ILLUMINATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT REVISITED, OR:

PIETISM AND THE ROOTS OF ISLAMIC MODERNITY

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Schulze’s provocative hypothesis: an “Islamic Enlightenment” in an “Islamic 18th century”?

Almost a decade ago, a sharp controversy broke out in Islamic studies in Germany when Reinhard Schulze presented some unprecedented ideas on what he called, “the Islamic eighteenth century”.1 In a paper first read to the 1988 Cologne congress of German Orientalists, he sketched a “historiographical critique” of dominant views on modern Islamic history that went one significant step beyond what had been heard so far. Other authors before him had called into question the dominant historiographical paradigm which posited that modernity in the Muslim world was essentially an import from the West brought to the Orient in the wake of Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. When Schulze presented his paper, it had become common and almost fashionable among historians of the Middle East to look into eighteenth-century Muslim history with an eye to traces of ‘reform’ and a gradual literary and economic awakening where previously one had seen only despotism, mannerism and decline. A cautious debate had started regarding the relevance of these new discoveries. Some argued that the new vitality supposedly detected was not so much a distinguishing feature of the eighteenth-century Muslim world as such, but that its discovery was rather the result of better and more detailed studies of the eighteenth century, of pushing back the boundaries of our knowledge from 1800 to 1700. Where previously the eighteenth century had been ‘dark’, now it was the seventeenth. If we were to scrutinize the seventeenth century, so the argument, we would perhaps discover a similar vitality there as well.2

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Schulze did not agree. He wasn’t only concerned with cautious reform and gradual evolution; he posited a major historical transformation, a radical change that distinguished the “Islamic eighteenth century” from previous Islamic history in a way similar to the role played by the eighteenth century in European and Western history. In the West, the eighteenth century is commonly seen as the beginning of the modern age. Enlightenment, the industrial revolution in England, and the political revolutions in America and France, are generally presented as the main symbols of this development. With some reason it may be said that for modern bourgeois society in the West, the eighteenth century represents a mythical ‘Golden Age’, the age when our ancestors forged the foundations of modernity as we know it, creating the conditions for the astounding economic, social, and political ‘progress’ that has made ‘our’, the Western experience unique in world history.

Where there is light, there is shadow, and the light that was focused on the West cast a long shadow on the rest of the world. The conceptualization of history as a long if winding progress culminating in the triumph of the modern West obscured to a large extent other peoples’ experiences; they were seen either as tributaries, as side streets or as culs-de-sac. To counter this historiographical juxtaposition which constructs a fundamental and therefore basically unbridgeable gap between a triumphant West and all the ‘others’, Schulze called for the historiographical emancipation of the “Islamic eighteenth century” as a point d’origine, a point of origin equivalent to the European age of Enlightenment and revolution. Since Western historiography had systematically obscured those developments in other peoples’ histories that it wished to portray exclusively as the West’s own achievements, the task at hand was to reestablish the “readability” of other peoples’ histories. In other words, Schulze called upon historians to open up their minds to the contingencies, the inherent options and unpursued possibilities that had been buried both by the course of events and the writing of history under the sign of European triumphalism. This, it was hoped, would help to overcome the essentializing divide that the colonizing West had drawn up between those who had and those who had not undergone the experience of Enlightenment and who were therefore entitled to a place in the sun. By reintegrating the history of Muslim peoples into a universal history that was larger than its European province, by looking at this universal history in terms of Wallerstein’s theory of a world system emerging since the sixteenth century, and specifically by uncovering general trends and developments that universally characterized this world system in the eighteenth century, Schulze hoped to achieve two goals: (1) to reestablish the forgotten lines linking modern Islamic history to its eighteenth-century roots — lines that had been cut by the portrayal of modernity exclusively as a Western import; and (2) secondly, to contribute to a more universal conceptualization of certain categories of historical research (such as modernity), a conceptualization less dominated by the idiosyncrasies of the Western experience alone.
What is ‘Enlightenment’?

So far, so good. Schulze’s paper would probably not have caused the uproar that it did had it not provocatively proposed to search for an autochthonous “Islamic Enlightenment”, thereby laying claim to the sacred heart of Western modernity, and deconstructing the essentializing conceptualization of Enlightenment as something exclusively Western. By deliberately applying terms that are generally used to conceptualize European history (such as ‘ancien régime’, ‘citoyen’, ‘intellectuals’, or ‘Enlightenment’) he meant to shake up historians from their complacency and their deeply-ingrained preconceptions of an essentially different Orient. His basic point was that we cannot see a process of Enlightenment, or elements thereof, as long as we are fundamentally convinced that Enlightenment did only happen and could have only happened in the West. This fundamental conviction must necessarily blind us to processes in the Muslim world that were similar or comparable to our own history. Schulze therefore proposed to initiate a specific search for traces of autochthonous processes of an Islamic Enlightenment in the eighteenth century that may lie buried beneath the debris of subsequent history. For there could be no doubt that such an Islamic Enlightenment did not produce the same results as the European Enlightenment. Schulze’s hypothesis was rather that the eighteenth century Muslim world had gone through specific processes of Enlightenment, and that this tradition of their own was a precondition for the understanding and the reception of the European Enlightenment by Muslim intellectuals in the nineteenth century. The autochthonous Islamic Enlightenment tradition was then submerged by the European tradition, primarily for reasons that have to do with the colonial encounter. As Western Orientalists since the nineteenth century had helped much to construct the image of an essentially different (and necessarily premodern) Islam, it was their responsibility as well to help to deconstruct such notions, and to rediscover Islam as an integral part of universal history.3

