapter charts the reasons for the decline in Yemen’s intellectual and cultural life between the first/seventh century and fourth/tenth century, before stability returned, which paved the way for the rise of saintly miracles (*karāmāt*) during the sixth/twelfth century and ended up with the prosperous, powerful Rasūlid dynasty (626–858/1228–1454).

Chapter 3 focuses on the legacy of Ibn ‘Alwān. First, I discuss his biography with special reference to the role of his father. Then, I analyze

an “incident” (*‘arīḍ*) that medieval hagiographies portray as a major turning point in Ibn ‘Alwān’s life. My discussion also provides a cursory glance at his education, including teachers and disciples. Then, I discuss the relationship between Ibn ‘Alwān and the Rasūlid princes, focusing on his courageous attitude. After that, I provide a detailed analysis of his major works, both published and in manuscript, beginning with the most influential book *The Supreme Union*. I follow with his second indispensable literary *diwān* (collection), concentrating on the debate around his miraculous language. Then, I turn to small treatises, “The Festival” and “The Unfamiliar Diverse Sea,” and conclude with some remarks about his manuscript known as “The Appropriate Answers on the Outstanding Questions.”

Chapter 4 deals with Ibn ‘Alwān’s theological views. I present his doctrine in his own words, emphasizing his Sunnī position, and his support of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. This chapter also tackles some difficult doctrinal issues addressed in Ibn ‘Alwān’s works, such as the relationship between God and human action, free will and predestination, his attitude toward speculative theology (*kalām*), the vision of God, the createdness of the Qur’ān, the Mu’tazilites, and, finally, his purported sympathy with some Shī‘ī concepts.

Chapter 5 examines the relationship between Ibn ‘Alwān and the Sufi tradition, beginning with his relationship with his popular Sufi rival Abū al-Ghayth Ibn Jamīl (d. 651/1253). I also discuss the relationship between Ibn ‘Alwān and as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī (d. 675/1276). Although existing sources do not provide us with information about the influence of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) on the theology and Sufism of Ibn ‘Alwān, I argue that one can sense a spiritual affinity between them through a comparative study of their major works. In addition, this chapter critically examines the link between Ibn ‘Alwān and al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) posited by Louis Massignon. Finally, I conclude with a refutation of the views of some modern scholars who ascribed Ibn ‘Alwān’s mystical ideas to the influence of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240).

Chapter 6 treats Ibn ‘Alwān’s Sufi thought. I begin with the most important feature of his thought, namely, the use of the Qur’ān and the Prophet’s Sunna. By basing his teachings on the Qur’ān and the Sunna, Ibn ‘Alwān placed himself squarely in the mainstream of Islam. Then, I discuss the controversial status of the Sufi concert (*samā’*) and Ibn ‘Alwān’s polemic against those who prohibited it. An analysis of Ibn ‘Alwān’s theory of the relationship between the Sufi master and his disciple follows. I also explore Ibn ‘Alwān’s analysis of Sufi epistemology and

his tripartite classification of Sufi knowledge: the knowledge of divine essence, the knowledge of divine attributes, and the knowledge of divine actions. Since the Sufi concept of “unveiling” (*kashf*) is an indispensable theme in Ibn ‘Alwān’s legacy, I provide a brief survey of its development in the works of some major Sufi authorities, including al-Kalābādhī (d. 380/990), al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), al-Hujwīrī (d. 469/1077), al-Anṣārī (d. 481/1089), and al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). I also analyze Ibn ‘Alwān’s views of the concept of *kashf*. This chapter concludes with a discussion of Ibn ‘Alwān’s views of the possibility of mystical union with God on the condition that the Sufi follows the teachings of the Qur’ān, emulates the exemplary piety of the Prophet, and follows in the footsteps of the “friends of God” (*awliyā*).

Chapter 7 provides a discussion of the Islamic concept of sainthood, particularly in the works of ash-Sharjī (d. 893/1487) and ash-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834). I also examine Ibn ‘Alwān’s saintly miracles (*karāmāt*) in light of the views of premodern hagiographers. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the controversy around Ibn ‘Alwān’s tomb and the veneration of “friends of God.”

Chapter 8 focuses on the protracted conflict in Yemen between the Sufi masters and the Zaydī imams, which began in the era where we first encounter charismatic Sufi leaders such as Abū l-Ghayth b. Jamīl (d. 651/1253) and Aḥmad b. ‘Alwān (d. 665/1266). The Sufi masters’ popularity with Yemen’s people made them valuable political allies for the Zaydīs, even as doctrinal disputes sometimes tore the groups apart. While the intensity of this conflict varied over time, and certainly not all Zaydī imams opposed Sufism, it is nevertheless central to understanding the tensions that shaped medieval Yemen’s religious and political environment.

Chapter 9 deals with the development of Sufism in Yemen from the demise of Ibn ‘Alwān until the fall of the Ottoman Empire. I provide a brief survey of the connection between major Sufi orders in the Islamic lands and their representatives in Yemen. I outline the rise and subsequent history of some Yemeni Sufi orders including the Qādiriyya, Rifā’iyya, Shādhiliyya, Suhrawardiyya, Naqshabandiyya, ‘Alawiyya, Yāfi’iyya, Aḥmadiyya, and the now extinct ‘Alwāniyya. After the establishment of the Sufi orders, Yemen entered a new phase of fierce scholarly debates over the monistic ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240). I conclude with a brief discussion of Sufism in Yemen after the end of these debates, focusing on two major representatives of tenth/sixteenth-century Sufism in Yemen: ‘Abd al-Hādī as-Sūdī (d. 932/1525) in Ta‘izz and ‘Umar Bā Makhrama (d. 953/1545) in Ḥaḍramawt.

## ISLAM IN MEDIEVAL YEMEN

Yemen, like many other areas of the Islamic world, was part of the Umayyad caliphate (40–132/660–749) and then part of the succeeding ‘Abbāsīd dynasty (132–656/749–1258). Yemen’s governors were appointed by both dynasties. Despite the strength of these centralized caliphates, Yemen’s remote location singled it out as a refuge for rebel groups and mutineers. Rebels from the central lands of Islam took advantage of the country’s distance from the capital of Baghdad and made Yemen the trying ground for their political ambitions. They were also encouraged by Yemen’s rugged terrain, which made it impregnable against invading armies.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the second/eighth century, Yemen became a veritable refuge for the Shī‘a, and it is likely that at that time the first conflict began among three theological schools (*madh-habs*): the Zaydī, the Ismā‘īlī, and the Sunnī. This tension defined Yemen’s religious environment for centuries, creating conflicts on the one hand and producing a uniquely fertile intellectual and spiritual atmosphere on the other. This atmosphere helped the celebrated Yemeni Sufi and thinker Aḥmad Ibn ‘Alwān (d. 665/1266) synthesize his original and pious theology. The following history will set the stage for his emergence in the sixth/twelfth century.

When Abbāsīd authority weakened, these tensions in Yemen exploded to leave the country chaotically fragmented into independent states. This began with the rebellion of the Ashā‘ir tribe against the ‘Abbāsīds in Zabīd at the end of the second/eighth century, and then a rebellion by the ‘Alids in 203/818 under the leadership of Ibrāhīm b. Musā al-‘Alawī, known as al-Jazzār.<sup>2</sup> In response, the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma’mūn (198–218/813–835) dispatched an army led by Muḥammad b. Ziyād (d. 245/859), who captured the Tihāma and its surroundings in 204/819. Ibn Ziyād took advantage of the situation and expanded his



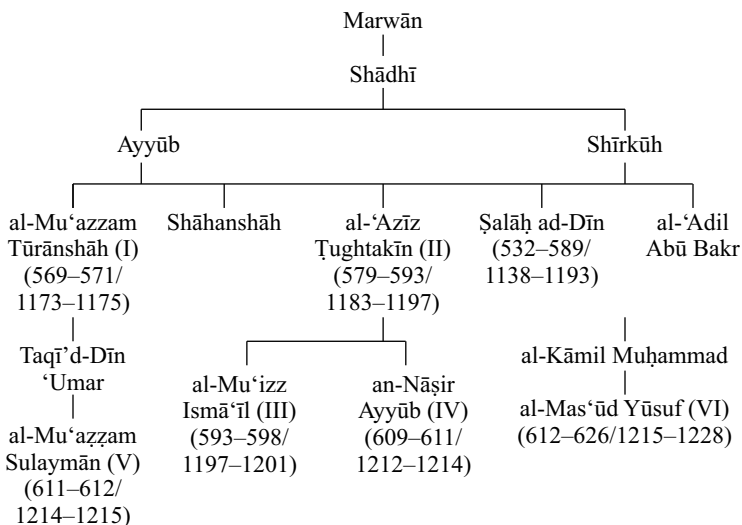
territory to include Ḥaḍramawt, Laḥj, Aden, al-Janad, Ṣan‘ā’, and as far as Sa‘da. He reintroduced the name of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph during the Friday prayers (*khuṭba*) in the territories under his control. Taking advantage of the power vacuum created by conflicts inside the ‘Abbāsīd court, Ibn Ziyād grew powerful and his allegiance to the ‘Abbāsīds became merely nominal. He passed what had become a semi-independent state onto his sons, who did not remain long in power due to two factors: the political and religious activities of the Ismā‘īlī religious mission (*da‘wa*) around the country on the one hand, and the establishment of the Zaydī state in Sa‘da in 284/897 by Imam al-Hādī Yahyā b. al-Ḥusayn (859–910) on the other.<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that the struggle among the Ismā‘īlīs, the Zaydīs, and the Sunnīs was severe and at times brutal.<sup>4</sup> Supporters of each *madhhab* tried to expand geographically at the expense of their rivals, which weakened Yemen’s economic and political structures. The effects of the conflict were exacerbated by Yemen’s difficult terrain and the weakness of ‘Abbāsīd rule to the extent that the country was left in a state of chaos.

