Introduction

It can be argued that the consciousness of sin is as old as human consciousness itself. From the first glimmerings of human history, human beings—as *homo religiosi*—have exhibited an acute awareness of their transgressions against a moral or supernatural order, and often suffered, as a consequence, under a distressing self-condemnation. Whether one considers the ancient Egyptians, the Aztec communities of America, the Hebrew prophets of Israel, or the Vedic Hindus of the Indus Peninsula, the sense of sin has gone hand in hand with the larger existential dramas of human existence.[1]

Yet, alongside this awareness of sin, humans have also sought ways to mend the ruptures created with the supernatural world as a result of their misdeeds, and to protect themselves from the consequences of their own actions. The fact that some believed these consequences appeared in the form of divine retribution, and others as a karmic response due to the violation of *dharma,* is ultimately of secondary importance. At the heart of this sense of sin there often lay a belief in a cosmic law of cause and effect, a belief that without some mitigating or atoning factor, one was condemned to face the consequences of one's transgressions, and that if those consequences did not appear in this life, they would in the next. The consciousness of sin was therefore almost always accompanied by measures, introduced by tradition, to protect the sinner from his own moral and sacrilegious crimes. Historically, these measures ranged from such responses as priestly sacrificial rites, elaborate purification rituals, the invocation of certain litanies or formulas, to extreme forms of self-mortification and even self-immolation.

In the Abrahamic religions, the cornerstone of these restorative strategies lay in "repentance." Although many of the common presumptions about the nature of the concept derive from Christian theology—indeed the term itself, as we shall see, is of a peculiarly Christian origin—it is

still possible to speak of repentance within Judaism and Islam provided certain preliminary qualifications are made. Keeping in mind that we should remain cautious of artificially imposing the categories of one religious tradition onto another, even when the other tradition belongs to the same family of faiths, only an extreme reductionism would prevent one from acknowledging the presence of repentance outside of a Christian context. If, however, one understands the concept in the broadest sense as a religious mechanism to cancel, redress, or atone for one's previous wrongs or past misdoings, then we can indeed speak of repentance not only in the Abrahamic faiths, but also across the spectrum of world religions.[2] But this, as noted, requires that one not inadvertently impose the particular features associated with this concept in one tradition onto another, even if those features are linguistically intrinsic to the term itself.

The purpose of the present study is to bring to light approaches to *tawba*, commonly translated as "repentance," from the early period of Sufism. To date, not a single academic monograph has been published on *tawba* in Islam, let alone one of its intellectual subtraditions. The scholarly lacuna is surprising considering the central place of *tawba* in the Qurʾān and the wider Islamic tradition. Indeed, Islam's founding Prophet is to have declared, "I am the Prophet of repentance" (*anā nabī al-tawba*).[3] While a number of short studies have appeared in the form of journal articles or book chapters exploring *tawba*[4] in the Qurʾān,[5] *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence),[6] *kalām* (Islamic theology),[7] Shīʿism,[8] literature,[9] or the relation of the concept to "conversion,"[10] or "redemption,"[11] this study aims to be the first full-length treatment of *tawba* in Islam, with a unique focus on early Sufism.[12]

The period analyzed in our study runs primarily from the eighth through eleventh centuries, with a particular focus on the middle two. In light of the periodization introduced by Michael Sells,[13] we shall look at two phases of the formative period of Sufism. The first consists of that of the "founders" of the tradition, and runs from the late seventh and early eighth centuries to the middle of the tenth century. It includes such figures as Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 778–9), ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 797), Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 860), Sarī al-Saqaṭī (d. 867), Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 910), Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 896), and Abū Saʿīd Aḥmad al-Kharrāz (d. 899). The second consists of the "formative period of Sufi literature," and begins in the middle of the tenth century with the appearance of some of the first comprehensive texts in which Sufism is presented as a "self-conscious mode of spirituality embracing all aspects of life and society."[14] This phase begins with the writings of Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī

(d. 994–5), Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 988), and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996), and ends with those of Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 1072) and ʿAlī b. ʿUthmān al-Hujwīrī (d. 1077). Although the focus on this second phase in the course of this study will be on its earlier period, and even here, with particular attention to the thought of Makkī (for reasons outlined below), some of the later works of this phase will not be excluded from our broader analysis, especially for *tawba* narratives and sayings as they have been transmitted to us in some key eleventh-century sources.