But what could this Islamic Enlightenment be? What is Enlightenment? Schulze has given several and not always consistent answers to this question; and he has repeatedly stated that it is too early positively to define Islamic Enlightenment, that we need many more preliminary studies, and that his main concern is to make the question as such plausible and worthy of consideration.4 This difficulty of defining Enlightenment is of course shared by the proponents and the historians of European Enlightenment as well, a fact that we should not overlook. Nevertheless, Schulze’s thoughts do revolve around an understanding of Enlightenment as both an ideational and a social development. Enlightenment is seen as an

ensemble of processes aiming at an emancipation of human thought and human self-conception from the hegemony of established theology. These processes have different origins and they are articulated in many different voices; they are clearly not always consistent. Overall, however, Enlightenment comes across as the ideational expression of a self-confident autonomy by a new (and chiefly urban) intellectual élite.

More specifically, Schulze identified four central concepts that in his view are essential, constitutive elements of any process of Enlightenment. These concepts are:

1. **[Subjectivity]** Schulze emphasizes the contribution of mystical traditions to the constitution of subjectivity and subjective self-consciousness. At the same time, he sees a “correlation between [the two poles of] monistic mysticism and rationality”. This two-legged process helped to strengthen individual self-consciousness and self-responsibility. In the face of the scholastic form of rationalism, it was, however, in particular the mystical experience of one’s self, the reflection upon one’s own intimate ideas, feelings and thoughts, that was a requisite precondition for what Schulze calls a more “anthropocentric” worldview.

2. **[Anthropocentrism]** The change from a theocentric to an anthropocentric worldview. Schulze sees a line leading from the mystic’s “creative imagination” to the creative design by an autonomous and self-conscious human subject of his own order (“der kreative Entwurf einer dem Menschen eigenen Ordnung”).

3. **[Originality]** A change in the evaluation of what is new (or modern) and what is old (or traditional), whereby it is no longer the old that is better but the new. This is linked to a view of the historical process as ‘progress’ and not as ‘decline’.

4. **[Emancipation]** The social and economic emancipation of an urban bourgeoisie from those classes that had dominated the state so far, and the political emancipation of the inhabitants of a country as citizens (citoyens) of a state, are described as the major drives behind the process of Enlightenment.

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Critics

To illustrate his thesis, Schulze very tentatively and rather speculatively pointed out some possible examples for these four constitutive elements from eighteenth-century Islamic history. It is here that he exposed himself most clearly to criticism. Three scholars in particular have come out publicly against his theses: Rudolph Peters, Bernd Radtke, and Tilman Nagel.

Peters: the problem of ‘anthropocentrism’; defending European specificity

Peters was the first of them; he is also the most benevolent. While he does “agree that it is important for Islamic historiography to look for indigenous agents of innovative change in the 18th century”, he reacted particularly against the keyword, ‘anthropocentrism’. Where Schulze, in Peters’ words, “tentatively points out that we might find in 18th century Islamic mysticism and even in Islamic jurisprudence a tendency to replace the theocentric worldview with a more anthropocentric one”, Peters “cannot follow him anymore”. His hesitation is understandable; that an anthropocentrism is not immediately evident in Muslim writings of the time is clear even from Schulze’s own treatment of the issue. Schulze writes, “In the culture of eighteenth-century Islamic scholars, this [paradigmatic] change [from a theocentric to an anthropocentric] worldview appears almost exclusively in disguise, in iconic or metaphoric form. Certainly, this has something to do with the powerful position of the guardians of tradition.” Schulze proceeds to suggest several mystical metaphors that might perhaps be interpreted in this sense: “the pre-existent Muḥammad, the mystical guide al-Khi¶r, the Muḥammadan Light or the Axis of the Age”. He does not elaborate on these ideas, but goes on the say that “the mystical concept of illumination (tanwir [sic]) — note the clear metaphor of light! — could perhaps in this context describe a self-illumination”.

Now in this little example we can see in nuce the beginnings of a series of small errors and distorted citations that have marred the controversy ever since — on both sides. For example, ‘tanwir’ is not generally used to describe the mystical concept of illumination; this concept is rather described as ‘fatḥ’ (“opening”). If Schulze has found a mystic using tanwir as a concept, he should tell us his source. Besides, the metaphor of light is of course

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not specific to the Enlightenment; as such, in isolation, it can therefore not readily be interpreted as an icon for a process of Enlightenment. Schulze’s interpretation of the pre-existent Muhammad and the other mystical concepts mentioned suffers from a similar lack of concrete context.

