

The Secrets and History of the Madaniyya Sufi Tariqah of Ksibet al-Mediouni, Tunisia.

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I began my Independent Study Project intent on studying Sufism in Tunisia, although I was not sure how I was going to do so. To begin, Sufism is Islamic mysticism, the adherents of which strive to understand God as the source of everything in the Universe, and embrace their existence through Him.¹ I asked quite a few people about Sufi *туруq* (plural of *tariqah*, which literally means "way," in Arabic. This word refers both to the way by which Sufis attempt to draw near to God, and to individual orders or brotherhoods)², but none seemed to know any Sufis with whom I could discuss their practices and beliefs. Earlier this year, the group I was studying with visited the shrine of Sidi al-Hajj Ambarak, a saint who lived and taught there many hundreds of years ago. While there, the *sharifah*, the woman who lives in it, watches over it, and accommodates guests who come to visit the saint, said that she receives visitors throughout the year, who I assumed to be Sufis, since I knew from my previous studies of Sufism that saints and shrines play an important role in Sufism in general. I decided to begin my research there, and so I returned to speak with the *sharifah* and her husband.

The *zawiyyah* (also referred to as a shrine, it is a place of worship, usually of a Sufi *tariqah*, although Sidi Al-Hajj Ambarak is not associated with a specific brotherhood. One may include the tomb of a respected *shaykh*, prayer rooms, and dormitories for visitors) is located on the side of a hill on the northern coast of Tunisia outside of a village called Ghar al-Milh. Its *sharifah*, who is called Khalti Beya³, and her husband Si Hedi⁴ occupy the tomb itself, and have one other small room to store food and water. They cook their food on a metal grill over coals in a clay pot, and boil water for tea on a kerosene stove. They use candles for light at night, and sleep on futons on the floor, next to the tomb. Behind the building stand many stone walls, all falling apart, that used to make up other buildings,

¹ For a more full explanation, see Chittick, William C. *Sufism: A Short Introduction*. Oneworld Productions. 2000. I will discuss this idea, also called *Wahdat al-Wujud*, later.

² Lings, Martin. *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi*. University of California Press, Berkley California. January 1972.

³ The Tunisian word *khalti* comes from the Arabic *khalati*, meaning 'my maternal aunt.' In Tunisia, it is used as a term of endearment and respect.

⁴ 'Si' is a common prefix attached to a man's name to show respect. It is roughly equivalent to the title 'Mr.'

but have now fallen into disrepair. They are both elderly, and cannot leave the *zawiyyah*, as it would mean climbing down a very steep hill, and walking more than a kilometer to the nearest village, so they rely on relatives to bring them supplies periodically. Despite what little they have, they very insistently fed me and gave me a bed for the night, and I will be forever grateful for their generosity.

Khalti Beya and Si Hedi had little to offer me on the subject of Sufism, however. When I asked them about the visitors who come to the shrine, they could only tell me that some of them were Sufis, and others were not. They could not tell me to which *turuq* their visitors belonged, nor could they describe the specific things people do when they come to visit. I left with the idea of Sufism in Tunisia no clearer than when I came, and decided to stop on my way back to Tunis at the *zawiyyah* of Sidi 'Ali al-Makki, located in a large cave in the same hill as Sidi Al-Hajj Ambarak's. It too was in poor condition, with the stucco peeling off the walls. Most of the rooms were almost completely empty, except for a prayer rug, or a mat to make sitting on the stone more comfortable. Even the tomb of the saint contained little more than a cloth over the grave and a Qur'an on top. The *sharifah* (the woman who lives at the *zawiyyah*, watches over it, and accommodates any visitors to the saint) lives in a set of rooms separate from the rest of the shrine, although they are hardly better furnished. She occupies only two of the rooms: a bedroom, which has a bed, a radio, and her Qur'an, and the kitchen, with a small gas stove, a sink, and a few cabinets.