A study of this nature faces a few challenges from the outset. The most significant of these is that our knowledge of the earliest period of Sufism is still quite rudimentary.[15] This is not simply because relatively little research has been carried out in this area, a problem which, on its own, can be rectified by more research. As in the case of our under-standing of the pre-Socratics, much of this has to do with meagerness of sources and scarcity of documentation. While many scholars agree that the origins of the phenomenon that came to be defined as Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) can be traced back to the interior life of the Prophet of Islam—particularly, to certain pivotal events in his mission, such as the first descent of revelation, or the famous nocturnal ascent (*miʿrāj*)—we do not have a very clear picture of the beginnings of Sufism insofar as we are dealing with a distinct expression of Islamic piety.[16] Although it is generally believed that Sufism gradually emerged out of a move-ment of renunciants (*zuhhād*) and devout worshippers (*ʿubbād, nussāk*) who had spread across the empire during the late Umayyad and early Abbasid period—a movement that was composed of individuals who saw themselves as inheritors of the spiritual message of the Prophet and who may have been reacting through their ascetic renunciation to the newfound wealth of the empire[17]—we have little knowledge of the exact nature of the theological and mystical doctrines that were in circulation during this period and shortly afterward. Many of the "founders" of the Sufi tradition who emerged out of this movement wrote very little, and many of the works of those who did write have either been lost or come down to us in the form of partial or fragmentary manuscripts. For many of these figures, all we have are a few aphorisms, glosses on Qurʾānic verses, or anecdotes passed on through oral tradition until they eventually appeared in later Sufi treatises. In many cases it is difficult to comprehend the actual import or meaning of these sayings because they are so removed from their initial contexts. In the course of this study we shall see how, for example, the same saying could be interpreted in conflicting and contradictory ways by later authors. Because we lack, for

the most part, extensive texts until the formative period of Sufi literature, our understanding of the doctrines of the earliest Sufis remains quite hazy. The difficulties this can present for a historical analysis of a single concept in the earliest phases of Sufism are self-evident. For this reason, our inquiry into the various perspectives on *tawba* prevalent in this period cannot be exhaustive. In some instances, an element of speculation will guide our conceptual reconstruction of early notions of *tawba*.

Although many figures played important roles in the intellectual development of early Sufism, this study will focus largely on the views of those individuals from whom important contributions to early notions of *tawba* can be drawn. Thus, some personalities of the early period will be given negligible or no attention. These include such men as Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728), considered by many to be the patriarch of Islamic mysticism, and Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 922), whose dramatic execution by the Abbasid polity brought tensions between the more esoteric and exoteric strains of Islam to a climax, thus marking a turning point in the unfolding of the tradition. The reason for this exclusion is not because these and other such personalities were peripheral players in the formation of the tradition, but because no more than a few cursory (and seemingly inconsequential) remarks of theirs have been transmitted on the theme of *tawba*.[18] On the other hand, an entire chapter will be given to exploring the views of a figure like al-Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857), who lived between the time of Ḥasan and Ḥallāj, because we have a number of his written texts, including a short treatise still in manuscript form entitled the *Iḥkām al-tawba* (*The Establishing of Repentance*). The range of works by him that are currently available remains a rather unique exception to the general dearth of texts that characterizes the earliest phases of Sufism. A study of early approaches to *tawba* would be incomplete without including Muḥāsibī.

It should be clear that the criterion that will determine our selection of figures whose ideas will be explored will not depend solely on how much they might have addressed the concept under study. In other words, the criterion is not simply quantitative. Since one of the aims of this study is to shed light on some of the principal theoretical trajectories of early views of *tawba*, we will also look into the views of certain figures who played an important role in some of the early debates surrounding the concept, even if no more than a handful of sayings on *tawba* have been transmitted from them.