On the other hand, Peters’ claim that Schulze sees “even in Islamic jurisprudence” an anthropocentric tendency has no basis in Schulze’s text. When Peters writes, “our knowledge of the 18th century has not advanced to the degree that we can positively state that [there were indigenous agents of innovative change and that we can] identify them”, he insinuates that Schulze does claim to have reached this stage of positive identification — whereas in fact Schulze keeps emphasizing the preliminary, but creatively challenging hypothetical nature of his arguments.

When Peters, finally, states that “we should not forget that Western European Enlightenment is closely associated with a specific political, social and economic development, which did not occur in the Islamic world”, he does no more than repeating the established Western creed that Enlightenment is something specifically Western and therefore cannot have happened anywhere else. In other words, what must not be, cannot be. After all, Peters writes, Enlightenment “made the Western world what it is today”, and “even if we should find in the Islamic world during the 18th century cultural and intellectual expressions that show some similarity with some basic concepts of the Enlightenment, […] it is not justified to label them as ‘Enlightenment’”. Why not? Firstly, because “it would strip the concept of Enlightenment of its precise meaning”, and secondly, because “it would imply isolating the cultural and intellectual sphere from the other historical developments”. Now here I cannot follow Peters anymore. He implies that there is a generally agreed-upon “precise meaning” of Enlightenment — which there is decidedly not in European historiography. And secondly, Schulze does anything but isolating the cultural sphere from the economic and political ones — quite the contrary. Peters’ reaction therefore appears to be merely a restatement of precisely those deeply ingrained preconceptions regarding the place of Europe in world history that Schulze set out to challenge.

**Nagel and the persistent influence of ‘the West vs. the rest’ imaginaries**

Now I hear some historians of Islam protest and say, ‘Wait a minute, that’s also a distortion; for over thirty years now we have been trying to paint a more nuanced, a more sympathetic picture of the Muslim world in the eighteenth century, and now you come and say there is this old dichotomy, this old picture of Muslim decline on the one hand and
European progress on the other, that’s simply keeping on beating a defeated enemy.’ Well, some historians may have worked to redress the balance a little, but the fundamental opposition it still very much noticeable, not only in more general public conceptions, but also in the scholarly literature. Thus, for example, we read in the current edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

“For the Islamic countries, the 19th century marks the beginning of a new epoch. Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt, as well as British colonialism, brought the Muslims into contact with a world whose technology was far in advance of their own. The West had experienced the ages of Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment, whereas the once-flourishing Muslim civilization had for a long while been at a near stagnation point despite its remarkable artistic achievements. The introduction of Muslim intellectuals to Western literature and scholarship […] ushered in a new literary era the chief characteristic of which was to be ‘more matter, less art.’ The literatures from this time onward are far less ‘Islamic’ than those of the previous 1,000 years, but new intellectual experiences also led to ‘the liberation of the whole creative impulse within the Islamic peoples’ (Kritzeck).”

The basic image of a Muslim world in stagnation, a world that could only be impregnated through Western penetration, can hardly be expressed more clearly. If specialist historians should have worked for thirty years to modify this image, this does not seem to have had any noticeable impact on the general public.

But even specialists continue to be influenced by this image. In a recent article, Tilman Nagel includes several scathing remarks on Schulze whom he accuses of “basing his far-reaching interpretations not on secure knowledge derived from the relevant sources but on ideological clichés of the most simplistic kind”. “Woolly ideas”, a stubborn “simple repetition” of unsubstantiated assertions, and the occasional adducement of a few poetic verses taken out of context and interpreted “in a philologically untenable, even blatantly wrong way” are combined to produce a “mysterious concord” between cultures that “the uninstructed observer” cannot make out. Nagel presents himself as an “uninitiated observer”, that is as someone who registers facts in a disinterested, sober and rational manner; his opponent, on the other hand, is ignorant of the facts and guided instead by wishful thinking and a “careless generalization of his own worldview”. Over half a century of research on the social construction of knowledge is ignored in this easy juxtaposition of facts vs. worldview. Nagel’s own ‘worldview’ is, however, easily apparent in his article. He laments the fact that “we have at best vague ideas about the make-up of that intellectual world that had to react to the challenge of modern Europe”. And he