I learned many things from the *sharifah* of this shrine, whose name is Sharifah, but nothing about the practice of Sufism in Tunisia. As she brought me through the shrine, she told me many stories about Sidi 'Ali al-Makki. He was originally from Mecca, and came to Tunisia many hundreds of years ago (she could not say exactly when) with two companions after traveling to Morocco to visit them. He spent many years in the cave where his *zawiyyah* now stands, practicing *dhikr* (the remembrance of God through the invocation of His name, discussed below). Before the end of his life, he traveled back to Mecca, but died soon after his return. His family, according to his wishes, placed his body on a camel, and set it loose. He was to be buried wherever the camel stopped. According to Sharifah, the camel returned to the cave in Tunisia and came to rest

at a pool of water, where the saint's tomb now stands. Descendants of Sidi 'Ali al Makki then set up the *zawiyyah* that is still there today. Sharifah told me that throughout the years, many different Sufi *turuq* would come to the shrine to practice *dhikr*. She currently receives visitors throughout the year, although mostly in the summer, some of whom are Sufis and some are not.

After my trip to Ghar al-Milh, I decided to try a different method of studying Sufism in Tunisia. By that time, I had heard of a *tariqah* called *Tariqat al-Madaniyya* in Ksibet al-Mediouni, a village outside of Monastir, and, through the director of my program, found someone who could put me in touch with the *shaykh*.⁵ I visited the *zawiyyah* of the Madaniyya twice, and spoke with the *shaykh* once, although he was reluctant to provide me with much information. Instead, I gathered much of the information I found from the Madaniyya's website, and from an interview with the nephew of the current *shaykh*. My interview with the *shaykh* demonstrated to me the level of secrecy the Sufi *turuq* in Tunisia keep up, and thus, why it had been so difficult for me to find any information on them when I began my research.

The father of the Madaniyya's current *shaykh* and founder of the *tariqah*, Shaykh Muhammad ibn Khalifa al-Madani, took his instruction in the Sufi Way from Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi, a *shaykh* of the Darqawi *tariqah* in Algeria,⁶ which is an offshoot of the Shadhilyyya, a large *tariqah* whose branches are mainly located in northern Africa. It will be helpful to know a little about the life of Shaykh al-'Alawi to understand how he came to be the spiritual master of Shaykh al-Madani. All of the information in this short account of the *shaykh*'s life may be found within his autobiography, which Martin Lings has reproduced in full in his book *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* on pages 47-78.

Al-'Alawi received his first instruction in the mystical path in the 'Isawi *tariqah*, a brotherhood known for its unorthodox practices (for example, he says that during his time in the group and after he left it, he practiced snake charming). After becoming proficient in the *tariqah*'s practices, al-'Alawi claims,

⁵ The word *shaykh* is usually used to denote a man wise with age, although in the world of Sufism, it refers to the head of a brotherhood.

⁶ Lings, 68

"God willed that I should be inspired with the truth,"⁷ after which he gradually began to discontinue the practices he had learned and distance himself from the *tariqah*. Al-'Alawi continued to charm snakes and run his business with his friend, whom he calls Sidi al-Ḥajj bin 'Awdah, until they met and began to meet with Shaykh Sidi Muhammad Al-Buzidi.

After spending time with al-'Alawi, the *shaykh* saw in him an aptitude for learning the mystic way, and so inducted him into his *tariqah*. Al-Buzidi gave him the brotherhood's *wird*,⁸ and eventually told him how to practice *dhikr* as a Darqawi. Al-'Alawi says that he gained a knowledge of God from practicing *dhikr*, after which point Buzidi told him that he must guide men to the Darqawi path by sharing his knowledge with them. Al-'Alawi spent the next fifteen years in the order, practicing *dhikr*, teaching from his shop, and helping attract followers to the brotherhood.