Yemen entered a new phase of its history, which is often described as the age of independent states. There was an absence of central authority due to the fragmentation of petty states weakened by domestic isolation and debilitating internal wars. In the north was the Zaydī state, particularly in Sa‘da, the Banū Ḥātim, rulers of the historical capital, Ṣan‘ā’, and along the southern coast the Zuray‘id state, whose leanings were towards Ismā‘īlī teachings. Among the independent states is the first Ismā‘īlī dynasty, which was founded by the two *dā‘īs* ‘Alī b. al-Faḍl (d. 302/914) and al-Ḥasan b. Ḥawshab (d. 303/915).<sup>5</sup> The second Ismā‘īlī state, and perhaps the most significant, was established by ‘Alī b. Muḥammad aṣ-Ṣulayḥī (439–459/–1045–1066), who unified Yemen for the first time. In addition, we witness the emergence of the Sulaymānī *ashrāf* north of Najrān and as far as Ḥaraḍ in the south of Tihāma. Finally, one should not overlook the two Sunnī states, the Banū Mahdī (554–569/1159–1173) and the Najāḥīds (412–551/1021–1156), who were in constant conflict with the Zaydīs on the one hand and the Ismā‘īlīs on the other. This chaotic and unstable political condition paved the way for the powerful Sunnī Ayyūbīds to invade Yemen, remaining in power from 569/1173 until 628/1228 (see Table 1).

### The Ayyūbīds

The Ayyūbīds invaded Yemen in 569/1173 at a moment when the country was torn apart by constant infighting among its main theological and

Table 1. Ayyūbid Rulers of Yemen



political factions. There is no doubt that the Ayyūbids contributed significantly to the development of the Yemeni politics and culture, not least because their lieutenants were to usher in one of the most brilliant dynasties in Yemeni history, the Rasūlid dynasty (626–858/1228–1454), which declared independence from the Egyptian Ayyūbids in 632/1234. It is against the cultural and political backdrop of these cataclysmic changes in Yemen that the heritage of Aḥmad b. ‘Alwān (d. 665/1266) unfolds. Before turning to Ibn ‘Alwān, however, we explore the entrance of the Ayyūbids onto Yemen’s political landscape.

First, why did the Ayyūbids invade Yemen? The motives behind this conquest have been a subject of debate among historians since the medieval period. This study has benefited from G. Rex Smith’s excellent research in his edition of Ibn Ḥātim, Badr ad-Dīn’s *Kitāb as-simṭ al-ghālī ath-thaman fī akhbār al-mulūk min al-ghuzz bi’l-Yaman* and the second volume of his *The Ayyūbids and Early Rasūlids in the Yemen*. Smith’s contribution lies in the fact that he was able to scrutinize critically both medieval and modern sources. In his overall assessment of the Ayyūbid occupation of Yemen, Smith provides a religious motive to be rid of the Khārijī, ‘Abd an-Nabī b. Mahdī.<sup>6</sup> Removing ‘Abd an-Nabī b. Mahdī is considered by far the most significant reason for the Ayyūbid conquest as it is explained in medieval sources.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Zaydī scholar

Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn describes the Banū Maḥdī, rulers of the Tihāma and Zabīd, by saying:

As for their *madhhab*, it was said that they were followers of Abū Ḥanīfa in *furū*<sup>8</sup> and followers of Khawārij in *uṣūl*.<sup>9</sup> They regard sinners as disbelievers and they punish them with death penalty. They kill and allow sexual intercourse with the wives of those who disagree with their *madhhab*. They enslave their offspring, and regard their land as an abode of war. ... They killed those who were defeated among their soldiers, they killed fornicators, and those who were late to the congregational prayer and those who were late to attend their places of worship. These rules were implemented against their soldiers, but the subjects (*ar-ra'iyya*) were subject to lesser punishment.<sup>10</sup>

This highlights the unjust conditions in coastal areas of Yemen prior to the Ayyūbid occupation. However, the characterization of Ibn Maḥdī in these sources is somehow exaggerated perhaps because he belonged to a Sunnī school of law, namely, the Ḥanafī *madhhab*.

In addition, Smith selects another feasible reason for the conquest given by H. A. R. Gibb, suggesting that Saladin (1138–1193) sent a large army led by Tūrānshāh (d. 1180) to Yemen to ease the tremendous financial burden of Saladin's army in Egypt. Smith concludes that the two chief motives for the conquest appear to have been trade and finding a secure place of refuge in the event of the dynasty coming under threat. A minor motive was the desire to drive out the Ismā'īlīs from Yemen. All the other reasons given in the sources, argues Smith, were incidental, though they should not be discounted.<sup>11</sup>

After leading the successful conquest, Tūrānshāh returned to Egypt, leaving his Mamlūk governors in a state of chaos. Each governor acted independently and soon was competing against the others. The deteriorating political situation in Yemen compelled Saladin to send another army under the leadership of Ṣafī ad-Dīn Kḥiṭlībā. After taking control of the country, he fell ill and died. The situation returned to chaos and again Saladin dispatched his other brother, Ṭuḡtakīn b. Ayyūb (better known as al-'Azīz), with troops to reassert Ayyūbid control over Yemen. Ṭuḡtakīn was not only able to wrest most strongholds from the local Yemeni tribes, but profited greatly from annual revenues and newly conquered areas.<sup>12</sup> When Ṭuḡtakīn had eliminated his rivals, he established a new and firm system of taxation policy. He is described in medieval

sources as a just leader who dug wells and planted trees to boost agricultural production. Moreover, he is reported to have punished some of his soldiers for their abuses in the country.<sup>13</sup> Ṭuġhtakīn and other Ayyūbid princes built fortresses and castles for their military protection. After the death of al-ʿAzīz Ṭuġhtakīn in 593/1197 power shifted to his son al-Muʿizz Ismāʿīl b. Ṭuġhtakīn (593–598/1197–1201) who is said to have fallen out with his lieutenants, which led to a conflict within the ruling elite. Some of his former commanders were defeated and joined the Zaydī imam, ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥamza (d. 614/1217), who was at war with al-Muʿizz. After the assassination of al-Muʿizz in 598/1202, conditions continued to deteriorate under his successor, an-Nāṣir Ayyūb b. Ṭuġhtakīn (609–611/1212–1214), who was poisoned in a conspiracy by his vizier, Badr ad-Dīn Ghāzī b. Jibrīl in 611/1214. Sulaymān b. Shāhīnshāh was immediately installed as sultan in the same year.<sup>14</sup>

Owing to the provocation of various groups, conditions again deteriorated during this period until 612/1215 when the ruler of Egypt, al-Malik al-Kāmil, dispatched his son al-Masʿūd (d. 626/1228) with a military force to settle issues in Yemen. It is important to mention that al-Masʿūd had a very close relationship with the father of Aḥmad b. ʿAlwān who eventually served as a royal scribe to king al-Masʿūd. Al-Masʿūd remained in power for ten years until he died in Mecca on his way to Egypt in 626/1228. Before leaving Yemen, he had appointed Nūr ad-Dīn ʿUmar b. ʿAlī b. Rasūl as his deputy.<sup>15</sup> In the absence of an Ayyūbid sovereign, Nūr ad-Dīn was able to take control of the country and protect it against an uprising in the Tihāma as well as from a Zaydī offensive in the north.<sup>16</sup> The Ayyūbids were preoccupied with internal as well as external problems, which distracted their attention from the already volatile situation in Yemen. In the meantime, Nūr ad-Dīn was astute enough to replace the Ayyūbid military leaders, who were in charge of the fortresses and towns, with his loyal retainers.<sup>17</sup> When he made sure that the whole country was in his grip, he threw off his allegiance to his Ayyūbid masters and proclaimed himself an independent ruler with the title al-Manṣūr.<sup>18</sup> “To legitimize his new status, in 632/1234, he obtained an investiture from the ʿAbbāsīd caliph in Baghdad, al-Mustanṣir.”<sup>19</sup> He remained in power until he was assassinated in 647/1250 in a conspiracy planned by his nephew, Asad ad-Dīn Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. Rasūl, who had been threatened with a discharge from the governorship of Ṣanʿāʾ.<sup>20</sup> Al-Manṣūr’s son, Yūsuf, with the title al-Muẓaffar (647–694/1249–1295), assumed power and was able to defeat the assassins of his father and outmaneuver his rival, Fakhr ad-Dīn b. Badr ad-Dīn.<sup>21</sup>