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10 Nagel, “Autochthone Wurzeln”, 108 n. 34.
remains unconvinced by Albert Hourani who already in 1972 had argued that a certain type of Sufism “which emphasized the importance of virtuous activity” had been an influential factor in the development of Islamic modernism.\(^\text{12}\) Hourani had pointed out these Sufis’ strict adherence to the *Sunna* of the Prophet [that is, an emphasis on modeling one’s life directly on the Prophetic ideal instead of relying on the doctrines of the scholastic religious establishment]; their critical attitude towards political authorities; or their claim to have produced the ‘renewer’ of the second Islamic millennium (Ahmad Sirhindī, d. 1624). Nagel regards all this as superficialities. He does not explain why, nor what exactly he means by this; but it is obvious from the context of his article that he views all these developments as surface phenomena that could in no way have changed the essential structure, that “attitude to the world that is peculiar to Islamic thought” (die “dem islamischen Denken eigentümliche Haltung zur Welt”).\(^\text{13}\) Nagel’s formulations reveal fundamental premisses of expectation when he complains that we know too little about “that world which had to react to the challenge of modern Europe”. Where Schulze reckons with contingencies and unpursued options, thus trying to open up historical research to the inherent openness of history, Nagel contributes to the reification of an essential contrast between ‘Islam’ and ‘modernity’. Modernity is thus constructed as the exclusive domain of ‘modern Europe’, to which the Islamic world ‘had to react’. Independent actions by Muslims are not part of this picture, and are therefore all too easily overlooked.

**Radtke: “projections and insufficient philology”**

I have spent an awful lot of time now talking about ideas and hypotheses, about worldviews and the construction of knowledge... but I shall try to stop short of ending up in a completely unsubstantiated postmodern narrative flux. I do believe that there are facts, even though our knowledge of them and our interpretations of them are never independent of social constructions. And I do agree that it is in the realm of facts — the examples he adduces to substantiate his thesis — that Schulze is most vulnerable. In a way, he has made it very easy for his critics to refute his hypothesis by providing too many unreliable examples to illustrate it.

The most persistent and outspoken of these critics has been Bernd Radtke. In a series of articles and lectures, most concisely in “Erleuchtung und Aufklärung” [Illumination and


\(^\text{13}\) Nagel, “Autochthone Wurzeln”, 111.
Enlightenment], he directly addressed Schulze’s thesis in order to demonstrate that “the whole construction of an Islamic Enlightenment in parallel [to the European one] owes its existence to projections and insufficient philology”\(^4\). To prove his point, Radtke concentrated on one complex of Schulze’s argumentation, “the development of Islamic mysticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries”. Drawing on his vast knowledge of the history of Sufism up to the thirteenth century, he explored in detail the writings of some of the most important Sufi authors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and demonstrated convincingly that neither can those authors be viewed as rationalists, nor is their cosmology scientific in the modern sense of the term. Secure knowledge they hoped to achieve not through independent human reasoning, but firstly through godliness (\textit{taqwā}), and secondly through imitation of, direct communication with, and eventual union with the Prophet — not, as Radtke stresses, an epistemology commonly associated with Enlightenment. Similarly ‘un-enlightened’ is their cosmology, which remains deeply anchored in ‘mythical’ ideas; “the world is not governed by […] natural laws, but is a sign of Divine omnipotence and wisdom”. For all these reasons, Radtke concludes, mysticism and Enlightenment rationalism constitute two totally different \textit{cultures}, in the sense that they cultivate different layers, areas, or faculties of the human mind (“Seelenschichten”). For such reasons, he also finds it difficult to follow the argument describing the mystical experience of oneself, the mystic’s self-reflection, as one of the factors that prepared the ground for or helped to engender modern anthropocentrism.\(^5\)

Radtke has a vast command of the literature of Islamic mysticism, and his recently published survey of the Arabic writings of eighteenth-century Sufism is a milestone in the exploration and careful documentation of the contents of this literature. The details of his criticism of Schulze’s position are generally correct, and he has an easy job pointing out the many factual errors, distortions, and premature generalizations in Schulze’s interpretations of Islamic mysticism. Thus, for example, Schulze wrote of the “rigorous dogmatics” of “the neo-Sufi movement”, “a dogmatics mostly called, \textit{al-ṭariqa al-Muḥammadīyya} (‘the Muḥammadan Way’)”. On the bases of this, neo-Sufi leaders allegedly “asserted their claim to be the sole legitimate representatives of the Muslim community”. “Inspired by the ‘Muḥammadan Light’”, they “preached self-liberation” from direct bindings to authorities

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and “developed an extended theory of *ijtihād*”, interpreting it as “the free will” of the community’s leader who was entitled to judge “through direct Prophetic emanation”.¹⁶

**Radtke’s criticism is correct en détail, but misses the point**

None of this is indeed based on a careful analysis of the relevant literature; Radtke refers to it as “undigested material”. But does this disprove Schulze’s hypothesis? I do not think so, for in spite of all his justified criticism en détail, the ensemble of Radtke’s argument misses the point.

**Mysticism does not equal Enlightenment**

Firstly, Schulze never claimed that mysticism equaled Enlightenment, but only that mysticism and pietism had played an important role in the overall process of Enlightenment in Europe. His hypothesis supposes that comparable developments took place in the Muslim world as well. Radtke’s insistence on the differences between mysticism and Enlightenment is therefore correct but misses the core of Schulze’s argument.