Al-'Alawi says that, at the end of this period of time, God put a desire to leave his home of Mostaganem in Algeria.⁹ He sold his belongings, acquired a permit to travel, and sent his wife to visit her family in Tlemcen in preparation to leave, but he could not fulfill his plans because Shaykh al-Buzidi became ill, and was soon to die. After his death, al-'Alawi received word from Tlemcen that his wife had taken ill as well, so he went to see her, but was with her only for a short time before she passed away. He returned to Mostaganem, still resolved to emigrate, but had to wait while his travel permit was renewed. In the mean time, the brothers of his order spent their time trying to decide who would take over Shaykh al-Buzidi's role and guide the *tariqah*. Although Shaykh al-'Alawi knew he would be considered for the position, he assumed that the *tariqah* would elect another man because they all knew of his desire to leave. However, the brothers could not agree, and decided to leave the decision for a week's time and see if any of them would have a vision revealing who was to become the new leader of the *tariqah*.¹⁰

⁷ Lings, 51

⁸ A litany or formula made up of verses of the Qur'an which the *shaykh* prescribes his followers to recite twice per day. Ibid. 53.

⁹ Ibid. 82

¹⁰ Lings uses a *hadith*, a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, on page 64 to demonstrate that visions are a way in which God communicates with believers.

Many of al-'Alawi's fellow brothers had visions in which Shaykh al-Buzidi told them that al-'Alawi was his spiritual heir, and so they begged him to guide them at least in the time before he left to travel. They succeeded in persuading him to remain with them, at least for a short time, and so he took oaths of allegiance from all of them. At this point, the order was still a Darqawi *tariqah*. About five years after Shaykh al-'Alawi took over, he would decide to break off the *tariqah*'s connection with the Darqawiyyah, and forge his own way, which he called "*at-Tariqat al-'Alawiyat ad-Darqawiyat ash-Shadhiliyah*."¹¹

Al-'Alawi remained restless, and one day could no longer bear to stay in Mostaganem any longer, so he went to visit some of his followers outside the city, bringing a disciple with him. From there, they traveled to Ghalizan to visit other disciples. Al-'Alawi's companion suggested they continue on to Algiers to look for a publisher to print the book al-'Alawi had been writing, to which the *shaykh* agreed. While there, they found it very difficult to find a publisher, and so decided to continue on to Tunis, where they were sure they would find a company willing to print the book. In Tunis, al-'Alawi received a group of visitors, Sufis, who had been the followers of Shaykh Sidi As-Sadiq As-Sahrawi, who had recently died. This *shaykh* traced his spiritual roots through a man called Sidi *Muhammad* al-Madani to Shaykh Sidi Mawlay Al-'Arabi ad-Darqawi, the founder of al-'Alawi's own *tariqah*. The visitors came to him seeking guidance since their master had passed away, and al-'Alawi stayed with them for a few days, teaching them and accepting some of them as disciples. One of the visitors Shaykh al-'Alawi received was Muhammad ibn Khalifa al-Madani, who would later follow Shaykh al-'Alawi to Mostaganem and study with him.

It is now appropriate to explore the biography of Shaykh Muhammad ibn Khalifa al-Madani.¹² Shaykh al-Madani was born in 1888 in Ksibet al-Mediouni to Khalifa ibn Hassin, a merchant who used to travel between his home and Tunis to sell oil there. While in Tunis, he spent part of his time studying the mystical

In the footnote on page 66, he relates that one of Shaykh al-'Alawi's disciples later related to Lings that visions tend to be much more visually clear than dreams, and are usually followed by complete wakefulness.

¹¹ Ibid. 84

¹² *All of this information in this section comes from the biography of the shaykh published on the Madaniyya's website at <http://www.madaniyya.com/Mohammed-Al-Madani> which was accessed on May 1st, 2009*

way in the Tariqat al-Madaniyya al-Shadhiliyya under Shaykh as-Sadiq as-Sahrawi, whose spiritual master was Shaykh Muhammad Zafir al-Madani. He named his son after this master, and did everything he could to encourage the young Muhammad al-Madani to learn about Islam.

