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Biographies and Mild Asceticism: A Study of Islamic Moral Imagination

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Source: *Studia Islamica*, No. 85 (1997), pp. 41-65

Published by: Maisonneuve & Larose

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1595871>

Accessed: 29/07/2010 06:12

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## **Biographies and Mild Asceticism : A Study of Islamic Moral Imagination (\*)**

In the last two decades a handful of studies have suggested new ways of thinking about the social taxonomy of pre-modern Islamic societies (1). The novelty of these studies lies in the importance that they attach to ideals of behavior in defining social units. An example of such an approach is R. Mottahedeh's study that set out "to identify fundamental social units" by focusing on the "manners that gave shape to the political life of a society that flourished a thousand years ago in the Near East" (2). Mottahedeh tried to uncover the cultural components that made up the "social bonds" of this society by examining how people ally themselves with each other and create nameless, yet meaningful, social networks.

In an essay that focused on a different place and time, A. Hourani took upon himself a similar task. Hourani sought to shed light on the relations between social structure and systems of belief. In his own words : "To what extent and in what ways can the history and nature of the societies where Islam is the inherited faith of the majority be un-

(\*) I would like to thank Prof. M. Cook for reading, commenting and criticising an early version of this article. I am grateful to Dr. Dror Zeevi and the participants of the Gabriel Baer Forum, may 1995, for their remarks.

(1) R.P. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton University Press, 1980) ; A. Hourani, "Islamic History, Middle Eastern History, Modern History" in Malcolm H. Kerr (ed.) *Islamic Studies : A Tradition and its Problems* (Undena Publications, 1980) ; B. Shoshan, "On Costume and Social History in Medieval Islam", *Asian and African Studies* (vol. 22) 1988.

(2) Mottahedeh, p. 3. Mottahedeh's working definition for "manners" relies on Tocqueville with slight adjustments : "the sum of the moral and intellectual dispositions of men in society".

derstood in terms of Islam?" (3) Hourani answered the question by sketching a potential scholarly direction in which "moral ideals" will serve as the foundations for the study of a pivotal "social order or estate" – the *ulamā'* (4). Like Mottahedeh, he attempted to describe how beliefs and moral values constituted the unifying forces behind different social groups. Both of these scholars set out to find the connection between moral notions, behavior and social ties.

The present study follows this methodological and historiographic trajectory. It takes as its object of study a particular ethical outlook, to which is ascribed the label "mild asceticism", and examines how its ideals were manifested in actual behavior. The tacit assumption of this study, which in and of itself requires further study and clarification, is that these ideals and practices became the predominant ethical outlook and code of conduct among the *ulamā'* and a large segment of society that looked up to them.

The use of etiquette (and an appropriate ethical posture) within social milieux is a well known feature in courtly circles. Studies of courts have demonstrated that in order to enter and succeed in them it was essential to master the intricacies of proper behavior. However, studies of other socio-cultural milieux, such as the *ulamā'*, have not given behavioral ideals and practices much attention. The purpose of this study is to unearth these moral ideals and practices and suggest how they acquired a normative status in Islamic society.

A short remark on the term "mild asceticism" is in place before we proceed. Though there is an elaborate vocabulary to describe the spiritual stages that an aspiring mystic must travel, Arabic terminology that relates to asceticism has not devised a rich and nuanced vocabulary that distinguishes between types of moral outlooks and practices. This characteristic of ascetic vocabulary has been noted in the study "What is Meant by *Zubd*?" (5).

I. Goldziher, R.A. Nicholson and L. Massignon render the Arabic word *zubd* by the term asceticism. But the term asceticism is rather vague and general. It does not explain the attitude of the *zubbād* (i.e. bearers of Muslim asceticism or *zubd*) toward the various components of asceticism, such as self-denial, self mortification, bodily abstinence, the renouncement of pleasures and temptations, the abandonment of dear people, etc.

Mild asceticism is therefore a non-native term that has been coined in this study for the sake of identifying internal differences within the "vague and general" landscape of asceticism. The usage of this term is

(3) Hourani, p. 11.

(4) *Ibid.* p. 14.

(5) L. Kihnberg, "What is Meant by *Zubd*?", *Studia Islamica* (61) 1985, p. 27.

based on the assumption that the vagueness of asceticism is a result of its composite nature that encompasses a number of discrete moral outlooks and behavioral patterns. Hopefully, if we specify and differentiate one sub-stream in the general current that is known as asceticism, we will do away with a bit of its vagueness. The contribution of such an approach may be twofold : Firstly, it will aide us to focus the blurred image of asceticism. Secondly, if we succeed in identifying the different moral and behavioral trends that make up what is known as asceticism, we may be in a better position to link between them and specific social milieux.

Biographies are the most relevant literary genre for this project. It is no novelty to argue that they were construed for the sake of conveying behavioral patterns (6). The connection between “moral ideals”, “certain ways of thinking and acting”, and “biographical dictionaries” has already been made by Hourani. After pointing to the interrelatedness of ideals, behavior and literary corpus, Hourani observes : “In what the dictionaries record and what they omit, and in their characteristic modes of expression, there is contained a certain human image, an ideal type of what the concerned, literate, law-respecting Muslim should be,...” (7).

Bearing in mind these insights, we need to remind ourselves that biographies were not written as moral tracts or manuals of behavior. Their authors were probably aware of their moral and pedagogical dimensions, but the genre had other goals. Thus, the moral and social meaning of the anecdotes that made up a biographical entry was usually implicit. If we want to unearth the multiple meanings that were invested in these anecdotes, we must contrive new ways of reading them (8). In previous scholarship, biographies often served as repositories of information. In this study the biography of Ibn Ḥanbal and the Prophet’s biography, as it appears in Ibn Sa’d’s *Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* will be analyzed

(6) *El2* “Manākib ”

(7) Hourani, p. 15.

(8) Previous scholarship has usually approached biographies in one of three ways : 1. As a repository of information. Such historians considered biographies and biographical dictionaries, that contain anecdotes about countless individuals, as a storehouse of information that can be taken and inserted into historical narratives. This sort of treatment has been characterized by R. Bulliet : “Scholars have customarily used biographical dictionaries as they were intended to be used by the authors, as reference books.” see R. Bulliet, “A Quantitative Approach to Medieval Muslim Biographical Dictionaries”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* (13) 1970, p. 195. 2. Social historians have devised the “quantitative approach” which focused on set variables in biographic dictionaries. One of the most common variables is the name. Such studies shed light on a variety of topics such as conversion to Islam, vocations and demography. For example, see R. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (Harvard University Press, 1979) ; H. Cohen, “The Economic Background and the Secular Occupations of Muslim Jurisprudents and Traditionists in the Classical Period of Islam (until the Middle of the Eleventh Century)”, *Journal of the Economic and Social*

and interpreted as if they were written as cultural codes (9). The decoding process will advance along two paths. In one, the literary conventions of the biographic genre and the moral ideals they conceal will be highlighted (10). In the second the divergences from biographic conventions that were inserted into Ibn Ḥanbal's biography as unmediated expressions of a moral outlook will be discussed.