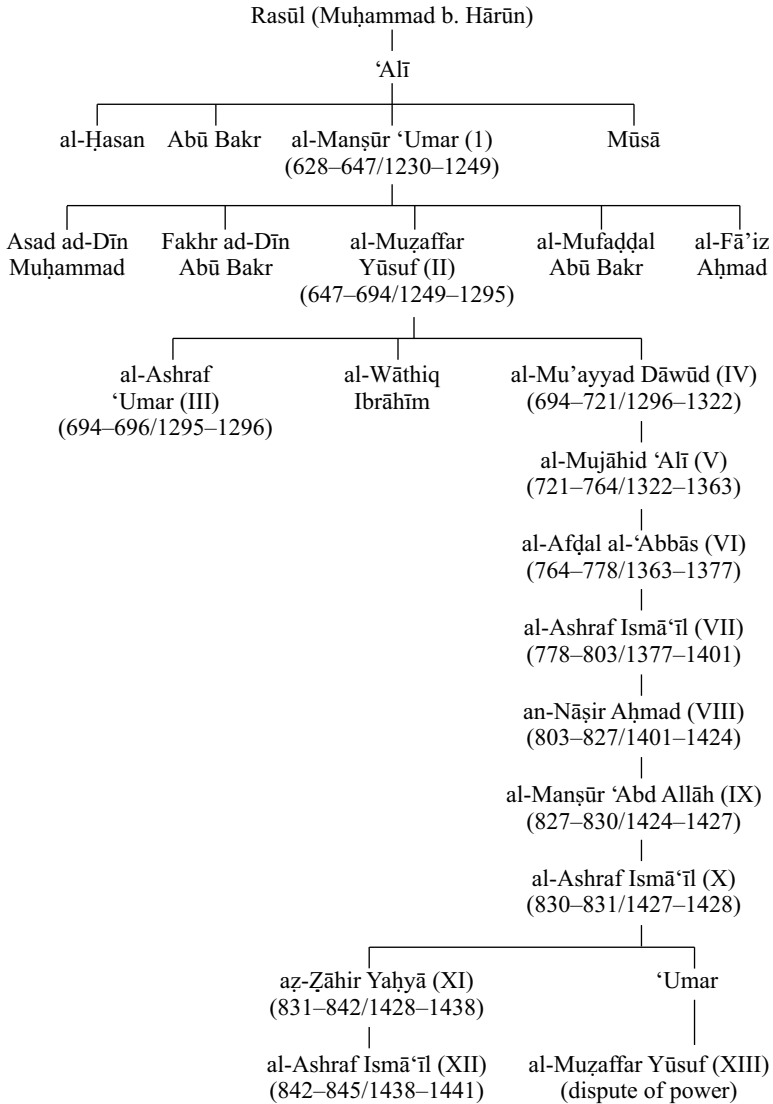
With the establishment of al-Muẓaffar's rule in Yemen, I turn to the Rasūlid dynasty and its cultural, religious, and intellectual impact on Yemen. A description of this dynasty elucidates the broader context for the works of Aḥmad b. 'Alwān and his contribution to the political, cultural, religious, and intellectual life of medieval Yemen.

### The Rasūlids

The genealogy of the Rasūlids can be traced in two ways: first, to the Turkomans, and second, to the pre-Islamic Yemeni tribe of Azd, specifically, to the time of the destruction of the Mārib Dam. The Rasūlids are said to have moved constantly through the centuries, stopping at the Tihāma and Ḥijāz, residing in Syria, Constantinople, Central Asia, Baghdad, and Egypt.<sup>22</sup> According to Smith, "those who did not know the Rasūlids traced their ancestry back to the Turkomans, while those who did know them acknowledged their Arab origin and called them Ghas-sānīs."<sup>23</sup> Although they were employed by the Ayyūbids in Egypt and Syria, they were so powerful that the Ayyūbids feared them as potential rivals and therefore dispatched them together with Tūrānshāh's expedition to conquer Yemen (see Table 2).

Rasūlid reign in Yemen began with Nūr ad-Dīn, who was succeeded by his son al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf (d. 694/1295), whose reign lasted for almost half a century. Commenting on his long rule, Alexander Knysch says: "Yemen witnessed an unprecedented political and social stability which led to the consolidation of the new state and its economy."<sup>24</sup> Another important feature of al-Muẓaffar's long reign has been observed by Daniel Varisco: "Yemen had achieved a unity not seen since the pre-Islamic kingdoms and not to be achieved again until the unification of the Yemen Arab Republic and Peoples Democrat[ic] Republic of Yemen in 1990."<sup>25</sup> The Rasūlid state after al-Muẓaffar reached its peak due to the rapid growth of trade and agriculture.<sup>26</sup> The last ruler of the Rasūlid dynasty was an-Nāṣir Aḥmad (d. 827/1424) whose death coincided with the dynasty's collapse. The repeated revolts of slaves and rebellious tribes equally contributed to the collapse of the Rasūlid dynasty.<sup>27</sup> The Rasūlid house was succeeded by the Ṭāhirids, whose rule was brought to an end by the first invasion of the conquering Ottomans in 945/1538.<sup>28</sup>

The era of the Rasūlids is described as "one of the most brilliant of Yemeni civilization."<sup>29</sup> Medieval as well as modern sources describe the Rasūlid sultans as noted for their erudite knowledge and love of scholarship. These rulers generously patronized scholars specializing in numerous religious and secular disciplines including history, biography,

**Table 2. Rasūlid Rulers of Yemen**

genealogy, astrology, Sufism, medicine, agriculture, furriery, equine, and veterinary. Rasūlid sultans themselves were students of first-rank scholars and were known for their prolific writings on a wide variety of subjects.<sup>30</sup> Emulating the Ayyūbid policies, the Rasūlid sultans built colleges, libraries, and international centers of Islamic education. The contemporary scholar, historian, and critic ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥibshī states that the Rasūlids were tolerant toward charismatic Sufi leaders, and frequently exempted them from land taxes. However, al-Ḥibshī argues, this tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*) was not based on religious motives; rather it was motivated by political interests.<sup>31</sup> Sufi masters enjoyed a high reputation among the peasants, and the Rasūlids cultivated friendship with them to benefit from their spiritual authority (*jāh*).<sup>32</sup> Some Rasūlids, it will be recalled, not only collected Sufi works but diligently studied Sufi philosophy.<sup>33</sup> The officials of the state imitated their rulers in reading speculative Sufism. For instance, Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* and the monumental *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya* enjoyed high regard at the Rasūlid court.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly, scholars were held in great respect at the Rasūlid court. Many scholars came from different parts of the Islamic world looking for opportunities offered by the enlightened Rasūlids.<sup>35</sup> Among them were Muḥammad Ibn Abī Bakr al-Fārisī (d. 675/1276), the great Egyptian biographer and *muḥaddith*, Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), who eventually declined the post of the supreme *qāḍī* of Yemen, the celebrated lexicographer Majd ad-Dīn al-Fayrūzābādī (d. 815/1415), the acclaimed Meccan biographer and historian al-Fāsī, the renowned *hadīth* collector Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429), the great Muslim traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭah (d. 779/1377), the Sufi writer ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 832/1428), and others.<sup>36</sup> Under Rasūlid influence Yemen’s cultural milieu changed drastically, setting the stage for the emergence of a scholar like Ibn Alwan. However, Yemen’s cultural fabric was also shaped by the complex interactions between the major Islamic sects, including the Ismā‘īlīs, Zaydīs, Ibāḍīs, and Sunnīs.

### Yemen’s Cultural Milieu

#### *The Ismā‘īlī Movement in Yemen*

The Ismā‘īlīs are a major branch of the Shī‘a with numerous subdivisions. Its followers branched off from the Imāmiyya by tracing the imamate through Ismā‘īl, the elder son of Imam Ja‘far aṣ-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765). Nothing is known about the history of the Ismā‘īlī movement until after the middle of the third/ninth century, when it appeared as a secret revolutionary organization carrying on intensive missionary efforts in

many regions of the Muslim world.<sup>37</sup> All sources that deal with the subject of the Ismā‘īlīs in Yemen agree that the two missionaries (*dā‘īs*) ‘Alī b. al-Faḍl al-Khanfarī (d. 302/914) and al-Ḥasan b. Ḥawshab (d. 303/915), known as Maṣūn al-Yaman, were collaborating in the early stages of the nascent Ismā‘īlī movement to advance the cause (*ad-da‘wa*) and prepare for the accession of the future Fāṭimid caliph, whose enemies called him ‘Ubayd Allāh al-Mahdī (297–322/909–934).<sup>38</sup> Whereas ‘Alī b. al-Faḍl preached his *da‘wa* at al-Janad, Ibn Ḥawshab established himself at ‘Adan Lā‘ah near the mountain of Maswar, in the province of Ḥajja. In 299/913 ‘Alī b. al-Faḍl renounced his allegiance to ‘Ubayd Allāh al-Mahdī and began to fight against his companion, the loyal Ibn Ḥawshab. The latter succeeded in spreading the *da‘wa* to the Maghrib and Sind, and Ibn al-Faḍl was depicted in Zaydī sources as a “Qarmaṭian.” These sources attributed to him the most heinous of crimes, such as the approval of adultery, incestuous marriage, wine drinking, and outlawing the pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>39</sup> According to a modern Yemeni commentator, ‘Abd Allāh ash-Shamāhī, the reason for these allegations was Ibn al-Faḍl’s intention to unify Yemen and suppress the conflict between sectarian *madhhabs*.<sup>40</sup> When Ibn al-Faḍl died in 302/914, his followers rapidly disappeared. Consequently, the Ismā‘īlī *da‘wa* weakened and went into steep decline following the death of Ibn Ḥawshab (d. 303/915).