The most comprehensive and sustained single treatment of *tawba* that we have up to the end of the tenth century is to be found in Makkī's

chapter on *tawba* in the *Qūt al-qulūb* (*Nourishment of Hearts*). On account of its breadth and depth, a significant part of this study will focus on this important Sufi author's discussion of this topic as it appears in his seminal Sufi text. Although Sarrāj and Kalābādhī, who wrote in the same period as Makkī, also devote chapters to repentance in the *Kitāb al-lumaʿ* (*Book of Flashes*) and *Taʿarruf li madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf* (*An Introduction to the Way of the Folk of Sufism*), respectively, their treatments of the subject are brief and succinct. But despite the brevity of their comments, their views shall be included in this study as well as those of other figures who came shortly afterward.

   One of the salient characteristics of early discussions of *tawba*, and one that will become quickly apparent over the course of this study, is the extent to which they are centered on the most practical concerns of the path. The most extensive inquiries into the nature of *tawba* that have been transmitted to us focus not so much on abstract, metaphysical issues but on practical considerations. Although inquiries into the former were certainly not absent in the early period, a fact we shall also see in this study, the main focus of the most well known of the early works was on *praxis* (*muʿāmala*), that is to say, in aiding the spiritual seeker to grow and mature on the path, and in protecting him from the trappings of his own psyche and inner world. This point has been highlighted by Laury Silvers, when she writes that "the treatises and manuals that are the most visible face of early Sufism and the early institutional period tend to focus on the basics of the spiritual path and less so on theoretical questions."[19]

   An accurate way to describe this *praxis*-orientated Sufism would be as a spiritual psychology, one whose aim was to direct the spiritual traveler toward an experience and knowledge of God through an inner cleansing and purification of the self.[20] Though principally pragmatic, this "practical Sufism"[21] did not consist of a simple list of injunctions and prohibitions of the path drawn through an analytic study of the formal precepts of scripture. Were that to have been the case, there would have been little to separate this science from jurisprudence. Although, like jurisprudence, it was prescriptive in nature, its foundations lay largely in meditative introspection and self-examination on the one hand, and reflection on revelation, particularly those passages dealing with the inner life of the believer, on the other. Even though many of the most well-known early representatives of this science had close ties to jurisprudence and its culture, the science developed out of the fruits of their asceticism, contemplation, prayer, inner life, and single-minded

devotion to God. Describing this inner science in the early period, Fritz Meier writes that the Sufi thinkers "established a scheme of ethical and epistemological principles and mapped out the boundaries of what was permitted in the way of spiritual adventuring; in short, they evolved an intricate moral psychology [. . .] intended to guide the initiate in his pilgrimage towards the purification of the soul."[22] It was only later that the more metaphysical and esoteric treatises came into prominence, though, as noted, such conversations were also taking place early on.

In the context of *tawba*, the aim of this "practical Sufism" was to help free the *tāʾib*—the one who repents and returns to God—from the seductive power of sin. This involved directing him to a certain course that would ensure he remained true to his *tawba*. The Sufi thinkers did not simply stipulate a set of conditions that had to be met in order for *tawba* to be accepted by God. Although they did discuss these conditions in detail, in the longer treatises they laid out a comprehensive regimen that would help protect the aspirant from lapsing in his *tawba*. In the process, they drew attention to the various internal impulses and maladies of the heart that could draw the *tāʾib* back to his misdeeds and the means through which he could overpower them. They thus prescribed a course of action through which the cravings of the lower soul, which were the ultimate causes of many of the sins, could be tamed and brought into control. One also finds in Sufi discussions *tawba* presented as an all-consuming process of returning to God—indeed, as the first stage or station (*maqām/manzil*) of the spiritual path. Insofar as it is presented as a comprehensive spiritual process, *tawba* is tied to other essential virtues of the path, such as patience (*ṣabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), and inner struggle (*mujāhada*).[23] The nature of the unity of the virtues in Sufi thought will become clearer by the end of this study.