## I. – Strategies of Presentation – Ṣāliḥ's Account of Ibn Ḥanbal's Life

Historians of Arabic literature have been debating for some time whether biographies are construed in accordance with strict literary conventions, and if so, whether these conventions bury the individual's perso-

*History of the Orient* (13) 1970 ; C.F. Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1980). 3. Historians of Arabic literature have given a great deal of attention to the nature of the biographic genre. Does it reflect literary conventions or can it reflect a "sense of personality"? The debate was sparked by H. Gibb, "Islamic Biographical Literature" in B. Lewis and P.M. Holt (eds.), *Historians of the Middle East* (London : Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 54-58. Gibb argued that Arabic biographies can be reduced to a formula and rarely go beyond that (though he does state that biographies can "add psychological depth indirectly..." p. 57. Gibb's statement drew a number of direct and indirect reactions. T. Khalidi, "Islamic Biographical Dictionaries : A Preliminary Assessment", *The Muslim World* (63) 1973, argued that "... it is difficult to hold, in this matter, to Gibb's view that these character sketches were mostly clichés." p. 64. By contrast, H. Fahndrich, "Compromising the Caliph", *Journal of Arabic Literature* (8) 1977, p. 40, observes that the biographic anecdotes of Abu Dulama do not add up to a "real, i.e. historical" figure, but rather to a "literary character".

One scholar that has attempted to pose a different set of questions that brush aside problems of factuality and historical veracity and focus on underlying meanings and ideological agendas is F. Malti-Douglas, "Dreams, The Blind, And The Semiotics Of The Biographical Notice", *Studia Islamica* (51) 1980, and "Controversy And Its Effects In The Biographical Tradition Of Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi", *Studia Islamica* (46) 1977.

(9) Ibn Ḥanbal's biography was written by his son Ṣāliḥ b. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Sīrat al-Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal* (Alexandria, 1981) ; Prophet's biography is Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut, 1985)

(10) There is, of course, a problem in identifying the conventions of biographic notices with conventions of biographies in general. Most of the above mentioned studies (see footnote 8) dealt with biographic notices. Despite the fact that these studies focus on biographic notices, I think that most of these conventions are also found in biographies such as Ibn Ḥanbal's *Sīra*. We must allow that certain aspects, primarily laudatory sections that describe the biographers' qualities, may receive more attention than comparable parts in a biographic notice. Another difference may be the attention given to events, which is often scant in biographical notices, and may be quite extensive in a biography.

For the purposes of this study, suffice it to say that certain ideological features remain very similar. To begin with, the biography is organized according to topics and not along chronological lines. Furthermore, the issues that it addresses are similar to those of biographic notices. As for the contents, these are often identical with what we find in biographic dictionaries. For example, the information in Ṣāliḥ's *Sīra* is often reproduced in Abū Nu'aym's *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā'*.

nality under layers of impersonal, and often inaccurate, information (11). In this study of Ibn Ḥanbal's *Sīra* we will find that even though literary conventions influenced the shaping of his biography, they cannot account for all the information that is included and every aspect of the biography's organization. Alongside literary conventions we must bring into account two sorts of influences. The first is that Ṣāliḥ b. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 265/878), who was Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal's son, made an effort to convey a moral message. The second is personal motives that lead Ṣāliḥ to include a host of intimate anecdotes. Thus, information that diverges from convention is at times governed by ideological considerations and at times by the authors whims. The latter are a complete break from literary conventions and reveal Ibn Ḥanbal's character as it is seen by his son. The former are part of a continuous effort to disseminate the moral position of mild asceticism.

Perhaps the most common characteristic and most basic convention of Islamic biographies is their structure. The organization of the information is thematic and not chronological. Modern scholars have remarked that this feature indicates that it is not the unique development of the individual's character, world view or emotions that concerns the authors, but "the exemplary message conveyed by the events he is relating" (12). In our case the "message" will be that of mild asceticism.

Ibn Ḥanbal's *Sīra* conforms to these observations. Its organizational principle is thematic and not chronological. Ṣāliḥ opens with the basic information – date of birth, date of death and genealogical tree (13), and moves on to describe his father's search for knowledge, mentioning a number of his teachers (14). This is followed by two chapters that depict Ibn Ḥanbal's virtues (*akblāq*) and asceticism (*zudā*) (15). The next two chapters concentrate on Ibn Ḥanbal's fate during the *mihna*, and give a detailed account of his interrogation. The final part of the *Sīra* is a doxography.

The case for a formulaic structure of biographies has been put forth most strongly by H. Gibb (16). Basing his observations on the writings of

(11) See footnote 8.

(12) Kilpatrick, "Autobiography and Classical Arabic Literature", *Journal of Arabic Literature XXII*, p. 3.

(13) Ṣāliḥ, p. 26, 27.

(14) *Ibid.* p. 28-32.

(15) *Ibid.* p. 33-48.

(16) Gibb, "Biographical", p. 56. Gibb's observation about the formulaic construction of biographies is as follows: "in keeping with his formula, the vast majority of biographical notices contain little more than shorter or longer outlines of the biographee's life (including in later works details of posts held), his teachers and pupils, traditions transmitted or books composed, and somewhat stereotyped generalities on his character, with little interest in his personality as such".

al-Sakhāwī, Gibb describes the organizing principle of a biography in the following manner : “who, when, where, intellectual powers, reputation.” What is more, in Gibb’s presentation of the formulaic nature of biographies we find that he depicts this genre as a technical scholarly apparatus, to which no agenda can be ascribed. “The presentation remains throughout concrete and factual” (17). We will not come across “personal judgments” of writers, or literary and historical “organization of these materials” (18).

Though this formula is a decent approximation of the central themes in most biographies, it ignores a variety of anecdotes that can be found in them. The information they convey is meant to present the biographee in a certain light, that of his moral standards, and in so doing to convey a moral message. Furthermore, in cases where theological and other problems arise, the biographies will refer to these problems.

A comparison between the structure of Ibn Ḥanbal’s *Sīra* and Gibb’s “who, when, where, intellectual powers, reputation” formula, reveals that even though Ṣāliḥ follows the formula’s general lines, the *Sīra* departs from this mold on occasion. Ṣāliḥ conforms with the conventional formula when he informs the reader of Ibn Ḥanbal’s education. We learn from the *Sīra* who were some of his teachers, when and where he studied with them (19). However, Ṣāliḥ did modify some formulaic elements when he omitted any reference to Ibn Ḥanbal’s “intellectual powers” which is an important component in Gibb’s formula. The omission is particularly surprising because Ibn Ḥanbal was the eponymous founder of the Ḥanbalī legal school, hence making his “intellectual powers” a pivotal issue in his life, and one would expect, in his biography. Furthermore, the deletion is amplified by the attention that Ṣāliḥ gave to such aspects as integrity and moral standards (20).

Following the description of Ibn Ḥanbal’s virtues, Ṣāliḥ relates a thorough account of the *miḥna* (21). The insertion of historic events does much to bend the formulaic nature of the biographies, because it leaves the author a great deal of room in which he can maneuver. For example, he can decide whether or not he will mention the event and how much attention he will dedicate to it. If it is a controversial issue, he determines whose point of view will appear.

Ṣāliḥ’s elaborate treatment of the *miḥna* reflects the liberty of authors to voice their views about contested issues. The length of the chapters dealing with the *miḥna* and the detailed description of events and in-

(17) Gibb, p. 57.

(18) *Ibid.*

(19) Ṣāliḥ, p. 28-31.

(20) *Ibid.* p. 33-48.

(21) *Ibid.* p. 49-68.

terrogations, as well as the uncompromising defense of Ibn Ḥanbal, demonstrate that a compiler of anecdotes could brush aside formulaic elements and present his personal view. Biographies in general, and Ṣāliḥ's *Sīra* in particular, could shake of the shackles of literary convention for the sake of polemics.