Although the Ya‘furid *amīr* ‘Abd Allāh b. Qaḥṭān, the ruler of Ṣan‘ā’, who wrested Zabīd from the Ziyādids, supported the *da‘wa* from 379/989 to 387/997, it had suffered major setbacks.<sup>41</sup> It is not until 429/1038 that we hear about the founder of the Ṣulayḥid dynasty and missionary (*dā‘ī*), ‘Alī b. Muḥammad aṣ-Ṣulayḥī, who fortified himself at the Masār mountain of Ḥarāz after establishing contacts with the Fāṭimids in Egypt. Ṣulayḥid rule over Yemen lasted for almost one century until 532/1138.<sup>42</sup> Aḥmad ash-Shāmī and R. B. Serjeant in their article, “Regional Literature: The Yemen,” describe the Ṣulayḥid era as one of the most fruitful ages in Yemeni history. According to them, “despite the violent political confusion and destructive sectarian quarrels that marked it, learning, literature and verse flourished, colleges and mosques were built, roads constructed. Most rulers of the time—imams, sultans, or princes—were scholars of distinction, orators, poets, and authors in a great variety of fields.”<sup>43</sup>

After the death of the eighth Fāṭimid caliph al-Mustanshir in Egypt in 487/1094, the Ismā‘īlīs split up into two main groups, presided over by al-Mustanshir’s sons, Nizār and Aḥmad. In spite of al-Mustanshir’s desig-



nation of his eldest son, Nizār, as his heir, the vizier al-Afḍal supported Aḥmad, the younger son, to take the throne with the title al-Musta‘lī. Nizār was defeated and fled to Alexandria. His right to inherit the throne was upheld by the Persian Ismā‘īlīs under the leadership of Ḥasan-i Ṣab-bāḥ, who, in the absence of Nizār, became the supreme chief claiming the rank of *ḥujja*.<sup>44</sup> Both Nizār and al-Musta‘lī had devotees in different parts of the Islamic world. Al-Musta‘lī was recognized by most Ismā‘īlīs in Egypt and India, many in Syria, and by the whole community in Yemen. The Musta‘lian Ismā‘īlīs experienced further division after the assassination of al-Musta‘lī’s son and successor al-Āmir in 524/1130. The latter’s son, aṭ-Ṭayyib (whose existence is questioned by some historians), had been proclaimed as heir eight months before his father’s death. Despite the suppression of the infant’s name and the succession of regents on the throne in Cairo, some Musta‘lian communities in Egypt, Syria, and most of the leaders of the established *da‘wa* network in Yemen continued to advocate the rights of aṭ-Ṭayyib.

The Ṭayyibī *dā‘īs* worked successfully in Yemen with the support of the Ṣulayḥid queen, Arwā bint Aḥmad aṣ-Ṣulayḥī (d. 532/1138). After her death, another branch of *da‘wa*, the Ḥāfiẓī, was supported by the Zuray‘ids in Aden and some of the Hamdānid rulers of San‘ā’, but they lost state support after the Ayyūbid conquests. However, the Ṭayyibī community, as portrayed by historians, was on good terms with the Ayyūbids, Rasūlids, and Ṭāhirid rulers.<sup>45</sup> The position of the chief missionary (*dā‘ī muṭlaq*) remained among the descendants of Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmīdī (d. 557/1161) until 605/1209, when it passed to ‘Alī b. Muḥammad of the Banū ‘l-Anf family. It continued with this family until 946/1539 with two interruptions in the seventh/thirteenth century. The Ismā‘īlī *da‘wa* in Yemen established its headquarters in the stronghold of Ḥarāz mountains, though there were scattered communities in other parts of the country. In 1050/1640 the position of *dā‘ī muṭlaq* passed on to Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Fahd of the Makramī family. The Makramī *dā‘īs* established themselves in Najrān where they were supported by the tribe of Banū Yām. Sometime before 1131/1719 they conquered the mountain of Ḥarāz, which became their stronghold and which allowed them to resist the attempts of Zaydī imams to expel them. The attempt of the *dā‘ī* al-Ḥasan b. Hibat Allāh (d. 1189/1775) to conquer Ḥaḍramawt was successful; however, his advance toward Central Arabia and his struggle against the rising Saudi dynasty ended in failure. In 1289/1872 the Ottoman general Aḥmad Mukhtār Pasha perfidiously killed the *dā‘ī* al-Ḥasan b. Ismā‘īl Āl-Shibām al-Makramī and expelled

the Makramīs from Ḥarāz. In 1940, the *dā'ī muṭlaq* of the Sulaymānīs was Jamāl ad-Dīn 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Makramī, who succeeded his father in 1939.<sup>46</sup> After this period, the *da'wa* went into hiding, or occultation (*ghayba*)—if I may borrow this classical term from early Shī'ism—since the political as well as cultural atmosphere was no longer hospitable to such activities.

### *Ismā'īlī Doctrine and Literature*

Ismā'īlī doctrine and literature had an important influence on the religious environment of Yemen both within and beyond the Ismā'īlī community. For example, the Sufi figure Ibn 'Alwān, while not directly linked to the Ismā'īlīs, refers to them indirectly in his works and was clearly aware of their legacy.<sup>47</sup> Such instances, exemplified in a figure such as Ibn 'Alwān, point to the complex interweaving that made up medieval Yemen's religious environment.

The early doctrine of pre-Fāṭimid Ismā'īlīs, which was formulated during the second half of the third/ninth century, drew a sharp distinction between *aẓ-ẓāhir*, exterior or exoteric knowledge, and *al-bāṭin*, inward or esoteric knowledge. This doctrine seems to have been shared by many Shī'ī sects as well as Sufis, including Ibn 'Alwān. *Bāṭin* consists of two main parts: an allegorical interpretation of the Qur'ān and the Sunna, and second, the "true realities" (*haqā'iq*). This duality presupposes that the Ismā'īlī system of philosophy and science can be reconciled with their religious beliefs. It is intended to prove the divine origin of the institutions of the imamate and the exclusive rights of the Fāṭimids to it.<sup>48</sup>

Ismā'īlīs tried to find in Neoplatonic philosophy a synthesis between the concept of monotheism and the plurality of the visible world. Moreover, the natural philosophy of Ismā'īlīs, with its ideas of the organic and inorganic world, psychology, and biology, is to some extent based on Aristotle's work and partly on Neo-Pythagorean and other Greek philosophical speculations. The probable aim of this theoretical framework was to reconcile religion with philosophy. The Ṭayyibī community in Yemen and India retained an interest in the gnostic cosmology and cyclical history of the Fāṭimid age. Unlike the traditional Fāṭimid cosmological system, the Ṭayyibī doctrine modified the cosmological system of the *dā'ī* Ḥamīd ad-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. about 411/1021). His system describes ten intellects in the spiritual world rather than the traditional duality of the intellect and the soul. This modification was achieved by introducing a mythical "drama in heaven," first portrayed

by the second *dā'ī muṭlaq* Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī, whose thought shaped the Ṭayyibī concept of gnosis.<sup>49</sup> Finally, “the Ṭayyibī doctrine maintained the equal validity of [knowledge from both] *zāhir* and *bāṭin* and repudiated antinomian trends. Al-Qāḍī an-Nu‘mān’s [(d. 363/974)] *Da‘aim al-Islām* remained the authoritative work of *fiqh*.”<sup>50</sup>

It is with the *Rasā'il ikhwān aṣ-ṣafā'* (Epistles of the Brethren of Purity) that the relationship of the Ismā'īlī sect to the great medieval Yemeni scholar and devout Sufi Ibn 'Alwān becomes clearer. Not only were the Ismā'īlīs a prominent theological and political school in the medieval history of Yemen, but their literary works are mentioned in the poetry of Ibn 'Alwān. These epistles were controversial encyclopedic work, regarded by the Musta'lians as a compilation by the second son of the concealed imam, Aḥmad. These epistles are significant for the purposes of this study because their authors are occasionally mentioned in a commendable tone in the poetry of Aḥmad b. 'Alwān.

There is a vast body of literature dealing with the Ismā'īlī doctrine and the Ṭayyibī *da'wa* in Yemen and India, and here I shall confine myself to those issues relevant to the Ṭayyibī community of Yemen. The great works of the *dā'ī* authors in this community continued to preserve the literary heritage of the Fāṭimid *da'wa* of Egypt after the Fāṭimids had lost their political power. These are: *Dīwān* and *Ghāyat al-mawālīd* by Ṣulṭān al-Khaṭṭāb al-Hamdānī (d. 533/1138), *Kanz al-walad* by the second *dā'ī muṭlaq* Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī (d. 557/1161), *Majmū' at-tarbiyya* by Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Hārithī (d. 584/1188), and *Tuhfat al-qulūb* and *al-Majālis* both by Ḥatīm b. Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī. To these can be added *Kitāb 'uyūn al-akhbār* (seven volumes), and *Kitāb nuzhat al-afkār* (two volumes) all by the prolific *dā'ī*, Idrīs 'Imād ad-Dīn al-Anf (d. 833/1428). They are, according to the modern writer Ḥusayn b. Fayḍ Allāh al-Hamdānī (d. 1961), not only relevant to the Fāṭimid period but contain information based on earlier sources and information so intimately bound up with the *da'wa* that it is not possible to find it elsewhere.<sup>51</sup> Another later work, al-Hamdānī concludes, is also valuable for earlier Fāṭimid times, namely the *Kitāb al-azhār* (“Book of Flowers”), in seven volumes by the Indian *dā'ī* Ḥasan b. Nūḥ (d. 939/1533). Sections from some rare or lost works of the earlier Fāṭimid period are preserved in it.

In conclusion, the history, doctrine, and literature of the Ismā'īlīs have been extensively studied by Western scholars interested in so-called deviant Islamic doctrines, which Knysch describes as “a hobby-horse of European Islamology since its inception.”<sup>52</sup> According to

Knysh, “this obsessive preoccupation with ‘deviancy’ has led them to neglect the ‘platitudes’ of mainstream Sunnīsm that was professed by the majority of medieval Yemenis.”<sup>53</sup> From the *Ismā‘īlīs* I turn to their opponents within the *Shī‘ī* movement, the *Zaydīs*.