Muhammad al-Madani spent his childhood learning the recitation of the Qur'an by heart, which he completed by age 12. After he achieved this, his father sent him to the nearby city of Monastir to learn to read and write. After completing his studies in Monastir, he went to study Islamic sciences and theology at Zaytuna University in Tunis at the age of 15. While in Tunis, he began to attend meetings of *al-Tariqat al-Madaniyya al-Shadhiliyya* in which his father had studied. In 1909, after the death of Shaykh as-Sahrawi, when Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi came to Tunis, Muhammad al-Madani went with his brothers to visit al-'Alawi. The website's biography reports that al-Madani immediately took a liking to Shaykh al-'Alawi, and was one of the men who took an oath of allegiance to the *shaykh* during his visit. Muhammad al-Madani did not follow Shaykh al-'Alawi when he left Tunis to go to Tripoli and on to Istanbul, but stayed at Zaytuna Mosque for the next two years. He was unhappy in his studies without his *shaykh*, so he left the university in 1911 and went to Mostaganem to be with al-'Alawi.

After spending a year studying Islamic law and the mystical way under Shaykh al-'Alawi, al-Madani received from his master a license connecting him to the Darqawi *tariqah*, and allowing him to pass on its teachings to other people. Al-'Alawi sent al-Madani back to Ksibet al-Mediouni at this time, where he began teaching Arabic and Islamic law at a school in Monastir. He taught from 1912 until 1915, when Shaykh al-'Alawi told him to leave the job and focus on teaching the ways of the *tariqah*. He began to farm the land, and travel throughout the region in which he lived offering to educate the poor, usually illiterate, farmers who lived there. As he gained favor in the region, people began to come to his home and listen to him speak about his *tariqah*. His new recruits brought gifts, which he distributed amongst them along with part of his own income from

farming.¹³ In 1920, he and his followers built the *zawiyyah* where it now stands on donated land (according to the current *shaykh*'s nephew, the land was donated by a local, rich man).

From then on, Shaykh al-Madani's following, and the *zawiyyah* grew until his death in 1959. The website lists a number of expansions made to the *zawiyyah* throughout the years, including two expansions of the mosque to accommodate more followers, and the additions of a *madrasah*, or a school for teaching the recitation of the Qur'an. The grandson of Shaykh Muhammad al-Madani, and the nephew of the current *shaykh*, Munawwar al-Madani, sat with me and spoke to me about his memories of the brotherhood since his childhood following my interview with the current *shaykh*. He remembers that in the early days of the *zawiyyah*, five or ten people would stay there at a time, and each would donate anything he could to the *tariqah*. There were even a few permanent residents of the *zawiyyah*, who had devoted their lives to the *tariqah* and provided services for the *shaykh* and his followers. He told me about one man, who he called Si Mabrouk, who came from Algeria after a vision prompted him to give up his life as a thief and seek out a Tunisian *shaykh*. Once he arrived, Si Mabrouk set up a room in the *zawiyyah* where he made tea for all the visitors who came. Another man, from Libya, apparently brought a mill wheel to the *zawiyyah*, and always ground wheat into flour to make bread for visitors.

During the later years of the *zawiyyah* under Shaykh Muhammad al-Madani, and especially the last few years of his life, the Madani *tariqah* gained a large amount of disapproval from the people of Ksibet al-Mediouni. Kenneth Brown relates that in 1937, al-Madani was a candidate for the position of imam at the main mosque of Ksibet, and the people of the village sent many letters of support and opposition to the Prime Minister. Those against the *shaykh*'s appointment argued that he was not a true authority on Islam, but had gained money influence by preaching to the ignorant farmers in the surrounding area.¹⁴ Although the current *shaykh*'s nephew believes his grandfather started the *zawiyyah* with good intentions, he agrees that he took in a large number of gifts,

¹³ Ed. Gellner, Ernest. *Islamic Dilemmas: Reformers, Nationalists and Industrialization: The Southern Shore of the Mediterranean*. Mouton De Gruyter, Germany, 1985. Page 150.