The doxographic ending of Ṣāliḥ's *Sīra* is another instance of a departure from convention (22). In contrast to the emphasis that biographers placed on behavior, the presentation of beliefs was quite rare in Islamic biographies. Here, again, it seems that Ṣāliḥ was reacting to a specific historic need, because the *miḥna* and its aftermath created enormous tensions and uncertainty regarding a number of theological issues. Ṣāliḥ's references to beliefs was, in a sense, a continuation of the attention he gave the events of the *miḥna*.

It may be concluded that Ṣāliḥ's adherence to structural conventions was limited. It would seem that he strayed from them whenever it served his political or theological position. Though digressions at the structural level do not expose much of Ibn Ḥanbal's personality, they do reveal Ṣāliḥ's views on highly controversial issues. Thus, it is quite clear from the analysis of the structure of Ibn Ḥanbal's *Sīra*, that its writer used this opportunity to advance his views on widely debated topics. Ibn Ḥanbal's *Sīra* was a weapon in the arsenal of the Traditionists (*muhaddithūn*) who have just won a major battle against the theologians (*mutakallimūn*) known as the *miḥna*. Ṣāliḥ was not about to write about the life of the man who was reputed to be the leader of Traditionist resistance and oblige to literary conventions. He harnessed his account of Ibn Ḥanbal to his cause and in so doing, ignored any literary convention that would limit his ability to make his argument.

Alongside this analysis of structural conventions ought to come an examination of the *Sīra*'s contents. When looked at from this perspective, we find that next to conventional information the *Sīra* offers an opportunity to glance at some intimate aspects of Ibn Ḥanbal's personality and at the same time (often in the same anecdote), it presupposes a moral attitude that constitutes a moral message. For example, we can read how Ibn Ḥanbal took care of Ṣāliḥ when the latter was sick (23), how Ibn Ḥanbal handed food to a slave when he came to dine in Ṣāliḥ's home (24), that he forbade Ṣāliḥ to buy a Christian slave girl (25), scolded him and his brother because they purchased and hid something that annoyed him and described a family crisis (26). The profile sketched by

(22) *Ibid.* p. 69-92.

(23) *Ibid.* p. 33, 41.

(24) *Ibid.* p. 39.

(25) *Ibid.* p. 42.

(26) *Ibid.* p. 40.

these anecdotes is that of a stern, yet caring parent, that never tires from preaching to his children. These glimpses of Ibn Ḥanbal as a father were clearly not part of the impersonal biographic formula.

Another departure from the ordinary information presented in biographies is Ṣāliḥ's reference to two teachers with whom Ibn Ḥanbal wanted to study but did not get a chance. To mention teachers with whom someone did not study is a digression from the biographic convention because this information sheds no light on the knowledge that a young scholar has acquired. It does not place him in a teacher-student network, nor does it inform the reader about the expertise that this scholar has acquired. However, Ṣāliḥ chose to insert the names of Fuḍayl b. 'Iyād and 'Abdallah b. al-Mubarak and specify that Ibn Ḥanbal made efforts to study with them but that they died before he met them (27). Ṣāliḥ's reference to the two episodes may be somewhat puzzling. What is the use of telling future generations which teachers Ibn Ḥanbal never met?

In both of these cases Ṣāliḥ strayed from the typical profile that one finds in biographies. Ibn Ḥanbal's behavior as a father was not what a reader or listener expects to find in a biographic sketch of a scholar. Perhaps Ṣāliḥ's intention in referring to this subject was to show-off his intimate relations with his father. Though we should not ignore emotional motivations as a way of explaining Ṣāliḥ's decision to include intimate details in his father's biography, we should treat this explanation with caution. If Ṣāliḥ was merely indulging in self-promotion or reminiscing about dad, he chose some awkward anecdotes. Why should he mention family fights and uncomplimentary remarks that he heard from his father? Why expose the family's dirty laundry in front of Ibn Ḥanbal's disciples and enemies? Nostalgia or self-promotion do not explain why these anecdotes were inserted into the *Sīra*.

These seemingly random bits of information, which for the most part seem unrelated to each other or the goals of scholarly biographies, ought to be the focus of any attempt to trace the moral assumptions and ideological agenda of the biography. Some of them can be considered deviations from the biographic formula. For instance, the way Ibn Ḥanbal was conceived as a father by his eldest son or the teachers he never met. Other anecdotes, such as his eating habits, are part of the literary norm of reporting on the biographee's pious behavior. Our point of departure is to inquire if there are any connections between these anecdotes. Is it possible to bring together a number of actions or habits and point to patterns of behavior? The answer, I believe, is yes. When read or heard together, these anecdotes constitute a unified vision of pro-

(27) *Ibid.* p. 29, 31.

priety. Furthermore, if we look at such seemingly unrelated anecdotes about family tensions, eating habits and teachers, we will find that they are governed by a common moral denominator.

The main issue of contention in Ibn Ḥanbal's family was the disagreements between him and his sons regarding financial support from the caliph. Šāliḥ makes a brief mention of the crisis that flared over this issue : "before we took (*na'kbudba*) from the sultan he [Ibn Ḥanbal] ate with us" (28). This anecdote hints at what we know from other sources. Ibn Ḥanbal was unwilling to accept a monthly stipend from the caliph while his sons, particularly Šāliḥ, felt they needed this support and were willing to accept it. Apparently they did so without notifying Ibn Ḥanbal, and when he got wind of their actions, he severed his ties with them. Ibn Ḥanbal's refusal to accept a monthly stipend from the caliph was part of a more general negative attitude towards financial aide such as gifts from generous individuals. His adamant refusal to receive financial aide can be understood on two levels. The first was social standing. Financial support meant patronage, and Ibn Ḥanbal did not want to be a client who depended on the whims of patrons. The second was his attitude towards materialism and worldliness. Ibn Ḥanbal did not aspire to improve his standard of living. He was content with the money his family generated and saw no reason to develop other sources of income. A regular caliphal stipend would entail changing his life style, and this was unacceptable, because Ibn Ḥanbal's way of life was governed by a moral outlook.

Another seemingly irrelevant topic that comes up in the *Sīra* is Ibn Ḥanbal's eating habits. The information about Ibn Ḥanbal's consumption of food can be described as modest yet sufficient. He did not starve himself, yet he refrained from delicacies. Much like his attitude towards money, he wanted to have enough to sustain himself and his family, but not to indulge in excesses. His attitudes towards money and food indicate that his way of coming to terms with worldly needs and temptations was by keeping them to the necessary minimum. This attempt to distance himself from material pleasures and worldly achievements reflects Ibn Ḥanbal's reservations towards worldliness. Despite his reservations, Ibn Ḥanbal's behavioral patterns did not reflect total rejection of worldliness. He never took the extra step that would have transformed him into a fully fledged ascetic who constantly fasts and does not necessarily know how he will maintain an income.

(28) Šāliḥ, p. 40. For a more detailed account of this crisis see Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā'* (Beirut, 1967), vol. 9, p. 213-215 ; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Manāqib al-Imām Ahmad b. Ḥanbal* (Beirut, 1973), p. 381-385.