### The Zaydī Movement in Yemen

The topic of the *Zaydīs* is so vast and complex that several large volumes would be required to do it justice. According to Alexander Knysh, “*Zaydīsm* has consistently received the lion’s share of academic attention.”<sup>54</sup> Here, I will confine myself to some important issues such as the doctrine of the imamate, imitation (*taqlīd*), and its refutation. This latter is relevant to the Sufi movement in general and to the study of Ibn ‘Alwān in particular, who refers to them as *Rawāfiq*.<sup>55</sup>

The practical group of *Shī‘ism* is distinguished from the *Ithnā‘ashariyya* (Twelvers) and the *Sab‘iyya* (*Ismā‘īlīs*) by its recognition of *Zayd b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib* (d. 122/740).<sup>56</sup> *Zayd* was the first to revolt against the *Umayyads* after the tragedy of *Karbālā* in 61/680 during which the Prophet’s grandson *al-Ḥusayn* was killed. *Zayd* was induced by *Kūfans* to publicly put himself forward as imam. Sources say that he spent a year in *Kūfa* in secret preparation, then came forward openly only to be killed in street fighting around 122/740.<sup>57</sup> His followers continued their struggle after *Zayd*’s death and took part in several uprisings in favor of the *‘Alid* clan, though they were not organized under any unified leadership. Their unification is attributed to the work of the two *Zaydī* leaders: (1) *al-Ḥasan b. Zayd*, who founded the *Zaydī* state south of the *Caspian Sea*, namely, *Ṭabaristān*, in 250/864. In the same year, another revolt took place that was considered to have been in line with *Zaydī* principles, during the caliphate of *al-Musta‘īn*, led by *Yaḥyā b. ‘Umar* (d. 250/864), who descended from *al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī* (d. 61/680). (2) The second important *Zaydī* leader is *al-Hādī ilā l-Ḥaqq Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn* (d. 298/910), the grandson of *al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm ar-Rassī* (d. 246/860), a descendant of *al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib* (d. 50/670).

*Zayd b. ‘Alī* (d. 122/740) was influenced by his teacher *Wāṣil b. ‘Aṭā* (d. 131/748), the famous founder of the rationalist school of thought, *Mu‘tazila*. After the demise of *Zayd*, the *Zaydīs* embraced *Mu‘tazilī* theology and became its ardent followers. The school founded by *ar-Rassī* (d. 246/860) and developed by his successors is now the only surviving school: it is *Mu‘tazilīte* in theology and *anti-Murji‘ite* in ethics, with a puritanical peculiarity in its repudiation of mysticism.<sup>58</sup> Their rejection

of mysticism has been noticed through their activities such as the destruction of saints' tombs, including the tomb of the Sufi Ibn 'Alwān.

A number of Zaydīs propounded the doctrine of the "imamate of the inferior" (*imāmat al-mafḍūl*): that it was possible for a man of lesser excellence to be appointed as an imam during the lifetime of a man of greater excellence.<sup>59</sup> According to the contemporary historian and literary critic, Ḥusayn b. 'Abd Allāh al-'Amrī, the question of the theory of the imamate became diverse and complicated.<sup>60</sup> However, the genuine beginning of Zaydī history in Yemen took place with the establishment of the first Zaydī state in Ṣa'da by its founder Imam al-Hādī ilā 'l-Haqq Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn (245–298/859–910). Following his death, the Zaydī community continued to develop until the present day. However, in their historical development they have become less well-defined as a group, and have been observed vacillating between moderates and extremists (*ghulā*). Indeed, W. M. Watt asserts that the history of the Zaydīs is so complex that it is difficult to make generalizations.<sup>61</sup>

In his *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn wa'khtilāf al-muṣallīn*, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935) classifies the Zaydī sects in six groups: al-Jārūdiyya,<sup>62</sup> as-Sulaymāniyya (or al-Jarīriyya),<sup>63</sup> al-Butriyya,<sup>64</sup> an-Nu'aymiyya,<sup>65</sup> those who repudiated the caliphate of Abū Bakr and 'Umar but did not deny the return of the dead before the day of Judgment, and finally al-Ya'qūbiyya.<sup>66</sup> However, the heresiographer ash-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) in his *al-Mīlāl wa n-niḥāl* and the medieval Yemeni scholar, Nashwān b. Sa'īd al-Ḥimyarī (d. 573/1177) in his *al-Ḥūr al-'īn* choose to recognize only the first three sects of Zaydīs.

It is widely known in literature and practice up to the present day that the Zaydī school (*madhhab*) is the closest Shī'ī *madhhab* to the four Sunnī schools (the Ḥanafī, the Mālikī, the Shāfi'ī, and the Ḥanbalī). In his *al-Muntaza' al-mukhtār min al-ghaiṭh al-midrār*, the Zaydī scholar 'Abd Allāh b. Miṭṭāḥ (d. 877/1472) provides a vivid picture of the similarity between the Zaydī *madhhab* and the four Sunnī *madhhabs*. Greater conformity can also be found in the official textbook, *Kitāb al-azhār fī fiqh al-a'immah al-aṭhār* (The Book of Flowers), by Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Murtaḍā (d. 836/1432), "a deposed Imam who composed his work while in prison."<sup>67</sup> "A chapter devoted to the *Imamate* represents the mainstream Zaydī position on qualifications and activities connected with this position. There are more than thirty commentaries and glosses on this authoritative manual, among them separate multi-volume commentaries by the original author and by his sister."<sup>68</sup> Al-'Amrī argues that those who commented on *al-Azhār* or *al-Baḥr az-zakḥkhār* of al-

Murtaḍā reject his argument that the imam must be from the family of ‘Alī.<sup>69</sup> The essential demands on the imam were: (1) membership of the Ahl al-Bayt without any distinction between Ḥasanids and Ḥusaynids; (2) ability to resort to the sword if necessary for offense or defense; (3) necessary religious learning. If the qualifications for the imamate are not completely achieved, one cannot be recognized as a full imam.<sup>70</sup> The Zaydī *madhhab*, according to Muḥammad Abū Zahra (d. 1974), is quite similar to that of Abū Ḥanīfa. But the Zaydī *madhhab* is more extensive in the use of three legal principles: *al-maṣlaḥa al-mursala* (public interest), *al-istiṣḥāb* (presumption of continuity), and the use of *al-‘aql* (intellect) if there were no indications (*adilla*) from the sources.<sup>71</sup>

Given all the above facts, it is important to survey the views of the historian and literary critic, Ismā‘īl al-Akwa‘ (d. 2008), who published *az-Zaydiyya: nash‘atuhā wa mu‘taqadātuhā*. In this book, al-Akwa‘ provides a brief historical background on the rise and doctrine of the Zaydī sect. He begins his discussion by saying that there is little research on the Zaydī sects and its branches.<sup>72</sup> This claim is in contrast to the argument noted above, that studies on az-Zaydiyya have been extensive, especially when compared to studies of their opponents, the Sunnīs. This bias, as has been illustrated, was due to European interest in deviant sects. The Zaydīs as a *madhhab* have not attracted sufficient attention, in the opinion of al-Akwa‘. An exception was given in a book titled *The Support of the Zaydī Schools (Nuṣrat madhāhib az-zaydiyya)*, which had been attributed to aṣ-Ṣāḥib b. ‘Abbād (d. 385/995), the vizier of Buwyhid dynasty.<sup>73</sup> Al-Akwa‘ seems to be disposed to suspect whether this book might have been the same as *Kitāb az-zaydiyya* mentioned by the *Fihrist* of Ibn an-Nadīm under the biography of Ibn ‘Abbād. The content of the book revolves around the preference of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and the legitimacy of his predecessor.<sup>74</sup>

Al-Akwa‘ goes on to mention those Western scholars who have contributed to the study of the Zaydīs, such as R. Strothmann (d. 1960), who wrote about Zaydīs from a purely historical perspective. Among the Arab historians who have tackled the question of Zaydīs is the Iraqī Faḍīla ‘Abd al-Amīr ash-Shāmī who wrote *Tārīkh al-firqah az-zaydiyya* (1974). Her focus was on the Zaydīs of Jilān and Daylamān during the second and third centuries A.H. As for the Zaydīs in Yemen, the lengthy book of Aḥmad Maḥmūd Ṣubḥī, a visiting scholar at the University of Ṣan‘ā’, entitled *az-Zaydiyya*, was received with admiration by the followers of the Zaydī-Hādawī *madhhab*.<sup>75</sup> This admiration, argues al-Akwa‘, sprang from the fact that Ṣubḥī uncritically praised some Zaydī

ideas. Şubhī thought that the Zaydīs of the late third century A.H., whose ideas have remained important up to the present, were an extension of the Zaydīs of the second century A.H., who appeared in Kūfa under their founder Zayd b. ‘Alī (d. 122/740). This is not true, al-Akwa‘ says, because the relationship between the Zaydīs of Yemen and the Zaydīs of Kūfa had been cut off since the third/ninth century. Although this judgment by Şubhī, al-Akwa‘ argues, was based on some Zaydī sources, Şubhī apparently neglected to consult neutral sources pertaining to his subject.