¹⁴ Gellner, 161-162.

and thinks this may have influenced the way he ran the *tariqah*.

Muhammad al-Madani's downfall came with the rise of Habib Bourguiba and his Neo-Destour party. According to Kenneth Brown, Muhammad al-Madani received the French Médaille d'Honneur.¹⁵ Although he supported the French colonialists, and even wrote against the Neo-Destour party,¹⁶ many people I talked to assured me that this was only a rumor that the Neo-Destour party started when Shaykh al-Madani refused to offer his support to them during independence. Al-Madani apparently also attended a rally for Bourguiba in 1955, in which he called for an Islamic constitution, completely contrary to Bourguiba's wishes. Unhappiness with the *shaykh* grew until the *Mulad* celebration (the prophet Muhammad's birthday) in 1957. That year, the Neo-Destour decided that it would run the celebrations throughout the country, and forbade Muhammad al-Madani from holding his yearly celebration, the first of which took place in 1925, according to the Madniyya's website.¹⁷ When al-Madani showed up at the *Mulad* celebration with a large group of his followers, members of the party began to denounce him in front of the whole town. They accused him both of collaborating with the French, and using his followers to accumulate wealth. This is what Kenneth Brown explains to be the final blow dealt to al Madani. Although the current *shaykh*'s nephew told me a different story, both ended with Muhammad al-Madani secluding himself in his house until his death in 1959.

On my first visit to Ksibet al-Mediouni the *shaykh* of the order was on vacation, visiting a *hammam* (bath house) in another city, but my hosts Si Muldi Malek, and his wife Saïda, spoke with him before my arrival, and he agreed to let Si Muldi show me around the *zawiyyah*. He took me there, less than a kilometer away from his home, on the day of my arrival.

The *zawiyyah* was unlike the others I visited in Tunisia. It was very large, with multiple buildings, all located on prime real estate overlooking the sea. The first thing that struck me was a brand new car in the paved driveway. Si Muldi explained that it belonged to one of Shaykh al-Madani's children, most of whom live in houses on the grounds of the *zawiyyah*. For our first stop, we entered the

¹⁵ Ibid. 163.

¹⁶ Ibid. 162.

¹⁷ <http://www.madaniyya.com/Mohammed-Al-Madani?artsuite=5> as of May 1, 2009.

tomb of Shaykh Muhammad al-Madani, and stood in the entrance, a small area inside the door without a mat on the floor. Like many saints' tombs (although Si Muldi told me that Shaykh al-Madani is not a saint), the tomb itself was surrounded by low, wooden walls with designs carved into them, past which visitors may not go. The floor was covered in a thick, reed matting, and the walls were adorned at eye level with photographs of the *shaykh*, of the brotherhood standing in a group, and of various holy places in the Islamic world. Above the photographs, along the walls where they met the ceiling, hung green pieces of wood carved to look like leaves, and each bearing one of God's 99 names. Above the center of the room, from the dome in the ceiling, hung a large, crystal and brass chandelier. In a closet along one wall hung some of Shaykh Muhammad al-Madani's clothes, preserved after his death and stored in his tomb.

From the tomb, we moved into the prayer room, which was very sparse compared to what I had seen so far. It was mostly empty, except for the columns holding up the roof, the *mihrab* (the niche in one wall of every mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca, and in which the imam, or prayer leader, prays), and signs on the walls with sayings from the Qur'an and information about the prophet Muhammad on them. The *mihrab* was made of brown stucco, and had very ornate decorations and verses of the Qur'an impressed in it. From the middle of the ceiling hung another chandelier, which was also made of brass and crystal, but was less ornate than the one in the tomb. The only thing out of place was a small, blue motor scooter in the corner of the room. Normally, to walk into a prayer room, one must remove his shoes to preserve the cleanliness of the space. I can only guess that the *shaykh* was storing the scooter there while he was away, and he does not normally park it in such a holy place.