This attitude towards worldliness and its underlying moral assumptions was not an original one. Others before Ibn Ḥanbal espoused a posture of criticizing worldliness while staying in close touch with the world. Two well known individuals that were famous for this from of piety were ‘Abdallah b. al-Mubarak and Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyād (29). It is no coincidence that Ṣāliḥ broke with the convention of listing teachers and mentioned these two figures who did not teach Ibn Ḥanbal. Ṣāliḥ did not mention them in order to tell us about Ibn Ḥanbal’s sources of information, which is the usual reason for these lists. He mentioned them because of their status and reputations as pious men, whom Ibn Ḥanbal considered as role models. Thus, Ṣāliḥ tells of Ibn Ḥanbal’s attempts to study with them because they were important figures in the milieu whose understanding of piety was similar to Ibn Ḥanbal’s. In telling us about his father’s attempts to meet these men, Ṣāliḥ placed Ibn Ḥanbal within the tradition whose views of worldliness were shared by Ibn Ḥanbal.

All of these descriptions of Ibn Ḥanbal’s behavior and lists of teachers, are pieces in the mosaic that can go under the heading “moral attitude”. Behind the explicit meaning of each separate anecdote is an underlying view of the world which links them together. It would seem to me that Ibn Ḥanbal’s moral attitude would be well served if it went under the title “mild asceticism”. Let us try to expose the details and subtleties of this moral view by focusing on Ibn Ḥanbal’s eating habits.

## II. – The Ethos of Mild Asceticism.

The formative centuries of Islam witnessed the elaboration of a number of world denying modes of life. The most extreme expressions of this moral sentiment can be found among a number of the early sufis. Some of them expressed their faith in Allah by refusing to make a living, expecting Allah to nourish them, and in so doing detached themselves from the productive circles of society. Others like Ibrāhīm al-Adham and Rābi’a severed the most basic ties with society by breaking away from their families or refusing to build one in the first place (30). A moving story from the hagiographic compendium “Muslim Saints and Mystics”

(29) On Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyād, see J. Chabbi, “Fuḍayl b. ‘Iyād, Un Précurseur du Hanbalisme (187/803)”, *Bulletin d’Études Orientales* 30 (1978). On the moral affinity between Fuḍayl and the Hanbalis, see p. 340-342.

(30) On Rābi’a’s choice of remaining celibate see M. Smith, *Rābi’a the Mystic and her fellow saints in Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 1984 [1928]), p. 10.

demonstrates the devotion and pain of their way of life (31). According to this story Ibrāhīm al-Adham left a wife and baby when he broke from ordinary life and took to the sufi path. The son grew and longing to meet his father set out to search for him. He found him in Mecca and approached with great caution. When Ibrāhīm found out that the young man was his own son, he burst into tears and embraced him. As he did so, the son died in his hands. Ibrāhīm's companions asked him what happened and he replied :

When I took him to my breast", Ebrahim explained, "love for him stirred in my heart. A voice spoke to me, 'Ebrahim, you claim to love Me, and you love another along with Me... When I heard this call, I prayed, 'Lord of Glory, come to my succor. He will so occupy my heart that I shall forget to love Thee. Either take away his life or mine.' His death was the answer to my prayer (32).

The view expressed in this anecdote is quite clear. Complete devotion to Allah is incompatible with family life. The dramatic ending, "his death was the answer to my prayer", is an extreme articulation of a sentiment felt by many ascetics and pious believers who were torn between their families and Allah (33).

Alongside this extreme, yet small segment of society evolved a milder form of asceticism. Its adherents were highly aware of the moral deterioration that is caused by worldliness. At the same time, the men and women that embraced this form of worldly denial, stood apart from the extreme ascetics. They had families, they rarely fasted more than the *sharī'a* requires, they did not wear the sufi rags, they were owners of property and they possessed skills that enabled them to earn a livelihood.

Ibn Ḥanbal was an important practitioner of mild asceticism and a respected member in the gallery of its role models. In his *Sīra*, and even more so in his *Manāqib*, we find countless anecdotes that make up the behavioral code of this milieu (34). It is not the purpose of this study to present a comprehensive picture of Ibn Ḥanbal's habits. However, it will be helpful to analyze the paragraph in Ibn Ḥanbal's *Sīra* that describes his habits of food consumption in order to get an idea how his behavior was described and codified :

He often seasoned (*ya'tadimu*) [bread] with vinegar ; at times I saw him eat a slice of bread, shaking the dust off it, placing in a plate and sprinkling water on

(31) Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār, *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, tr. A.J. Arberry (Chicago University Press, 1964) p. 68-70.

(32) *Ibid.* p. 70.

(33) A well-known example of this pressure is al-Ghazzālī's statement that he returned to his family and social roles because of his children. See al-Ghazzālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* (Dvir, 1965) (Hebrew translation), p. 58.

(34) Ibn al-Jawzī, p. 242-256.

it until it softened, after which he would eat it with salt. I never saw him buy pomegranates or quince or any other fruit except (that he bought) watermelons which he ate with bread or grapes or dates... (35)

Bread was consumed by most “citizens of the Muslim Empire” and Ibn Ḥanbal was no exception (36). Since it was so popular, its consumption did not indicate economic or social affiliation. However, there was a division of types of bread that correlated with social standing: “People of elegant taste preferred the white bread because of its fine quality and softness” (37). The bread’s ingredients (wheat or barley), sieving and baking were all used as social markers. Even though Ṣāliḥ did not indicate what sort of bread Ibn Ḥanbal ate, we can assume that it was not of the highest quality. The bread’s staleness and its seasoning with vinegar, an inexpensive means of flavoring commonly used by the poor, hint at this (38).

As for the fruits that he bought, dates were very cheap due to their abundance in Mesopotamia (39). They often served as a dessert among the poor who could not afford the sweet dishes of the well to do (40). Among the self-styled, highly cultivated members of society, dates were unpopular due to the stone they had inside (41). Watermelons, another fruit that Ibn Ḥanbal bought for himself, were also seen in elegant circles as inappropriate since they were cheap, and therefore “left to the common folk” (42). Grapes, like bread, were consumed both by the rich and the poor. However, due to the abundance of types, we can assume that the rich and elegant favored specific kinds of grapes, while the poor and common consumed others.

Ibn Ḥanbal’s diet included some other components. “Sometimes I would bake bread for him, and he would put it in a pot of lentils (*‘adas*) and fat (*shabḥm*)” (43), writes Ṣāliḥ about his father. Bread was the basic ingredient in Ibn Ḥanbal’s diet. He ate it with salt, or fruit or lentils. Fat (*shabḥm*) which “was sometimes used in some plain dishes” as a substitute for oil or butter (44), seems to have been used by Ibn Ḥanbal on a regular basis. He would buy fat at the price of one dirham “and eat from

(35) Ṣāliḥ, p. 40; Manāḡib, p. 251.

(36) Mez, p. 430; In Ahsan, p. 87, a similar reference appears.

(37) Ahsan, p. 88.

(38) *Ibid.* p. 133, 135.

(39) Mez, p. 434; Ahsan, p. 108, 145.

(40) Ahsan, p. 134.

(41) *Ibid.* p. 111. This fad included olives, apricots and peaches.

(42) *Ibid.* p. 110, 111.

(43) Ṣāliḥ, p. 40; Similar description of this dish in Ibn al-Jawzī, p. 251. Ibn al-Jawzī goes back to Ṣāliḥ.

(44) Ahsan, p. 107.

it (for the duration of) a month" (45). Alongside these daily dishes, we read about a number of exceptional dishes. Ḥusn, Ibn Ḥanbal's concubine, bought meat on one occasion (46). On holy days (*ayyām al-ʿīd*), Ibn Ḥanbal recommended sweets (47).