Al-Akwa‘ proceeds to say that Zaydī scholars (‘ulamā’) should have made an effort to fully identify Zaydīs in reference to the differences between the past Zaydīs at Kūfa and the Zaydīs of Yemen, and to clarify the relations between the Zaydīs and the Twelvers. According to Al-Akwa‘, this has not yet been done. He then criticizes some Zaydī works, such as the introduction of *Bayān Ibn Muẓaffar* by al-Qāḍī Ḥusayn as-Sayāghī (d. 1407/1987) for its inadequacy and *az-Zaydiyya: Theory and Practice* by ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Faḍīl for its digression.<sup>76</sup>

Following several definitions of *az-Zaydiyya* and the analysis of its branches, al-Akwa‘ mentions the jurisprudential (*fiqh*) sources of Imam al-Hādī ilā al-Ḥaqq Yahyā b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 298/910). Al-Akwa‘ states that Aḥmad b. Yahyā al-Murtaḍā (al-Imam al-Mahdī) in his *Ghāyat al-amānī*, quoted al-Hādī: “they—[the people of Sunna]—have two books called ‘*ṣaḥīḥayn*’ [i.e., Bukhārī and Muslim] and I swear that they are devoid of truth.”<sup>77</sup> This, al-Akwa‘ argues, is supported by Aḥmad b. Sa’d ad-Dīn al-Maswarī (d. 1079/1668) who says in his *ar-Risāla al-munqidha min al-ghiwāya fī tariq ar-riwāya* that “everything in the six [Sunnī] collections of Ḥadīth (*al-ummahāt as-sit*) are lies and cannot be taken as a source of proof (*lā yuḥtajju bihi*).” This opinion was held because Imam al-Hādī and his followers did not regard them as true, because their transmitters were not Shī‘īs.<sup>78</sup>

The point mentioned above is not only pertinent to the Zaydī *madhhab* but can also be prevalent in some other *madhhabs*. This, al-Akwa‘ says, is attested by Imam ash-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834) in his *Adab at-ṭalab* when he discusses the doctrine of blind imitation (*taqlīd*) in all Islamic *madhhabs* by saying: “they [i.e., the *muqallidūn*] believed that their Imam is the most knowledgeable of the proofs (*adilla*) in the Book and Sunna. . . . If they were informed of a proof in the Book of Allāh [i.e., Qur’ān] or in the Sunna of the Prophet, they reject it.”<sup>79</sup> The *muqallidūn* argue that if proof from the Qur’ān or Sunna had been more significant (*rājih*), then their imam would have adhered to it. They em-

phasized that their imam abandoned this Qur'ānic proof only because it was insignificant in his eyes, had less weight in scholarship, and another proof may have carried more evidence (*arjah*). Ash-Shawkānī states in the same book: “If someone says to them: follow this verse from the Qur'ān or this sound Ḥadīth, they say: ‘You are not more knowledgeable than our Imam so that we would follow you. If this was true as you claim, the one whom we imitate [i.e., the Imam] would not have departed it. He would not have been at variance with it, but rather left it to what seemed to him to have more evidence (*arjah*).’”<sup>80</sup>

Finally, al-Akwa' supports his thesis with a long quote from ash-Shawkānī's *Adab aṭ-ṭalab*, particularly with regard to the doctrine of *taqlīd* within the Zaydī *madhhab*. I present the argument as it appears in *Adab aṭ-ṭalab*, which talks about the “followers” or “imitators” (*muqallidūn*; pl. *muqallid*)<sup>81</sup> among the Zaydīs of Yemen. According to ash-Shawkānī, the *muqallidūn* in Yemen were misled by a devilish pretext (*dharī'a iblīsīyya*) and a pessimistic excuse, namely, that the biographical dictionaries (*dawāwīn*) of Islam—the six books and what is added to them such as the *masānīd* and the *majāmi'* comprising the Sunna—were not only written by non-Shī'īs but also studied by those who do not follow the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*). By this cursed pretext, ash-Shawkānī argues, they nullified the entire body of the pure Sunna. According to ash-Shawkānī, there is no Sunna except what is in these collections. Despite the fact that some scholars consider ash-Shawkānī a moderate Zaydī, he must be regarded as a Sunnī scholar since he defended the Sunna. Ash-Shawkānī criticizes the *muqallidūn* of the Zaydī *madhhab*:

Although the *muqallidūn* are not considered among the people of knowledge, and do not even merit to be mentioned, and it is not worthwhile to display their ignorance and to record their stupidity, they nevertheless have pretended to be among the people of knowledge, carrying notebooks, attending mosques and schools to the extent that the populace believed in them as belonging to the people of knowledge and, hence, accepted their instructions. So they themselves went astray and deluded others. . . . With them, the calamity was aggravated and because of them disaster prevailed.<sup>82</sup>

Ash-Shawkānī maintains that the people of imitation (*taqlīd*) in every *madhhab* glorify the books of Sunna, acknowledge their eminence, and



believe that they are the sayings and the deeds of the Prophet. Moreover, they are the *dawāwīn* of Islam, which scholars have depended on. Ash-Shawkānī further discusses the status of the *muqallidūn* of the Zaydī *madhhab*, who added to the repulsiveness of *taqlīd* another ugliness, more repugnant, and to the heretic bigotry another heresy, yet more abominable, specifically, the rejection of the Sunna. Ash-Shawkānī disparagingly says:

If only they [i.e., Zaydī *muqallidūn*] had had a little bit of knowledge and a little bit of understanding, they would have come to know that the intention of writing these books was to collect what reached them [i.e., their authors] from the Sunna according to their capabilities and utmost of their knowledge. They were not bigots to a [particular] *madhhab*, and they did not confine themselves to what may appeal [more] to some *madhhabs* than others. Yet, they collected the Prophet's Sunna for the *umma* so that every scholar would learn from it in accordance with his knowledge and his preparation. Whoever does not understand this, does not deserve to be addressed as a human being.<sup>83</sup>

This statement represents the doctrine of *taqlīd* versus *ijtihād* not only within the Zaydī *madhhab*, but also within the cultural milieu of the Islamic world as a whole. There is no doubt that ash-Shawkānī was not the first to address this topic. He was preceded by Muslim scholars from different schools, who dealt with the topic of *taqlīd* versus *ijtihād*. For instance, pertaining to our purpose, Ibn 'Alwān rejected the concept of blind imitation, particularly in Sufism where he instructed his disciples that it is unnecessary to follow their Sufi masters if they are able themselves to follow the Qurān and Sunna. Nonetheless, six centuries later, ash-Shawkānī's era in Yemen was full of blind imitation (*taqlīd*) that probably exceeded all other parts of the Islamic world.

Criticism of the Zaydī-Hādawī *madhhab* has become prominent due to the efforts of the contemporary historian and Yemeni critic 'Abd Allāh ash-Shamāhī. According to another contemporary Yemeni literary critic and historian Aḥmad Muḥammad ash-Shāmī (d. 2005), ash-Shamāhī's study is the first scientific, historical, and political criticism of al-Hādī's theory of the imamate.<sup>84</sup> Later on, Aḥmad ash-Shāmī undermines ash-Shamāhī's argument in relation to the Zaydī theory of imamate. Ash-Shamāhī shows his astonishment that the Hādawīs would not understand that the confinement of the imamate to the Fātimids would harm them,

their cause, and society.<sup>85</sup> He argues that Imam Zayd b. ‘Alī was more farsighted than al-Hādī since Zayd did not embrace the doctrine of confining the caliphate to the sons of his grandmother Fāṭima az-Zahrā, the daughter of the Prophet.<sup>86</sup> Ash-Shamāḥī explains the consequences of the Zaydī dilemma as follows:

The confinement of leadership (*at-taḥajjur fī az-za‘āma*) led the Yu‘firids, Āl ad-Da‘‘ām of the Arḥab tribe, Āl aḍ-Ḍahḥāk of the Ḥāshid tribe, Āl Abī al-Futūḥ of the Khawlān tribe and their like among the people of *ijtihād* to oppose the Zaydī doctrine. This confinement also led all the Yemeni forces such as Āl Ḥātim, Āl al-Ghashm, al-Khaṭṭāb, Āl Zuray‘, Ṣulayḥids, Yāmids, Hamdānids, and others to stand against the Zaydī *madhhab*. These [Yemeni forces] opposed Zaydīs in favor of Ismā‘īlīs.<sup>87</sup>

The confinement (*at-taḥajjur*) has been the obstacle behind the dissemination of the Hādawī *madhhab*. Ash-Shamāḥī describes al-Hādī’s *madhhab* as follows:

It is a real *madhhab*, full of truth and not imagination, not ecstatic propositions and dreams, not a *madhhab* with riddles and puzzles, not a *madhhab* of miracles and infallible Imams, not a *madhhab* of mediation between the servant and his Lord except the deed of the servant and his faith. It is a *madhhab* of worship as well as social customs and personal behavior (*mu‘āmalāt*). Its rules reached the juridical and legislative accuracy, with comprehensiveness, susceptibility to develop and readiness to accept every new development, which contemporary laws have not reached. It is a *madhhab* of religion and worldly life, faith and deed, activity and seriousness, justice and altruism, *jihād* and *ijtihād*. In it the human being is free, not predestined, to obey God and to care for His servants. It is a *madhhab* that calls for intellectual liberation and profundity in beneficial knowledge. It prohibits blind imitation (*taqlīd*) in doctrines and religious scientific rules. It necessitates *ijtihād* on the basis of the Qur’ān and Sunna in worship and *mu‘āmalāt*. It calls for strength and sacrifice. It enjoins obedience, discipline, and cooperation. It enjoins rebellion against the unjust Imams, revolution against social injustice and individual oppression. It does not accept, for its followers, humiliation, laziness, subjection and surrender except to God and His teachings. It is a *madhhab* that respects

the predecessors (*salaf*) in that they are humans, susceptible to criticism including the Companions and the sons of Fāṭima. Some members of the Fāṭimids are like the Companions in that they perform good deeds whereas some clearly wrong themselves.