After we saw the prayer room, we walked outside and down a flight of stairs to the lower level of the *zawiyyah*. A very large pavilion, a tin roof supported by metal legs, took up most of the space on the lower level. The roof supported a twenty-foot sign bearing the name of the prophet Muhammad and wishes of peace upon him, which marked the pavilion as the place where the *Mulad* celebration takes place. The pavilion was empty for the time being, since the *Mulad* took place on March ninth in 2009, but there were many things leftover that hinted at the nature of the celebration. The walls had large white

areas bordered with gold where video could be projected, although Shaykh Munawwar al-Madani would not tell me what videos they use when I spoke with him. Many of the legs supporting the roof also had platforms about eight feet off the ground with chairs and stands for cameras on them. Si Muldi said that every year, the Madaniyya film their *Mulad* celebration, and make the video into a DVD. When I asked Shaykh Munawwar if I could see some of the videos, he told me he did not have any, although I will comment more on his secrecy later.

In the far corner of the pavilion, a door was set in the wall, through which were the graves of several of the *shaykh's* relatives, including three of his brothers who died in childhood. It was clear from the construction of the pavilion that the graves had been there first, and it was built around them, as the corner they occupied jutted into the pavilion. It was also clear that the pavilion was built over what used to be part of the *zawiyyah's* garden. Through a gate next to the pavilion was what is left of the garden today: a 25 by 40 foot piece of land with a few trees, grass growing wild, and piles of rubble from past construction projects. I spoke with Shaykh Munawwar's nephew after my interview with the *shaykh* himself, and he related to me his memories of the *zawiyyah* when his grandfather, Shaykh Muhammad al-Madani was still alive. He remembers most of the *zawiyyah* being a large garden, full of fruit trees. He told me that every Friday, when his grandfather went to the mosque to deliver the sermon (he was then the imam of one of the mosques in Ksibet), he would close the large gate to the *zawiyyah*, cutting it off from outsiders, which allowed the women who lived there to walk around the garden freely, gathering fruits. He also told me, with dismay, that after Muhammad al-Madani's death in 1959, Shaykh Munawwar divided up the land the garden occupied, and gave it to his seven sons, each of whom now has a house on the *zawiyyah's* land.

Coming out of the garden, I saw the houses that now stand there. Buildings surround the pavilion, which Si Muldi told me were the houses of the *shaykh's* relatives, although he could not tell me whom. In the bottom of the building that houses the prayer room and the tomb there were many more rooms. The first one, closest to the bottom of the stairs, was a communal washroom for doing the ritual ablutions before prayer. The entrance to the room had a hallway with toilets, from which brothers can go to the washroom, where a

dozen low, square seats border the room. In front of them is a trough-like gutter for draining water, above which runs a pipe with a valve for each seat. Outside, farther from the bottom of the stairs were several windows and doors set into the wall. Peering into the windows, I discovered that they were dormitories for visitors, although it appeared they had been out of use for some time. The doors were all locked with padlocks and chains, and inside sat stacks of lightweight chairs in storage until they were needed again.