In terms of Abbasid society, Ibn Ḥanbal's regimen was that of a poor man and he was aware of that. The following anecdote, from Ibn al-Jawzī's *Manāqib*, demonstrates his sensitivities to such matters. An eyewitness related that when attending the circumcision of a friend's son he sat next to Ibn Ḥanbal. He described Ibn Ḥanbal's behavior in the following manner :

He [Ibn Ḥanbal] ate until they brought *fālūdbaj* [a sweet made of flour and honey, often found on the tables of the well to do] from which he refrained. Abū Bakr (the host) said to him : "Ya Aba 'Abdallah", as if he was asking him to eat, and he said it is most refined food. After this Ibn Ḥanbal ate one bite and no more (48).

Sweets were, according to one modern scholar, an addiction in Abbasid society (49). Even poor folk found ways to purchase them. They ate dates, candy and oil cakes. Like his contemporaries, Ibn Ḥanbal enjoyed and encouraged eating sweets. But as can be expected, sweets, like other ingredients and dishes, were divided along socio-economic and cultural lines. Thus, there were the sweets of the rich and the sweets of the poor. *Fālūdbaj* was of the former. A host that served it "was regarded as a man of refined taste and culture" (50). Ibn Ḥanbal's discomfort when eating *fālūdbaj* was probably a result of the social significance that he allotted to it. This anecdote, conveyed by Ibn al-Jawzī, is in line with what we know of Ibn Ḥanbal's diet and the image that was constructed by Ṣāliḥ in the *Sīra*.

Ibn Ḥanbal's attitude towards food and eating gives us much insight into his views of the human body, pleasures and materialism in general. From this presentation of Ibn Ḥanbal's eating habits we can learn that the central concept in his view of food consumption is self-control. He considered eating to be an activity that was necessary for maintaining the body. He followed a reasonably varied regimen. However, he shunned culinary pleasures. The fruits from which he refrained, the scarcity of meat and the stale bread, indicate that he abstained from any ingredient or dish that was considered a delicacy. The inventory of his food

(45) Ibn al-Jawzī, p. 251.

(46) *Ibid.* p. 302.

(47) *Ibid.* p. 252.

(48) *Ibid.* p. 252.

(49) Ahsan, p. 98.

(50) *Ibid.* p. 99.

suggests that Ibn Ḥanbal was aware of the socio-cultural meaning invested in consumption of food. Ibn Ḥanbal knew that certain dishes or ingredients were status symbols and that their consumption might indicate affiliation with those social circles that indulge in physical and material pleasures. By denying himself food that was typically consumed in pleasure seeking circles, Ibn Ḥanbal signaled a lack of approval regarding their norms of conduct and their views of the world and morality.

Self-discipline was necessary because material pleasures were conceived by Ibn Ḥanbal as a corrupting force. One needs to check and curtail his own behavior in order to avoid falling under the charms of worldly satisfaction. For Ibn Ḥanbal, self-discipline meant eating what was necessary to maintain the body and no more. He made no effort to limit the amount of food he consumed and at the same time refrained from delicacies that would excite and encourage more consumption. This position towards food can serve as a mirror of his attitude towards materialism and his moral views. Its features and particularity become clearer when we compare it to the two extreme world views that existed in his days. The first are the *zurafā'*, whose norms and moral outlook epitomize the pursuit of luxuries. At the other extreme were a group of ascetics whose world denying practices derived from a different view of religiosity and spiritual efforts.

The *zurafā'* were men and women that have mastered the intricacies of elegant behavior. They were well mannered, spoke well and were finely dressed. This being the dictionary definition of the term, the above mentioned features are not related to any specific social segment and could fit any social circle that thought highly of itself. However, in Arabic literature it denotes courtly culture and was used to describe its particular behavioral norms. The *zurafā'* viewed material well being and pursuit of pleasures favorably and exerted efforts to attain them. Their clothing was made of the softest textiles, their diets included many delicacies and they often drank illicit beverages. Their socio-cultural being was predicated on refining ways of acquiring pleasures, and in the course of this refinement, setting themselves apart from the vulgar masses. They invested much of their time and resources on acquisition of the appropriate clothes and foods. As a result money was a pre-requisite in these circles. Naturally, the *zurafā'* had to have a world embracing outlook in order to rationalize their pursuit of money, consumption of delicacies and acquisition of fine clothing.

On the whole, the *zurafā'*'s patterns of conduct and fads were imitated by growing circles<sup>(51)</sup>. The trickling down of their ideals of conduct

(51) On the spread of fashion and its infiltration "from the high social layers down to the 'bottom' of society", see Shoshan, p. 51.

into wide circles of society indicates that the basic value system of the *zurafā'* had many adherents in medieval Islamic society. However, the scope of the diffusion of such values is not clear <sup>(52)</sup>.

Against this background, Ibn Ḥanbal's behavior becomes clearer. His tendency to consume the dishes and foodstuffs of the masses and avoid certain fruits is a mean of distancing himself from the *zurafā'*. According to Ibn Ḥanbal's views, food was a basic necessity and not a means of indulgence. So he ate stale bread while the *zurafā'* ate white bread known for its "quality and softness" <sup>(53)</sup>. He flavored his dishes with animal fat (*shahm*) while they used butter <sup>(54)</sup>. He bought dates and watermelons while they avoided these fruits and ate quince <sup>(55)</sup>. Ibn Ḥanbal's attitude towards eating was simple and straightforward. By contrast the *zurafā'* tended to pamper themselves, or to put on an act of pampering themselves, by consumption of expensive foods.

It is relatively easy to identify and describe the differences between the world views of the *zurafā'* and Ibn Ḥanbal because their moral disposition and practices were so far apart. It is more difficult to distinguish between mild and extreme ascetics, because they embraced similar values. For instance, both trends considered involvement with worldly matters as a possible threat to ones integrity. The fundamental point of view of mild and extreme ascetics was that food, sex and luxuries are potential forms of corruption of any individual.

However, the two forms of asceticism differ in a number of ways. The first is in their behavioral norms. Extreme ascetics had developed a variety of aggressive techniques through which they controlled their physical appetites. For example, some of them abstained from sexual intercourse, others took fasting as far as is humanely possible, still others refrained from making any effort to obtain their livelihood. It is quite obvious that these individuals viewed any worldly attribute as potential moral poison. However, the extremity of their practices was a consequence of another factor, a distinctive religious vision. The aspiration of an extreme ascetic goes beyond mere control of physical appetites. It is to transcend them. Their point of departure is that such appetites and pursuit of material pleasures are obstructions in the spiritual path of mankind, and as a result must be obliterated. Furthermore, the extreme ascetic yearns to unite with Allah. Thus, the onslaught on the physical

(52) One study that touches upon these issues, though without demographic conclusions, is S.D. Goitein, "The Rise of the Middle-Eastern Bourgeoisie in Early Islamic Times", in S.D. Goitein, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden : Brill, 1968).

(53) Ahsan, p. 88.

(54) *Ibid.* p. 107.

(55) *Ibid.* p. 108, 110.

senses is only the first stage in a long internal struggle, in which physical needs, ego and spiritual aims, clash with each other.

A telling story about the well known sufi, Sahl al-Tustarī, demonstrates the physical and spiritual progress to which extreme ascetics aspire. It starts with the first stage, that is shared by both mild and extreme asceticism, and moves on to higher stages of spirituality :

Then I came to Tostar. By that time my diet had been reduced to the point that they would buy barley for me for a dirham, grind it and bake it into bread. Every night about dawn I would break my fast with an ounce of that bread, without relish or salt. In that way the dirham lasted me a year.