‘Neo-’ is not the same as ‘new’

Secondly, Radtke strongly emphasizes the continuities between the 18th/19th-century Sufis and their predecessors; and he uses these continuities as an argument against those in whose view there are sufficiently significant new developments and constellations in eighteenth-century Sufism to justify labeling them ‘neo-Sufism’ or ‘reformed Sufism’. His method basically is to demonstrate that XYZ, allegedly a characteristic of ‘neo-Sufism’, is nothing new but an “old hat”. By finding the individual elements that are used to characterize ‘neo-Sufis’ in the writings of earlier Sufis as well, he claims to have refuted the whole picture. But while in many regards this it is certainly a salutary exercise, Radtke ignores both that what is alike is not always identical, and that ‘neo’- is not the same as ‘new’. If you take a ‘neo-Gothic’ church, for example, you will find that a lot — perhaps all — of its elements are copies of medieval models. Even the church as a whole may be constructed in the image of an identifiable medieval original. But still, it is not a medieval church. The context has changed, the clients who had it built, its location in the cityscape, the techniques used in its construction, the general visual impression it makes, and the people who use it — all this

has changed, and so the overall appearance as well as the significance of the building are no longer the same as those of a medieval cathedral in medieval times. Similarly, one can argue, it is with ‘neo-Sufism’. Radtke does not consider this when he translates ‘neo-Sufism’ as ‘Neusufik’ and believes to be able to refute it simply by demonstrating that the individual elements are not new.

A neo-Sufi consensus?

He does also not distinguish between those authors who have used the term ‘neo-Sufism’ (Fazlur Rahman, John Voll, Schulze) and those who prefer to speak of ‘reformist orders’ (Trimingham) or of ‘mystical reform movements’ (Johansen), in the latter case adamantly opposing the term ‘neo-Sufism’. This lead him, together with R.S. O’Fahey, to draw up a list of points that allegedly constitute “the neo-Sufi consensus”: rejection of ‘popular’, ecstatic practices; rejection of the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabī; emphasis on moral and social teaching over initiatory spiritual training; ‘union’ with the Prophet rather than with God in the unio mystica; legitimation through direct contact with the Prophet; creation of hierarchically-structured mass organizations; emphasis on hadith-studies; rejection of taqlīd; and the will to act politically and militarily in defense of Islam.

These points certainly do occur in the literature, but they had never before been assembled so neatly into a unified picture, and some of them are decidedly not part of the concept as used by a specific author. Thus, for example, the alleged “rejection of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings” — Schulze, for one, has long emphasized precisely the opposite, namely the importance of the reception of Ibn al-‘Arabī in the eighteenth century, a phenomenon he likes to link to “the confirmation of a highly subjective individuality”.

We must pay attention to directions of change and gradual shifts of emphasis

But it is not only the list of neo-Sufi characteristics as a whole that I think does not adequately reflect the distinct efforts of different scholars to come to grips with intellectual developments in eighteenth-century Sufism. O’Fahey & Radtke assembled their list in order to deconstruct it point by point — yet in many if not all the individual points on their list I see a grain of truth, not in any absolute or extreme sense, let alone as a coherent

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ensemble, but in the sense that there is something going on there in this direction. I have tried to document this in my thesis, for one particular exemplary case, and I cannot go into details here. But based on my research, I do think we can document a greater emphasis on morality, a greater concentration on the Prophet, an increasingly outspoken rejection of the established orthodoxy (through a rejection of taqlid [the unquestioning submission to traditional authorities in fiqh] and an increasing reliance on hadith to legitimate one’s views), as well as the creation of hierarchically-structured mass organizations in an effort to spread one’s influence more effectively throughout society. To take just one point: Radtke demonstrates that it is wrong to say that for the so-called ‘neo-Sufis’, union with the Prophet replaced union with God as the goal of the mystic quest; instead, union with the Prophet was conceived of as a stage leading on to the passing away of the mystic in God. This is quite correct according to the theoretical literature — but if we look at reflections of the actual practice, such as the poetry that was one of the major vehicles transmitting the ideas of these people, or the saint’s biographies, we find that the role of the Prophet in the eighteenth century is much more prominent, much more central than it had been in the tenth, and that for all practical purposes, communion with the Prophet and identification with him (through imitation and submergence of one’s soul in his image) are really the climax of the mystic experience.

In short, I maintain that there are so many developments that are distinctly specific to (roughly) eighteenth-century Sufism that only to wave the “old hat” argument may be as misleading as are rash generalizations of “undigested material”.