The Structure of this Study

This work has been divided into two broad sections. The first consists of two chapters that examine the semantic field of *tawba*. In the first chapter, we shall explore the meaning of *tawba* through an inquiry into the most established and authoritative lexicons of classical Arabic. In the process, we will define the parameters of the semantic field of the term both from a linguistic (*taʿrīf al-tawba fī al-lugha*) and religious (*taʿrīf al-tawba fī al-sharʿ*) perspective. Most important, we shall highlight the central problems involved in conceptualizing *tawba* simply as "repen-

tance." Although many of the problems in this equation will be brought out, it will be shown that, in the final analysis, repentance can function as a viable translation of *tawba* provided one does not lose sight of the principal lexical sense of the Arabic term, namely, that of a "return." The chapter will demonstrate the importance of being conscious of this principal lexical sense in order to appreciate the full range of meanings conveyed by its use in the Islamic tradition. One of the main reasons that it will be concluded that the commonly employed English word can act as a reasonable though not unproblematic translation of the Arabic term is because the underlying meaning of the former corresponds closely to the religious meaning of the latter (at least in relation to the human being), and moreover, because English lacks an altogether adequate alternative. The focus of this chapter, however, will be on demonstrating not the converging but diverging meanings of repentance and *tawba*. This is simply because it is usually taken for granted, even in scholarly studies, that the two function as neat equivalents.

The second chapter offers a detailed and meticulous analysis of *tawba* in the Qurʾān. One of the purposes of including such an inquiry in a study of Sufi approaches to this concept is to demonstrate the Qurʾānic background to many later Sufi ideas. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, many of the issues brought up for discussion by the early Sufis had strong scriptural precedents. By employing a method used by the remarkable Japanese scholar Toshihiko Izutsu in his studies of the Qurʾān, this chapter will attempt to define the semantic field of *tawba* through an internal analysis of Islam's sacred text. Although we shall occasionally consult external literature, such as *tafsīr* (exegetical commentaries), the primary intention is to draw out the Qurʾānic meaning of *tawba* through the text itself. This will involve examining not only the derivatives of the root **t-w-b**, but also those terms that tend to cluster around our point of focus. As a semantic analysis, particular attention will be given to the root meanings of those terms that congregate around *tawba* on a recurring basis. This will involve analyzing both its Qurʾānic synonyms and antonyms. By the end of this chapter we shall have a clearer idea of how *tawba* fits into the larger *Weltanschauung* of Muslim scripture.

Part II of this study consists of four chapters. Here, we begin to look at early Sufi notions of *tawba*. We shall begin in chapter 3 by exploring the idea of *tawba* as "interior conversion." That is to say, we shall examine how early Sufis understood *tawba* not simply as an act of turning away from a particular sin, but as an overall conversion experience in which a nominal allegiance to the faith one was born into was replaced by a

whole-hearted commitment to God and the spiritual life. To this end, we shall look at the conversion or *tawba*-narratives of some of the Sufis of the early period, such as Ibrāhīm b. Adham and Fuḍayl b. ʿIyāḍ, as they have been portrayed in the biographical and hagiographical literature. In the process of this analysis, we shall identify and categorize the various means through which these conversions to the Sufi path were brought about. The purpose of this chapter is not to scrutinize or determine the veracity of these conversion narratives, which from a purely historical perspective remain suspect,[24] but to observe instead how the narratives were presented in the tradition. These stories, as we shall see, were not meant to function as existentially irrelevant historical accounts. Instead they had, as the authors of these narratives often openly confess, the specific goal of encouraging would-be mystics to submit themselves completely to God, just like the heroes of these narratives, or of allowing readers to draw some level of inspiration from them. By analyzing these narratives phenomenologically, we will highlight the various ways through which the Sufi tradition depicted the life-altering *tawba* and conversion experiences of some its most important early figures. This analysis is possible because we are fortunate enough to have rather elaborate accounts of the conversions of some of the early figures, particularly from the eighth and ninth centuries.