All the above features of the Hādawī *madhhab* described by ash-Shamāḥī are meant to prepare the reader for the critical attack on the *madhhab*. However, ash-Shamāḥī exaggerates his description of the *madhhab* probably to avoid criticism due to his severe censure of the theory of imamate in the *madhhab*. He argues that the confinement of imamate reflects a weakness of the Hādawī *madhhab*. According to ash-Shamāḥī, the Hādawīs consider ‘Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn infallible like the prophets. Their consensus (*ijmā’*) after the demise of Prophet Muḥammad is a proof (*ḥujja*) [i.e., as the Qur’ān or Sunna] because they are alone the Prophet’s family (Āl Muḥammad). Similarly, their educated sons have the authority of consensus because of their lineage. Ash-Shamāḥī argues that this narrow thinking, which is unfamiliar in the Hādawī *madhhab*, led the Fāṭimids to confine the imamate to themselves only. In addition, the Hādawī *madhhab* would have been stronger and more liberal if it had turned away from the theory of the imamate and its interference.<sup>88</sup>

Ash-Shamāḥī holds the view that the real setback behind the Zaydī failure in applying the Islamic theory of imamate was the theory’s genealogical “confinement.” He did a thorough investigation to discover the reasons behind the monopoly of leadership and how it was restricted to a particular group of people, thereby denying the right of others to participate in that process. Ash-Shamāḥī, however, does not provide alternatives, as is evident from some reactions to his work presented by the Yemeni scholar and critic Aḥmad ash-Shāmī (d. 2005).

Aḥmad ash-Shāmī points out that the sectarian narrowing (*al-ḥaṣr at-tā’ifi*) by al-Hādī (d. 298/910) and others of the imamate to either the “Qurashiyya” or the “Fāṭimiyya” is not the chief reason behind tragedies, whether in Yemen or elsewhere in the Islamic world. The “confinement” has been observed in the reality of Islamic history across the ages; a monopoly on authority has been seen in the families of every leader, caliph, king, or sultan. This is evident from the experience of the Umayyads, ‘Abbāsids, Fāṭimids, Banū Ḥamdān, Mamlūkes, Saljuqs, and Ottomans. Similarly, this has been the case in Yemen, which was ruled by more than twenty families. The rich and powerful passed on their power and authority within their clans, such as the Banū Ziyād, the

Yu'firids, the Banū Najāḥ, the Ṣulayḥids, the Ayyūbids, the Rasūlids, the Hādawīs, and others until the revolution of 1382/1962.<sup>89</sup>

On the other hand, in an attempt to refute ash-Shamāḥī's thesis, Aḥmad ash-Shāmī discussed in detail the failure of the Zaydī theory of imamate and brought two questions to the fore: Why did the Zaydī imams fail continuously to apply their Islamic theory? Why did they succeed in formulating the theory but fail to apply it? The answer, according to Aḥmad ash-Shāmī, does not lie in ash-Shamāḥī's explanation that the theory has been distorted by genealogical factors. Despite the partial admission of ash-Shamāḥī's ideas, Aḥmad ash-Shāmī attributed the incapability of the Zaydīs and the Hādawīs to apply their theory of succession to several reasons. The most important reason is the freedom the theory grants to whoever believes himself able to meet the conditions of assuming power such as wielding the sword and calling people to follow him. But the real problem, argues Aḥmad ash-Shāmī, is the lack of a system represented by institutions to legislate the theory, explain it, and uphold it. Were such a system to be instituted, every member of Yemeni society would be comfortable because the peaceful transfer of power would be protected by institutions. Aḥmad ash-Shāmī concludes his remarks by noting that this is how civilized countries, whether in the East or the West, currently practice and live.<sup>90</sup> These are the major issues imbued in the Zaydī school of Yemen and—I believe—they are sufficient background for further research. The relationship between the Zaydī imams and the Sufis of Ibn Alwan's era will be discussed at length in Chapter 8 of this book. Now, in keeping with the aim of providing an image of medieval Yemen's diverse religious milieu, I turn to a discussion of another significant group, the Sunnīs.

## The Sunnī Movement

### *An Overview*

The term "Sunna" has multiple meanings.<sup>91</sup> In the Qur'ān, the most common meanings are "the wont of the ancients" (*sunnat al-awwalīn*)<sup>92</sup> and "the wont of God" (*sunnat Allāh*).<sup>93</sup> Other meanings are way, method, law, conduct of life, behavior of life, established rule, and established mode of conduct. The meaning of Sunna as an established mode of conduct appears in the Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*), "I am leaving with you two things: you shall never go astray as long as you adhere to them: the Book of Allāh and the Sunna of His Prophet."<sup>94</sup> According to Marshal G. M. Hodgson, "the term Sunnī is short for men of the Sunna and the Jamā'a. This name was first adopted by only one faction

among those who accepted the ‘Abbāsids—a faction which stressed continuity with the Marwānid past (and was not especially friendly to the ‘Abbāsids as such) and combined this with a special interest in the Sunna practice as expressed in *ḥadīth* reports about the Prophet. But since that faction eventually was specially recognized as representing the Jamā‘a position, the term has come to refer not necessarily to all that faction’s complex of teachings, but simply to the acceptance of the Jamā‘a principle in contrast to the ‘Men of the Sharī‘a’, the ‘Alid-loyalist party.’<sup>95</sup>

There is much dispute about the beginnings of the process of recording traditions in Islam. However, a half century after the death of Muḥammad b. Idrīs ash-Shāfi‘ī (d. 205/820), scholars produced what came to be known as the standard collections of authentic *ḥadīth*. These books are the two *Saḥīḥs* by al-Bukhārī (d. 257/870) and Muslim (d. 262/875), and the four *Sunans* by Ibn Māja (d. 273/886), Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/888), an-Nasā‘ī (d. 303/915), and at-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892). All these books are known to Muslim scholars as “the six books” despite their rejection by some Shī‘ī scholars. Of course there are other books, which are recognized by scholars, such as the *musnad* of ad-Dārmī (d. 256/869), the *musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), the *Muwaṭṭā‘* of Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), and others, but the priority of the Sunnī view has always rested upon “the six books.” This corpus of traditions is recognized by everyone except the Shī‘a.<sup>96</sup> The people who have transmitted or critically compiled traditions are known as “traditionists.” It should be noted that scholars differentiate between “traditionists” and “traditionalists.” The latter are those who have recognized religious knowledge derived from the Qur’ān, the Sunna, and the consensus (*ijmā‘*) and given priority to these sources over reason in treating religious matters. Similarly, scholars have identified those who attack the “traditionalists” as the “rationalists” or speculative theologians (*mutakallimūn*), be they Mu‘tazilites, Ash‘arites, Mātūrīdites, or other groups. It should be noted, however, that the boundaries between “traditionists” and “traditionalists” are not always precisely marked.<sup>97</sup>

With the support of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph, al-Ma‘mūn (d. 218/833), the Mu‘tazilites required the Ḥadīth folk to admit that God had created the Qur’ān. The people of Ḥadīth refused such admission and instead emphasized the supremacy of God over all things, insisting that He alone created human acts, including a person’s evil acts. God was above any human criteria of good or evil, of just or unjust because all things sprang from Him. The argument between the Mu‘tazilites and the people of Ḥadīth was aggravated by the Mu‘tazilī assertion of freedom of the hu-

man will, which would be rewarded necessarily by God's justice. The Ḥadīth folk felt that this was an insult to God, rendering Him powerless.<sup>98</sup> In the end, the Mu'tazilites were permitted to persecute the leaders of the Ḥadīth folk. The consequence of this was the famous inquisition (*miḥna*) of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). The Mu'tazilites remained prevalent until Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935) recanted his Mu'tazilī doctrine and was able to employ the debating techniques of the Mu'tazilites to produce a rational defense of tradition.<sup>99</sup> Al-Ash'arī's theological position became the standard view of almost all the Sunnī schools of law, including the Mālikīs, Shāfi'īs, Ḥanbalīs, and Zāhirīs. The orthodoxy of these Sunnī schools was recognized by the overwhelming majority of its membership.<sup>100</sup>

### *The Sunnīs in Yemen and Their Literature*

According to Ibn Samura al-Ja'dī (d. 586/1190), the majority of Sunnī schools of law in Yemen in the third/ninth century were the Mālikīs and the Ḥanafīs. Before that time, the sources of Islamic law were taken from the work of Ma'mar b. Rāshid al-Baṣrī (d. 153/770), the work of Sufyān b. 'Uyayna (d. 198/813), the work of Abū Qurra Mūsā b. Ṭariq al-Laḥjī (d. 203/818), the reports in *al-Muwatṭā'*, the work of Abū Muṣ'ab az-Zuhrī (d. 242/856), the reports transmitted by Ṭāwwūs b. Kaysān (d. 106/724) and his son Abd Allāh b. Ṭāwwūs (d. 132/749), and the work of al-Ḥakam b. Abān al-'Adanī (d. 154/770), and others.<sup>101</sup>

Although Muḥammad b. Idrīs ash-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820), the founder of the *madhhab*, visited Yemen in 179/790 and remained there for quite some time, his *madhhab* entered Yemen only in the third/ninth century, spreading in al-Janad, Ṣan'ā', and particularly in the south of Yemen (al-Yaman al-Asfal). Later on, it gained wide acceptance in Ḥaḍramawt.<sup>102</sup> Shāfi'ī *madhhab* was prevalent in the fourth/tenth century and came to prominence in the first half of the fifth/eleventh century.<sup>103</sup> Ibn Samura provides us with a brief account of the early Shāfi'īs who actively participated in the development of the Shāfi'ī *madhhab*.<sup>104</sup> The most noted scholar from the third generation of Shāfi'īs was al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Jumahī al-Qurashī (d. 437/1045) who played an important role in disseminating the Shāfi'ī *madhhab*.<sup>105</sup> Shāfi'īsm became popular when the Rasūlid sultan al-Manṣūr 'Umar converted from the Ḥanafī school to the Shāfi'ī *madhhab*.<sup>106</sup> The first Shāfi'ī book to arrive in Yemen was a summary of the Shāfi'ī precepts by Ismā'il b. Yaḥyā al-Muzanī (d. 264/877), known as *Mukhtaṣar al-Muzanī*. It was introduced into the Yemeni scholarly milieu by Ḥusayn b. Ja'far al-Murāghī