After that I resolved to break my fast once every three days, then once every five days, then once every seven days, and so on until I reached once every twenty days. (According to one report, Sahl claimed to have reached once every seventy days). Sometimes I would eat just one almond almost every forty days.

I made trial for many years of satiety and hunger. In the beginning my weakness resulted from hunger and my strength came from satiety. After a time my strength derived from hunger and my weakness from satiety. Then I prayed, "O God, close Sahl's eyes to both, that he may see satiety in hunger, and hunger in satiety, both proceed from Thee" (56).

'Attār started out by referring to a known socio-cultural code, and used a number of symbols to place al-Tustarī in the lowest tier of society. Like Ṣāliḥ's descriptions of Ibn Ḥanbal, 'Attār used bread in order to place him among the poor and unrefined strata of Abbasid society. The detail that reveals that al-Tustarī ate bread of poor quality is its ingredient, barley. In the case of Ibn Ḥanbal the indication to the bread's inferior quality was its staleness. Both barley and staleness were unacceptable among the refined circles of their times. The description of al-Tustarī's eating habits continues with an emphasis that al-Tustarī did not add any "relish or salt" to his bread. This is more extreme than Ibn Ḥanbal who did use sauces, but of the cheapest kind. Both 'Attār and Ṣāliḥ refer to the types of food consumed by their heroes, and their quality. However, 'Attār adds another dimension to his account of al-Tustarī's eating habits.

The dimension which extreme ascetics emphasized and mild ascetics often ignored or underplayed, was the quantity of the food. Whereas both trends shared the symbolism of low quality, extreme ascetics addressed the issue of quantity, which was manifested in fasting. Ibn Ḥanbal rarely denied himself satiety. If he had the means he ate regularly. We do not read of any attempt on his part to fast for the sake of shrinking his diet. By contrast, in the description of al-Tustarī's eating habits, fasting is a major theme. Furthermore, he is described as making special efforts

(56) 'Attār, p. 155.

to prolong his fast. He starts by breaking his fast “once every three days” and manages to lengthen this period to once every forty or seventy days. “Satiety and hunger”, he points out, were at the focus of his attention “many years”. The effort to shrink his diet indicates that al-Tustarī was not merely trying to avoid luxuries. His interest was to bring it to its bare minimum.

Transcendence is not achieved by doing away with all food, a feat that would be impossible. The spiritual peak to which al-Tustarī and the likes of him aspired passed through a phase that is best described as the “alchemy of hunger” (57). It describes a physical and spiritual state in which “strength derived from hunger” and not as with most human beings, from satiety. As a result of these transformations between hunger and satiety, an individual can reach the highest spiritual stage in which nourishment or lack of it is inconsequential. Transcendence is attained after an individual trains himself physically, emotionally and spiritually. In al-Tustarī’s words, it is the stage in which he realizes that hunger and satiety “both proceed from Thee.”

Mild asceticism is at the center of the moral landscape of Islam, whose general contours have been mentioned above. Its mildness is a result of clashing moral impulses, religious visions and historical experiences, all of which were encouraged and admired in Islam from its outset. One of them was reservation from worldliness. The individual’s retreat to solitude, much like that of the Prophet when he set out to the hill of Hira, was seen as an important and effective means for cleansing oneself and uniting with Allah. On the other hand, the Muslims’ success in the military arena was seen as a sign of divine intervention. Furthermore, the Prophet’s behavior supplied adherents of worldly actions much ammunition. His commercial undertakings and political activities could easily serve as a means of legitimizing involvement in worldly affairs. In light of this ideological clash, and the legitimizing quality of the Prophet’s alleged behavior, it would be instructive to examine how mild ascetics depicted Muḥammad’s conduct.

### III. – Mild Asceticism and Moral Imagination

Mild asceticism probably did not take on its literary form in the first two Hijrī centuries. Judging by the literary evidence that is at our dispo-

(57) This phrase has been discussed by Shaqīq al-Balkhī who focused on change from darkness to light. See A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 115. I have chosen to use it because it captures the concept of transformation of opposites.

sal, the first comprehensive treatment of life style and moral behavior can be found in Ibn Sa'd's depiction of Muḥammad's habits and behavior in his opening books of the *Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*. Thus, if we take the Prophet's life as an indication, we can identify an interesting shift at the turn of the second century. Up until the closing decades of the second century, the historians and biographers of the Prophet emphasized his military and political achievements. An example of this is Ibn Ishāq's biography of the Prophet named "The Book of Campaigns or the Book of Campaigns and (the Prophet's) Biography and the Beginning of the Campaigns" (58). Its main themes, as they appear to us in Ibn Hishām's recension, are the *ghazawāt* (raids) and *wufūd* (parties, sent to create political alliances).

As was mentioned above, a crucial change in interests can be found in Ibn Sa'd's *Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*. Like other biographers of the Prophet, Ibn Sa'd covered the political aspects of Muḥammad's life and the community's growing strength. However, to these topics he added novel dimensions that depict the Prophet and the developing legal community from new angles. One of them is a description of the legal activities that the Prophet's Companions carried out during the Prophet's life (59). The second is a collection of anecdotes which sketch the everyday habits and moral deeds of the Prophet (60). The attention given to the judicial activities of the Prophet's Companions reflects the *ulamā*'s interest in their professional predecessors. It is an expression of their self-awareness and collective professional consciousness. It bolsters their collective prestige because it states the overt agreement of the Prophet to their judicial activities. Therefore, it carves their niche in Islamic history as they saw it – the development, articulation and maintenance of Islamic law (61).

Among the *ulamā*' was one particular group that paid special attention to the Prophet. These were the Traditionists, who unearthed, criticized and put into circulation anecdotes about the Prophet. Along with stu-

(58) Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, tr. A. Guillaume, p. xvii.

(59) Ibn Sa'd, vol. 2, p. 334-354.

(60) The virtues of the Prophet are described in Ibn Sa'd, vol. 1, p. 364-506; Ibn Sa'd's attention to the virtues and merits of the Prophet and their importance to future depictions of the Prophet has been mentioned by A.A. Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing Among the Arabs*, tr. L.I. Conrad (Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 40.

(61) An interesting observation on the growing awareness among the *ulamā*' of their own "scholarly community" and its influence on their intellectual interests and output can be found in T. Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 44. On p. 205, Khalidi specifically mentions the relations between the *Sababa* and *ulamā*': "Short biographies of the Prophet's Companions were intended to authenticate the history of the early community... This was carried over into biographies of the *ulama*' who were increasingly thought of, by members of their own class, as the true guardians of religion."

dying the Prophet's actions and sayings, they thought that the Prophet should be placed on a pedestal and imitated. Ibn Sa'd belonged to these intellectual circles. Though there were discussions about the veracity of the traditions that he transmitted, due to doubts about his teacher Waqidi, Ibn Sa'd was a respected member of the Traditionist milieu<sup>(62)</sup>. He was part of the network that transmitted knowledge, and even Ibn Ḥanbal is said to have frequented him and studied, albeit very cautiously, the traditions he learnt from Ibn Sa'd<sup>(63)</sup>. Other members of this network, such as 'Affān b. Muslim (d. 220) and al-Fāḍl b. Dukayn (d. 219), were Ibn Sa'd's informants regarding the habits and lifestyle of the Prophet<sup>(64)</sup>. Both of them were also Ibn Ḥanbal's teachers. A striking feature which 'Affān b. Muslim, al-Fāḍl b. Dukayn, Ibn Ḥanbal and Ibn Sa'd shared was that they were interrogated during the *mihna*.