Chapter 4 is divided into two subsections. In the first part, we shall develop our understanding of the theme introduced in the previous chapter by further exploring *tawba* as a life-transforming alteration. This shall be done by situating *tawba* into the larger journey of the soul as it strives to ascend into the divine presence. In the process, we shall explore the Sufi understanding of the virtues essential for the spiritual ascent, particularly insofar as they are embodied in the states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*). This shall be followed by a brief analysis of the role wisdom sayings and aphorisms (*ḥikam*) played in the transmission of early Sufi ideas, as well as what they reveal to us about early notions of *tawba*. As part of our analysis, we shall examine the various levels of mystical realization or attainment from which a given concept could be conceived by underscoring the important function of what has been identified as the "ethical perspectivalism" of Sufi thought.

After this we shall proceed, in chapter 5, to explore *tawba* in the thought of four key figures from the early period: Kharrāz, Sahl al-Tustarī, Junayd, and Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d. 936). These individuals have not been randomly selected. Kharrāz is of importance because (with the exception of Muḥāsibī) his *Kitāb al-ṣidq* presents us with one of the earliest treat-

ments of *tawba* in Sufism, particularly in relation to the larger scheme of ascending stations. As for Sahl al-Tustarī, his importance lies in the central place he assigned *tawba* in the spiritual life. He stands unique among early Sufis in emphasizing the necessity of continuously turning to God in *tawba,* regardless of one's state or degree of spiritual maturation. By studying the views of Sahl, we will also be in a better position to appreciate the views of Makkī, who was an heir to the Sahlian tradition as it was transmitted through his disciples. As for Junayd, although we have very few of his sayings on repentance, he is considered by many to be the most critical figure in the theoretical formation and development of Sufism. We shall look at his ideas on repentance because of the central role he played in the theoretical formation of the early tradition. Although Wāsiṭī was not as prominent as the other three, he was by no means insignificant in early Sufism. His ideas of repentance represent the most theoretically sophisticated views of the subject from the early period with respect to the metaphysics of *tawba*.

In chapter 6 we shall turn to examine in detail the views of Muḥāsibī, whose primary importance within the tradition rests on the role he played in developing a science of moral psychology. While it would have made sense to approach him before Kharrāz, at least if we were following a strict chronological order, the reason he will be examined independently in a separate chapter, immediately before Makkī, is because his writings offer, like the author of the *Qūt al-qulūb*, a relatively comprehensive treatment of *tawba* in the early period. In the interests of conceptual development, he will be studied alongside Makkī. In this chapter, we shall see how his many treatises are concerned not so much with mystical experiences, but with practical measures the aspirant should adopt in order to draw closer to God, and at the heart of which lies the practice of *muḥāsaba* or self-examination—from which he derives his name. In order to draw out his particular understanding of repentance, we shall consult more than a dozen of his treatises. The themes covered in this chapter include the obligatory nature of *tawba*, the relation of *tawba* to the larger return to God, the means by which the aspirant may overcome temptation, the danger of breaking one's resolve never to repeat the sin, and the importance of turning away from both outward and inner sins.

The final chapter is an analysis of *tawba* as it appears in Makkī's *Qūt al-qulūb*. As noted above, the book was one of the most influential and widely read works in early Sufism. Makkī's analysis of repentance in this work, to which he devoted an entire chapter, remains the lengthiest sustained single discussion of the concept in Sufi literature up to the

tenth century. Despite overlaps with Muḥāsibī in his analysis, particularly because, like Muḥāsibī, he is concerned primarily with Sufi *praxis*, Makkī's psychology bears the stamp of Sahl al-Tustarī more than anyone else. The themes to be covered in this final chapter include the obligatory nature of *tawba*, the process and conditions of *tawba*, the importance of resolve and regret, the method through which the *tāʾib* can protect himself from falling back into sin, the merit of effortlessly abandoning sins, the importance of rectifying past wrongs, the categories of the *tāʾibūn*, and the highly contested question of whether the process of repentance ever comes to an end.

Readers who wish to avoid the technical analyses of *tawba* in Arabic and the Qurʾān may simply begin with the second part of this study, which holds together on its own and does not require a close reading of the first two chapters.