We must not idealize Enlightenment, but analyze available data carefully in their synchronic and diachronic contexts

Besides, the process of Enlightenment in Europe was a much less clear-cut rise of reason and modern science than is popularly assumed; Kant is only one, and a late name in this process. The picture of Enlightenment that Radtke contrasts with Islamic mysticism is very much a cleansed digest produced by nineteenth-century historians ex post facto; it is part of the ‘Golden Age’ myth of modern Europe. Recent historiography has amply demonstrated the manifold interconnections between mysticism, pietism, and Enlightenment, tendencies that were often merged by the same person in what to us may appear the most bizarre combinations.20 Let me take just one example, that of cosmology which Radtke uses to


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contrast Enlightenment and mysticism. Radtke writes: in Enlightenment, “the cosmos lost all mythological-theological meaning [and] became purely an assembly of matter, governed, so it seemed, by the laws of mathematics”.21 This is the Cartesian view of nature, which was not at all shared by all adherents of Enlightenment, many of whom [for example the so-called “Father of German Enlightenment”, Christian Thomasius (1655-1728)] subscribed to cosmological ideas that were clearly influenced by Hermetism and even alchemy. Thus, a frontispiece to one of Thomasius’ works depicts how Enlightened and pietistic reform unite to produce wisdom in an alchemical process.22 Such ideas, and knowledge of the long and winding genesis of modern rationalist and scientific thought were later deleted from public consciousness when the image of Enlightenment was standardized and idealized; it is the historian’s obvious task to rediscover them. This becomes particularly urgent when it comes to intercultural comparisons, so as to prevent any facile contrasting of clichés.

Where Radtke operates with an idealized and therefore rather unhistoric concept of Enlightenment, Schulze, filled with the enthusiasm of discovery, appears overly quick to interpret certain phenomena as expressions of a process of Enlightenment. As I have pointed out before, he believes that Ibn al-‘Arabī was read in the eighteenth century to “confirm a highly subjective individuality”.23 The Syrian mystic al-Nābulusī (d. 1731), for example, who was much taken by Ibn al-‘Arabī, supposedly celebrated a “subjectivism”, the self-view [Ich-Sicht] of which “had little to do with the classical mystical idea of the lowly nature of man”. Schulze concedes that for the time being, this interpretation must remain conjectural. But he makes it clear that “the confirmation of a metaphysical ‘self’ [or ‘me’] is an important key for the Enlightenment thesis”.24 I think that Schulze’s interpretation of the verses he cites by al-Nābulusī is premature. The self-praise that is expressed in these verses may appear quite exaggerated to outsiders who can easily misinterpret it as praise of the worldly Ego of the author (or as the constitution of a metaphysical ‘me’). But similar verses and sayings can easily be adduced from ‘classical Sufism’; one may refer here not only to al-Baṣṭāmī or al-Ḥallāj, but also to the dream-book of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and many other dreambooks.25

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22 Kemper, Aufklärung und Pietismus, 96-103.
25 Katz.

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My own thesis: certain Sufi ideas now used in a larger context

Having said all that, my own thesis is not so much that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sufism produced so many fundamentally new ideas but rather that certain ideas which had been developed in the mystical tradition over the centuries were now used in a much larger context, and brought to bear on a much larger number of people. The particular attention that the mystics paid to the inner experiences of the individual believer, the particular importance given to these individual experiences, was no longer merely theoretically held out to all, but was actively propagated by missionary movements. Personal religious experience and personal understanding of the fundamental truths of the faith, became something that every one, even an unlettered bedouin, was supposed to have. This development was most likely imbedded in the context of structural changes in society; social history has still much research to do here. And it also engendered structural changes — such as the growing importance of the role of individuals and of their autonomy vis-à-vis the scholarly establishment — of which the carriers of this development, as social actors, need not necessarily have been conscious. It is therefore, I believe, often unrewarding or pointless to search too much for conscious changes in the system of ideas. Schulze sometimes gets on thin ice here and is then an easy prey to ‘philological’ attacks.

Parallels between 18th/19th-c. Sufis and Christian pietists

The most rewarding and useful comparison, I believe, can be made between our 18th/19th-century Sufis and European pietists (an American audience will perhaps be more familiar with the Methodists, an offshoot of the pietistic movement).26 While Schulze has mentioned this hypothesis, he has not really systematically elaborated and tested it, and at times he does not distinguish clearly enough between pietistic and Enlightenment thinkers and actors. I believe that a more systematic comparison that differentiates more clearly between the fundamental ideas and the carriers of rationalist Enlightenment on the one hand and pietism on the other would do much to advance both our understanding of the

26 Influenced by pietistic (specifically, Moravian) ideas, the ‘Wesley brothers’ John (1703-91) and Charles (1707-88) founded organised disciplined ‘Methodist’ societies in England in around 1770. They emphasized personal experience of conversion, sanctification of the individual believer, home mission, and relief work for the poor. Methodism had much success in North America, where the evangelical English itinerant missionary George Whitefield and other preachers of the ‘Great Awakening’ had prepared the way in the 1730s and 1740s. At John Wesley’s death, the societies had over a hundred thousand members. Other revivalist movements in America should of course also be considered in this context.

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peculiarities of 18th-century Sufism and of the role it may have played / its contribution to / larger intellectual and cultural processes in the Muslim world.

Here, I can do no more than sketch a few central features that characterize European pietism, features that show, both in detail and in the general direction, surprising parallels with 18th- and early 19th-century Sufi movements such as I have analyzed in my dissertation.