On the face of it, all that the Traditionists were doing was excavating and circulating information about the Prophet. However, upon closer examination, it is difficult to shake off the impression that the Traditionist description of the Prophet was informed by their ideals of piety. As the Islamic community shifted its emphasis from conquests and military might to the articulation of the finer details of moral conduct and expressions of piety, the Traditionists projected onto the Prophet the behavioral patterns that they practiced or held in high esteem. The similarity between the underlying moral agenda of Ibn Ḥanbal's *Sīra* and Muḥammad's chapters in Ibn Sa'd's *Ṭabaqāt* suggests that third century Traditionists imagined and discussed the Prophet in terms that were similar to their own views of propriety<sup>(65)</sup>.

The ambivalence towards worldliness, that is at the heart of mild asceticism, and the efforts to steer a middle course between its total reception or denial, can be detected in many of Ibn Sa'd's anecdotes. One interesting example of this attitude is the following story that is ascribed to Muḥammad :

My Lord offered to me that He would convert the pebbles of Makkah into gold for me but I said : No ! O my Lord ! I want to remain satiated for one day and to remain hungry on the other and he repeated it thrice or so. (He added)

(62) Al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'riḫ Baghdad* (Beirut, 1986), vol. 5, p. 321.

(63) Baghdadādī, vol. 5, p. 322.

(64) On 'Affān b. Muslim see Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Kitāb Tabdhīb al-Tabdhīb* (Beirut, 1984), vol. 7, p. 206 ; On Al-Fadl b. Dukayn see *Tabdhīb*, vol. 8, p. 244-249.

(65) The tendency to imagine pivotal religious figures of the past in terms that are drawn from the norms and values of later periods is a well known phenomenon. I thank Dr. Dror Zeevi for pointing out that Talmudic scholars depicted king David as one of their own. Following Dr. Zeevi's remarks, I sought and found a systematic study of this process. See Sandra R. Shimoff, *Rabbinic Legends of Saul, Salomon and David : Political and Social Implications of Aggada* (Ph.D. Dissertation, St. Mary's Seminary and University, 1981) for a competent presentation of this backward projection see p. 63, 64 and footnote 41 in p. 99.

when I am hungry, I shall implore Thee and when I am satiated I shall praise Thee and thank Thee (66).

The anecdote starts with Muḥammad's refusal to receive unlimited amounts of gold and enjoy fantastic riches. However, Muḥammad does not opt of the other extreme, which is complete poverty. Rather, he wants to experience both satiety and hunger. By juxtaposing both of these poles, hunger and satiety, the Prophet hints at the seemingly paradoxical situation, the espousal and denial of worldliness. What is more, he does not want to cling to one emotional experience, but aspires to oscillate between imploring and thanking. Thus, it is not one particular moral and emotional disposition that is being advanced, but a balanced tension between the two.

The Prophet's choice to reject riches and symbols of social standing due to pious considerations, can be gleaned from a number of anecdotes. When he was presented with a silk cloak "He wore it, then he offered prayers in it. Then he removed it and returned it like one who disliked it and said : It does not befit pious men" (67). The dichotomy between piety and luxuries and Muḥammad's sense that luxury is inappropriate, is self-evident in this instance. Another anecdote that gives the impression that riches and power are not appropriate for individuals that have spiritual pretensions is the dialogue between Gabriel and Muḥammad, in which Gabriel criticized the Prophet for sitting like a king (reclined) while eating. Gabriel's suggestion was that the Prophet show more humility (68).

Another indication that the ideals which governed the construction of the Prophet's biography are similar to the mild asceticism of third century ulamā' is the description of the Prophet's properties (69). His possessions seem to be just enough to sustain his family, at times even failing to supply them with cash to buy bread (70). In depicting the Prophet's attitudes towards expressions of worldliness, Ibn Sa'd sought the middle ground between rejection and espousal. The construction of this ambivalence will be demonstrated in the analysis of the anecdotes that describe Muḥammad's habits of food consumption, women and perfumes.

(66) Ibn Sa'd, vol. 1, p. 381. Translation from : Ibn Sa'd, *Kitāb Al-Ṭabaqāt Al-Kabīr*, tr. S. Moinul Haq, vol. 1, p. 448.

(67) *Ibid.* p. 457 ; tr. p. 541, 542.

(68) *Ibid.* p. 380, 381 ; tr. p. 447.

(69) *Ibid.* p. 487-496 ; tr. p. 578-590. His possessions include herds of horses, camels, goats and spoils of war such as swords and coat of mail.

(70) *Ibid.* p. 488 ; tr. p. 579, 580. On one occasion he found it necessary to mortgage a coat of mail so as to buy flour.

Ibn Sa' d's depiction of the Prophet's ambivalence towards worldliness and sensual pleasures comes across in a number of anecdotes : "The Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him, said : 'I like not from worldly life but perfumes and women!'" (71). The contrasting attitudes towards "worldly life" is revealed by the sentence's structure. The first clause opens by emphasizing the limited scope of the Prophet's interest in worldliness. This is balanced by a second clause in which he inserts two exceptions, "perfumer es and women". The Prophet's position is presented as a personal position, and not as a prescription to stay away from worldly matters. Even as Muḥammad expresses the morally upright view of reservation from "earthly life" he does not use the harshest of terms and does not reject worldliness out of hand. He merely expresses dislike or lack of attraction towards it. It is not a clear condemnation of earthly appetites, but a description of his own physical drive or lack thereof. Muḥammad's opening statement is not more than a low keyed critique of worldliness. This somewhat understated critique is countered by two examples of sensual pleasures from which the Prophet did not refrain, women and perfumes. The mere mention of his penchant for these earthly pleasures may present the Prophet as someone who succumbed to his appetites. Yet, in my opinion, this is not Ibn Sa'd's purpose. By juxtaposing Muḥammad's general reservation from worldliness with his attraction to specific earthly pleasures, Ibn Sa'd legitimized the tension itself.

In another anecdote, which resembles the above mentioned anecdote, an important twist is added : "The Prophet of Allah, may peace be on him, liked three worldly objects - perfume, women and food. He obtained two and did not obtain one. He obtained women and perfumes but did not get food" (72). Though it seems to be merely adding another object which the Prophet coveted, this description adds a new dimension to Muḥammad's moral dilemma. While the previous anecdote related the Prophet's discomfort with his passions, it did not point to an internal struggle regarding actual behavior. Muḥammad merely stated that he was attracted to two earthly matters, but did not describe any attempt to acquire them. By contrast, in this anecdote 'Ā'isha refers to the actual fulfilment of his drives. Once this comes up, a different level of internal moral struggle is broached. Muḥammad is no longer just remarking about the general problem of worldly appetites, but is describing the actual struggle regarding their manifestation in behavior. Hence, we do not merely read that he was attracted to perfumes and women, but we

(71) *Ibid.* p. 398 ; tr. p. 469.

(72) *Ibid.* p. 398 ; tr. p. 469.

learn that he attained them. On the other hand, certain sensual appetites, such as food, were not satisfied.

There is an interesting correlation between Muḥammad's moral posture and the behavior of third century Muslims. The Prophet's attitude towards women is often relived by pious Muslims. We often find among ascetics an acute awareness of the hurdles that women, children and families place in their path. Yet, the overwhelming majority of these pious ascetics would complain about the disruptiveness of families and go on to build one. Much like the Prophet, they realized that women and families tie an individual to worldly concerns and problems, and still, like the Prophet, they did not abstain from them.