(d. 324/935).<sup>107</sup> Ibn Samura (d. 586/1190) points out that people in Yemen took their source of Islamic law (*fiqh*) from *Mukhtaṣar al-Muzanī* and the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) from ash-Shāfi‘ī’s *Risāla*. According to Ibn Samura, the Yemenis relied on the books of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Abū ‘Alī aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 350/961), Ibn al-Qaṭṭān al-Miṣrī (d. 407/1016), and al-Maḥāmili (d. 415/1024) until the arrival of the influential Shāfi‘ī manual *al-Muḥadhdhab* by Abū Ishāq ash-Shīrāzī (d. 476/1083).<sup>108</sup> Ash-Shīrāzī’s book was fashionable even after the compilation of *al-Bayān* by the Yemeni scholar Yaḥyā b. Abī al-Khayr al-‘Imrānī (d. 558/1162). However, when books of an-Nawawī (d. 676/1277) such as *al-Minḥāj*, *al-Majmū‘*, *Rawḍ aṭ-ṭālibīn*, and others came to Yemen, they superseded all the earlier sources that were developed by the Shāfi‘ī school of law.<sup>109</sup>

It is important to note that the celebrated Sunnī traditionist Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) visited Yemen. He studied under ‘Abd ar-Razzāq aṣ-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 211/827) and was influenced by the latter’s *al-Muṣannaḥ*. Another famous Yemeni traditionist worth mentioning is Muḥammad Ibn Abī ‘Umar (d. 320/932), the chief judge of Aden. He compiled a collection of *ḥadīths* arranged according to the chain of transmitters known as *musnad*. The celebrated Sunnī *ḥadīth* collectors, Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī (d. 261/874), the author of *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, and Abū ‘Isā aṭ-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), the author of *as-Sunan*, collected their traditions from him and relied heavily on his expertise in the field of *ḥadīth*.<sup>110</sup> Another prominent scholar from the late third/ninth century is ‘Ubayd b. Muḥammad al-Kashwarī (al-Kishwarī) whose history has not come down to us, but is quoted by the prolific writer and historian al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad b. Ya‘qūb al-Hamdānī (d. 334/945) in his *al-Iklīl* and by Aḥmad b. Abd Allāh ar-Rāzī (d. 460/1068) in his *Tārīkh Madīnat Ṣan‘ā’*.<sup>111</sup> Al-Kashwarī was one of the teachers of the well-known traditionist aṭ-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/970).

Due to the intellectual tensions between the Shāfi‘īs and the Ḥanafīs in Yemen, and since the Ḥanafīs were close to the rationalist precepts of the Mu‘tazilīs, the Shāfi‘īs adopted the creed (*‘aqīda*) of Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). They opposed speculative theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*) and rejected the Mu‘tazilite doctrine of the createdness of the Qur’ān. The Shāfi‘īs went even further to refute the rationalistic tendencies advanced by the Mu‘tazilites as can be seen in the polemical treatise titled *al-Intiṣār fī ar-radd ‘alā ‘l-Qadariyya al-ashrār* written by the foremost formidable authority of the Shāfi‘ī school during the ‘Abbāsīd era, Yaḥyā b. Abī ‘l-Khayr al-‘Imrānī (d. 558/1162). Al-‘Imrānī is also the

author of an eleven-volume work titled *al-Bayān*, which is considered Yemen's most celebrated Shāfi'ī manual.<sup>112</sup> "Another Shāfi'ī scholar was Iṣḥāq b. Yūsuf aṣ-Ṣardafī (d. 500/1107) who lectured at a school established in the Mosque of aṣ-Ṣardaf and was an expert on arithmetic (*ḥisāb*) and the law of inheritance, on which he compiled *al-Kāfī fī 'l-farā'id*."<sup>113</sup> Among the Sunnī scholars who participated in polemics against the Mu'tazilite doctrine were Maṣṣūr b. Jabr (d. 657/1258) in his *ar-Risāla al-muzalzila li-qawā'id al-Mu'tazila* and the Sufi scholar 'Abd Allāh b. As'ad al-Yāfi'ī (d. 768/1366) in his *Marāhim al-'ilal al-mu'ḍila fī ar-radd 'alā al-Mu'tazila*.<sup>114</sup>

Ḥanbalism in Yemen flourished at the hands of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Burayhī (d. 586/1190), known as the "Sword of the Sunna" (*sayf as-Sunna*). He was known for his asceticism (*zuhd*) and scrupulousness (*wara'*).<sup>115</sup> According to Ibn Samura, he was a disciple of Yaḥyā b. Abī al-Khayr and the second in rank after him.<sup>116</sup> Students came to study with him from far and wide. Al-Janādī (d. 732/1331) emphasizes his proficiency in *fiqh*, grammar, language, the principles of jurisprudence, and the principles of *hadīth*. He wrote books in refutation of the doctrines of Mu'tazilism and Ash'arism.<sup>117</sup> He left a considerable body of writing, much of which is still in manuscript. There are two lines of poetry in every book he left behind, warning, "This book should be confined to the Sunnīs; it should not go to the deviant Ash'arites nor those who have gone astray [i.e., the Mu'tazilites]."<sup>118</sup> Al-Ḥibshī, the contemporary historian and literary scholar, quoting Abū Makhrama's *Tārīkh thaghr 'Adan*, states that people had adhered to Ibn Ḥanbal's *'aqīda* until the age of al-Janādī (i.e., the eighth/fourteenth century) whereupon some scholars (*'ulamā'*) converted to the Ash'arite school of theology. The first scholarly tension between the Ḥanbalites and the Ash'arites, says al-Ḥibshī, was when Ṭāhir b. Yaḥyā al-'Imrānī abandoned his father's *madhhab* (i.e., the Ḥanbalites) and joined hands with the Ash'arites. Many *'ulamā'*, including his father, rose against him until he was forced to leave Yemen for Mecca. When he came back after a long time they forced him to change his creed and to publicly retract his Ash'arite beliefs from the pulpit of the city's main mosque. The chief instigator of his retraction was the Ḥanbalī scholar, Sayf as-Sunna, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Burayhī (d. 586/1190).<sup>119</sup>

Before the Ayyūbid conquest of Yemen, education was confined to a few mosques that served as schools (*madāris*, sing. *madrasah*). When the Ayyūbid ruler al-Mu'izz b. Ismā'īl b. Ṭuḡhtakīn (d. 598/1202) assumed power, he built the first religious college in Zabīd in 594/1197,



which was named after him (*al-mu'izziyya*).<sup>120</sup> The college resembled, to a certain extent, those found in Syria and Egypt about that age. The Rasūlids followed in their footsteps. They built colleges, mosques, and libraries throughout the country, making Zabīd and Ta'izz major international centers of Islamic learning.<sup>121</sup> Due to the fame of these centers, scholars came "from distant Muslim lands in search of the opportunities for advancement offered by the enlightened Rasūlid rulers."<sup>122</sup>

As mentioned above, Ash'arite theology became standard in lower Yemen, where the majority of Sunnī schools of law were located. (Ash'arism was embraced by Yemeni Sufis in the seventh/thirteenth century and continues to be an important part of the Sufi doctrine.) On the other hand, people in the northern part of the country, especially Ṣa'da and Ṣan'ā', have adhered to the Zaydi school of law, which has close ties with the Mu'tazilite-Hādawī school of theology. This geographic split is still in place at the present time.

### Conclusion

During the 'Abbāsīd caliphate, the majority of Yemenis adhered to Sunnism. Yemen's relative isolation and difficult geography prevented the 'Abbāsīds from bringing it under centralized authority,<sup>123</sup> and so it became a refuge for Islamic sects to establish independent religious communities. Thus, Yemen became a veritable preserve of the Shī'a, represented by the Zaydīs and the Ismā'īlīs. Although these two sects shared some religious principles, they vied with one another for the political control of the Yemeni hinterland, and this competition prevented them from converting the country to either version of Shī'ism.<sup>124</sup>

The Ayyūbid invasion in 569/1173 returned some stability to Yemen.<sup>125</sup> The Ayyūbids suppressed the Ismā'īlīs and most of the sultanates, but failed to subdue the Zaydīs. Most important for our story are the Ayyūbids' energetic promotion of Sunnī learning and Sufi lodges and generous funding of their construction. They also exempted the lands of Sufi masters from taxation. In return, Sufi masters assisted authorities in quelling rebellions and mediated the frequent conflicts between the rulers and semi-independent tribal leaders. When the Rasūlids seized power they continued this trend, building colleges, encouraging intellectual activities and individual scholars, and advancing religious studies, Islamic mysticism in particular. In their era of stability and prosperity scholars came to Yemen from distant Muslim lands to enjoy the lavish rewards offered by Rasūlid princes.<sup>126</sup> It was under these conditions of state patronage that Yemen's ascetic movement began to flourish.

Here I have shown the historical and cultural development of Yemen in its broader perspective, introducing the various Islamic communities and showing Yemen's diversity. Armed with this understanding of the numerous strands of Islam shaping the medieval Yemeni environment and the influence of political dynasties on Islamic learning, I begin to trace the development of Yemeni asceticism. The following chapter explores the rise of the Sufi movement in Yemen from early Islam to the lifetime of Aḥmad b. 'Alwān, elucidating the connections between Yemen's complex religious environment and its nascent Islamic ascetic movement.