**Pietism in Europe**

*Pietism* was a movement within the Protestant Church that emerged since the 1670s.\(^{27}\) It aimed at reforming the religious life of individuals because the established religious hierarchy (the orthodox church) was seen as being unable or unwilling to do so, being preoccupied with maintaining their power base (relation to the state) and with theological hair-splitting. The roots of pietism lay partly in mysticism, more particularly in a devotional mysticism that — while striving for the *unio mystica* or mystical union\(^{28}\) — laid more emphasis in practice on repentance, regeneration and a new life.

It is precisely these aspects that were the chief concerns of pietism. Pietists called for a “complete religious renewal of the individual believer”, “a conscious change of man’s relationship to God”.\(^{29}\) They demanded a personal and upright resolve to turn, once and for all, from sin to God, for a fundamental and practical ‘con-version’ of oneself and one’s life. This ‘conversion’ was believed to lead to a ‘rebirth’ and a new life in a new spirit and a new community of brethren in the faith.\(^{30}\) Members of this community often believe that their conversion, and the ascetic and spiritual exercises they fulfill, will ensure them of ultimate salvation.

Pietism thus had mystical roots, but it de-emphasized speculative mysticism in favor of a new morality grounded in an individual, practical conversion. This conversion was to be based on a personal, even if stereotyped, religious experience — an experience which every individual member of the group had to go through. And it led, generally, not to a retreat from this world, but to active devotion, to an imbuing of this world with the new-found spirit, and to both external and inner mission. “[P]ietists hoped to reform society through

\(^{27}\) History: Precursor: Johann Arndt (1555-1621); leading figures: Jakob Philipp Spener (1635-1705); August Hermann Francke (1663-1727, established in 1695 the Franckeschen Stiftungen in Halle); Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf (1700-1760).

\(^{28}\) The concept of *unio mystica* was developed by the Lutheran orthodox reformer, Johann Arndt (1555-1621) in addition to the Lutheran *ordo salutis* or order of salvation.

\(^{29}\) F Ernest Stoeffler, art. “Pietism”, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*.

\(^{30}\) This is the central message of Jakob Philipp Spener’s (1635-1705) best-known work, *Pia desideria*.
the efforts of renewed individuals”. In other words, pietists contributed to enlarging the internal boundaries of the faith, on two fronts, that of the individual, and that of society. They organized circles of Bible reading and introduced the “Daily Text” to ensure that the Scriptures were read and understood by everyone, not only the priests, thereby making them truly a book of the people. They then demanded from every individual true, personal commitment to the norms laid down in the Scriptures. And while they organized in small circles or cells within the larger Church (ecclesiola in ecclesia) in order to intensify the personal impact of their message, they aimed at permeating society at large and therefore were one of the driving forces behind both external and inner mission.

To this effect, they utilized and perfected means of mass propagation. A great deal of effort went into improving methods of preaching (previously, the sermon had been used mostly to address outsiders); hymns and song flourished as carriers of the message to the illiterate; and books and pamphlets were published in the vernacular languages and in a style accessible to the less well-educated. Pietists produced a vast corpus of edificatory literature; some of their works became ‘best-sellers’ and maintained their place among the most widely-read books in Europe until the nineteenth century.

It is highly important to realize that in terms of quantity and impact, this pietistic literature was much more significant, at least until the mid-18th century, than the works of the proponents of Enlightenment. It has been estimated that through their various means of mass publication, the pietists succeeded in making their ideas known to about 40% of the Protestant population in Germany until the mid-18th century, reaching more sections of society than any other movement before, and certainly having a much larger audience than the philosophers of the Enlightenment. They brought the Bible to the people, and next to the Bible it was their own works that were most widely read.

The most important legacy of pietism was its insistence that all people, however poor or ignorant, can commune with God if they have a pious heart. Two elements should be distinguished here, an ideological one and a social one: (1) Piety — the right attitude — was placed above scholarship; (2) everyone, every individual, was given the principal right to direct access to the Truth. In this broadening of the social base pietism preceded and was in practice more radical than the early Enlightenment philosophers.

31 Stoeffler, art. “Pietism”.
32 E.g. Bunyan, The pilgrim’s progress; Spener, Pia desideria. In Norway, a similar development was Hans Nielson Hauge’s (1771-1824) lay preacher’s movement, which was directed against the Church establishment. It has been said that Norway was truly christianized only through Hauge and his best-selling books (Edvard Bull).
33 Kemper, Aufklärung und Pietismus, IX-X.
Pietism it often contrasted with Enlightenment; but in reality, this is only a secondary opposition. First and foremost, pietism was a reaction against legalistic scholasticism (that of Protestant orthodoxy).\(^{34}\) Piety and godliness served as a weapon in the fight against established scholarly and scholastic authorities and their claim to exercise a monopoly over the interpretation of the Scriptures. It is precisely this aspect that pietism shares with Enlightenment:

- the rejection of established authorities, of the institutionalized church, in favor of a more individual approach to Truth, or in other words, the freedom of the individual vis-à-vis the established, dominant norms of the day
- an “ethical sensitivity” which stressed ethical qualifications over and above formal status
- the importance attached to man’s inner experience and the individual’s own thought.