Another expression of this correlation can be found in Muḥammad's food consumption. According to Ibn Sa'd's depiction of the Prophet, he limited his diet and did not indulge in gastronomic pleasures due to moral reasons. This, again, fits the norms of many mild ascetics and pious Muslims. Food was an arena into which many believers channeled their energies of moral self-control. However, the extent of this self-control varied. Some, like Tustarī, used food consumption and hunger as a means of spiritual elevation. Others, like Ibn Ḥanbal, relayed a social and moral message.

Right after the chapter that deals with women and perfumes, Ibn Sa'd placed a chapter that is labeled "the hardships of life" and is dedicated to Muḥammad's eating habits. The chapter includes a detailed exposition of the types of bread and fruits that the Prophet ate. The components of Muḥammad's diet bear a striking resemblance to the inventory of foodstuffs that Ibn Ḥanbal consumed.

According to the information we have regarding the symbolism and meaning of food consumption during the third century Hijra, Ibn Sa'd chose to place Muḥammad among the lower social strata of Abbasid society. When the bread that the Prophet's family ate was described, it was usually barley (*al-sba'ir*)<sup>(73)</sup>. If we take bread consumption to be a social signifier, it is important to know that anyone who could afford it ate bread made of wheat. The sole exceptions are the "poor and the ascetics", i.e. those that could not afford bread made of wheat or those that tried to avoid material pleasures. These two groups consumed "bread made of barley"<sup>(74)</sup>. The division between consumers of barley and wheat reflected a socio-economic gap. At the same time, this gap was invested with ideological meaning. When Ibn Sa'd opens the chapter on the Prophet's hardships with a remark regarding his consumption of barley and follows this up with an anecdote that states that the Prophet

(73) *Ibid.* p. 400 ; tr. p. 471.

(74) Ahsan, p. 89.

did not eat wheat bread during a period that lasted more than four months, we need to ask ourselves is Ibn Sa'd describing Muḥammad's dire economic situation or his moral posture and attitude towards materialism? The answer, in my opinion, is the latter. Muḥammad was not poor, and Ibn Sa'd did not describe him as such. The choice to present Muḥammad as a consumer of the poor-man's bread is probably a projection of third century values prevalent among the *ulamā'*.

In so far as social signifiers are concerned, Ibn Sa'd's portrait of Muḥammad goes beyond wheat and barley: "The Messenger of Allah (PBUH), Abu Bakr and Umar ate unsieved barley" (75). Sieving was another nuance which contemporaries used as a social signifier (76). It would seem that anyone eating unsieved barley was considered as a member of the lower socio-cultural strata. By describing the Prophet and the two most esteemed Caliphs as consumers of this product, Ibn Sa'd expressed a clear message embracing certain forms of asceticism. In another anecdote Ibn Sa'd reiterates Muḥammad's consumption of barley but adds dates to this list (77). Ibn Sa'd dedicates a number of sub-chapters to Muḥammad's eating and drinking habits. We learn that the Prophet ate meat, but on the whole his diet was made up of bread, dates and vegetables. The underlying message that this diet relates is an attitude of reluctance to be part of the milieu that embraced luxurious living. The implied division is between Ibn Sa'd's milieu and the *zurafā'*. The most telling anecdote that captures the self-view that Ibn Sa'd tried to attribute to the Prophet is the following anecdote: "Fine flour of almonds was brought to the Prophet, may Allah bless him. The Apostle of Allah, may Allah bless him, said: Keep it away from me, it is the drink of the wealthy people" (78).

The similarity between Ibn Ḥanbal's and Muḥammad's food regimen is conspicuous. Who influenced who? Did Ibn Ḥanbal stick to his diet because it was so similar to the Prophet's habits of food consumption, or did third century *ulamā'* describe the Prophet as a consumer of such regimen because this is what they ate? It is, of course, an open ended question. My inclination is to assume that there was a process of mutual influence. The Traditionists (*muḥaddithūn*) aspired to imitate the Prophet and perhaps they did regarding certain parts of his diet. However, it seems reasonable to conclude that at times they used their imagination and described the Prophet in accordance to the rules of etiquette that circulated in their milieu. This cannot be proven, but the mere fact that before the third century the Prophet's biographies paid scant attention

(75) *Ibid.* p. 408 ; tr. p. 482.

(76) Ahsan, p. 88.

(77) Ibn Sa'd, vol. I, p. 409 ; tr. p. 482.

(78) *Ibid.* p. 395 ; tr. p. 465.

to his life style, gives credence to the assumption that this milieu of mild ascetics depicted the Prophet's life style in their terms and according to their moral principles. It may be concluded that in terms of directing Islamic cultural orientation, the major achievement of the mild ascetics was to convince themselves and most believers that the Prophet acted like one of them. By fusing their moral outlook with the Prophet's behavior, they solidified their moral outlook and transformed it into the predominant moral view in Islam.

## Conclusion

Mild asceticism is a cluster of moral sensibilities whose common feature is the tension between world embracing and world denying impulses. In the course of time and throughout the Islamic world this tension elicited a wide variety of behavioral patterns. The individuals that experienced this tension operated in starkly different historical situations and as a result worked out a diversified spectrum of attitudes and perceptions of propriety regarding rulers, salaries, *waqf*, charities, consumption of foods, fashions of dress, etc.

The fluidity in ideals and behavior necessitated a flexible system of legitimization. Clearly, one biography, be its hero as revered as the Prophet was not enough. Thus, although the *ulamā'* of the second and third centuries achieved a major success when they depicted the Prophet's life in their own mild ascetic terms and sketched his profile in shades that resembled themselves, even they had to turn to other sources of legitimization in order to address the full spectrum of moral problems that arose in that period. An important alternative source were their own religious and spiritual leaders. An interesting anecdote that reflects the *ulamā'*'s awareness of this situation is told of Sufyān al-Thaurī :

It is related of Abū Shoab Ibn Harb al-Madā'ini, a *hāfiz* of the first rank and a man of pre-eminent piety, that he said : "I imagine that Sofyān ath-Thaurī will be brought forth on the day of resurrection and placed by God before his creatures to confound them ; it will then be said to them : 'You did not see the Prophet when in the world, but you saw Sofyān ath-Thaurī ; why then did you not take him as a model ?' " (79).

Abū Shu'ayb's comment on the moral decay of his contemporaries who did not imitate Sufyān al-Thaurī indicates that he, and others I believe, thought that transmission of moral ideals was to be carried out by role models. Thus, widely recognized pious Muslims were the crucial

(79) Ibn Khallikān, *Biographical Dictionary*, tr. De-Slane, vol. 1, p. 578.

building blocks of Islamic moral traditions and biographies were a means of saving for posterity the values and ideals of conduct that outstandingly pious individuals embodied. The huge choice of pious individuals gave this genre a great deal of flexibility and enabled the authors of biographies to articulate and disseminate the most subtle moral nuances.

Mild asceticism was merely one expression of the Islamic moral imagination. I suspect that in many societies throughout the ages it was the dominant moral trend. However, even when it was the central ethical stream, it varied greatly in its actual manifestations and the behavioral norms that it inspired. A comprehensive study of biographies will enable us to assess more precisely mild asceticism's relative importance and identify its internal divergences. Furthermore, it may supply us with information about other moral trends and perhaps enable us to map out the contours of Islamic moral imagination.

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