Thus, the scholastic establishment was challenged both on emotional and on rational grounds. Pietists and philosophers of the Enlightenment represent two aspects of the same overall process. Their relationship with each other was a dialectical one, and recent research has emphasized the “functional analogies” between the two, for example that between the Enlightenment principle of self-determination and the individual pietist’s “assimilation of himself to Christ” (as the song goes, “… so wird ein jeder Christ / ein wahrer Christus seyn …”), meaning an “internalization” of the principle of salvation (that is, salvation is no longer conceived of as being effected through the singular, physical death of Christ on the cross, but through the “effective incarnation and personification of the son of God in man”.\(^{35}\)

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\(^{34}\) By scholasticism I mean a system of learning wherein a class of scholars trained in specific institutions according to a long-established and slowly-changing canon employ reason \([aql]\) as a chief tool of understanding the revealed truth; this reason(ing) always remains subordinated to the revealed truth.

In the Muslim world, this system was represented by the scholar-jurists or ‘ulamā’. Over time, the scholar-jurists became the dominant interpreters of revelation in the Muslim world; their position was often bolstered by state institutions. In many respects, their impact on the construction of Muslim worldviews was hegemonic. Alternative, rival models existed, but they generally had to justify themselves in terms set by the ‘ulamā’, and they never attained the same authoritative influence that the scholar-jurists were able to exercise. As we enter the eighteenth century, the scholastic ‘ulamā’ thus generally represented established authority in the Muslim world; their system of learning — the scholastic system — represented learning par excellence: \(al-\text{`ilm}\).

Examples from the Sudan: \(al-Fāki\) Hamad turned to the authoritative figure of the Mālikī shaykh al-Azhar to confirm his \(ijāza\) in the Shādhili way. And \(\text{`ilm}\) (which literally just means, ‘learning’) has a much more specific meaning in Wad Dayf Allāh’s \(Tābaqāt\), where it always means the learning administered by the scholar-jurists, a learning attained in practice through the study — that is, the repeated reading — of a largely canonized body of juridic texts.

\(^{35}\) Kemper, \textit{Aufklärung und Pietismus}, 129-132.

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Parallels with 18th/19th-century Sufism

Parallels with 18th/19th-century Sufism abound. Take, for example — just to mention a point that is dear to Radtke — the emphasis Ağmad b. Idrõs (one of the towering figures of the mystical reform movements) places on taqwâ (godliness or ‘God-wariness’) as the fundamental precondition for the correct understanding of the Scriptures, thereby challenging the whole system of established scholastic authority. Or compare the pietists’ attempts to spread knowledge of the Scriptures with the growing emphasis of and reliance on ‘primary’ sources (the Qur’ân and Prophetic Traditions) by Muslim reformers of the anti-taqlõd persuasion. Take the issue of mass propagation, the hymns that emerged in the Sudan, for example, at the end of the 18th century to propagate the message to the illiterate, and the enormous increase in writing that we can observe at the time and that is chiefly due to the vast output of edificatory and devotional literature by Sufi or Sufi-inspired movements.

Another parallel that should be mentioned at least hypothetically is that of the social base of these movements: pietism had its origins in centers of learning (such as the university of Halle); but its message spread to a significant extent among more lowly, less well educated classes to whom it offered a sense of pride and self-esteem which they could not possibly have attained within the world as defined by the old system, the ‘ancien régime’. Research on the social bases of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Muslim reform movements leaves much to be desired; but again, parallels with the move exemplified in the case I have written on in my thesis, the move ‘from the Ḥaramayn (Mecca and Medina) to the grass huts of the Beja in Sawākin’ suggest themselves.

Carrying the simple (and simplified) message of Truth beyond the sterile debating rooms of the theologians, carrying it to the common people, implementing it in real life, making every individual responsible for its implementation — that is the basic agenda of both the pietists and the 18th/19th century Sufi movements.

Individuals en masse

The increasingly significant role of the individual that is part of this picture is something that was advanced by both pietism and Enlightenment. It is the individual as object of the (pietistic or enlightened) message, and as subject of a direct, emotional or rational experience of and access to Truth — an access that is immediate, i.e., no longer mediated by the scholastic guardians of the faith. In the long run, this heralds a process of emancipation of the individual from ‘traditional’ authority.
To try to draw up a generally accepted definition of modernity is probably a hopeless enterprise. But perhaps we can agree that ‘individualism as a mass phenomenon’ is a central feature of modernity. If this is so, then pietism and Enlightenment were both equally important, and mutually interdependent, factors in the emergence of modernity. With this in mind, I would like to formulate the following conclusion:

Pietistic reform movements, rooted in old mystical traditions but clearly distinguishable from these roots both as intellectual and as social phenomena, helped to lay important foundations for developments that are characteristic of the modern Muslim world: the emancipation of the individual from traditional scholastic authorities; the tendency to merge the spheres of morality and the law; and the attempt effectively to spread a generalized concept of true knowledge and normative practice throughout society and into every individual’s heart.\(^{36}\)

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