Between my trips to the *zawiyah*, I spent my time reading all about the *tariqah* on its website, which contains articles written by the site's administrator, called "Madani," as well as Dr. Salah Khelifa, a man from Ksibet al-Mediouni who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Madaniyya. There I was able to read a biography of Shaykh Muhammad al-Madani, the "16 principles of good conduct of the Madaniyya,"¹⁸ the *tariqah's wird*,¹⁹ and the first issue of a quarterly newsletter called "La Lumiere", or "Al-Nibras" in Arabic, which both mean "lantern."²⁰ When I read what was on the website, I was struck by how open the Madaniyya seemed to be. Many *turuq* have websites now, including the Shadhiliyya,²¹ so I was not surprised to find that the Madaniyya had a website, nor that they had published a biography of the *shaykh*. I was surprised, however, to find the Arabic text of the *tariqah's wird*. Many Sufis would regard reciting a *tariqah's wird* without the guidance of the *shaykh* as dangerous. Without guidance, the adherent does not understand why he is reciting the words of the *wird*, and so may draw further from God, rather than nearer to Him, while reciting it. For this reason, *shuyukh* (plural of *shaykh*) give the *tariqah's* litany only to adherents after they are ready to join the *tariqah* and have taken an oath of allegiance to the *shaykh*.²²

¹⁸ <http://www.madaniyya.com/Principes-de-bonne-conduite-de-la>,155

¹⁹ <http://www.madaniyya.com/al-Wird>,082

²⁰ <http://www.madaniyya.com/-AL-NIBRAS->

²¹ <http://www.shadhilitariqa.com/site/index.php> as of May 11, 2009.

²² In the autobiography of Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawi, he says that he spent many days over the course of months with the man who would become his *shaykh*, Muhammad al-Buzidi, before the *shaykh* let him take the oath and join the *tariqah*. Before admitting al-'Alawi into the *tariqah*, al-Buzidi declared that "he would be receptive to instruction," but waited still to let him take the oath. Only after al-'Alawi had taken the other did the *shaykh* give him the *wird*. Lings, 52-53.

On my second trip to Ksibet al-Mediouni, about two weeks later, Si Muldi brought me back to the *zawiyyah* of the Madaniyya. The *shaykh*, Munawwar al-Madani, was waiting for us inside his office, which is located halfway down the stairs, in a small building separate from the main building. The level of décor in the office matched that of the rest of the *zawiyyah*. It was furnished mainly with a large, wooden desk, upon which sat a rotary telephone with gold trim and various papers, and a leather office chair facing the door. In front of the desk was a low table, around which were three chairs. Along the back wall and the wall to the right upon entering were bookshelves full of unlabeled folders containing stacks of paper. Above them hung a photograph of the *shaykh's* father along with multiple frames of Arabic calligraphy. I sat across the table from *shaykh* Munawwar and Si Muldi while the latter introduced me and explained who I was again. The *shaykh* furrowed his brow at the explanation, and turned to me to ask what I was studying.

While I was explaining my research topic, Si Muldi left, leaving me to speak to the *shaykh* alone. Shaykh Munawwar looked at me with a skeptical expression while I told him that I had studied Sufism at my university, and I was interested in examining the forms and practices of Tunisian Sufis. I also told him that I wanted to ask him about the *tariqah's* relationship with the people of Ksibet al-Mediouni, and with the government. After I had explained myself, he told me that his, or his father's, relationship with the government or with the people of Ksibet had nothing to do with Sufism (*Tasawwuf*), which he thought was the subject of my paper. When I explained that there was a miscommunication, and that I actually wanted to talk about more historical events, he elaborated on his answer, but still refused to talk about it. He told me that he interacts with other people, including people who work in the government, as a person, not as a Sufi or as a *shaykh*. In his view, all people are from God and will return to God, so there is no reason for him to have anything but good relations with other people.

The idea that all people come from and will return to God comes from the doctrine of the Oneness of Being, or *Wahdat al-Wujud*.²³ In short, this is one of

²³ For a much more in-depth explanation of *Wahdat al-Wujud*, see Chapter 5 of Lings' *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century* beginning on page 121.

the principle ideas of Sufism, and says that God is the only thing in existence, and from Him comes everything in the universe. The Qur'anic verse "Wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of God."²⁴ is one of the chief origins of this doctrine. It says that in all things in the created universe, one may perceive God. In creating the universe, God imbued everything in it with qualities of himself, and so each created thing displays part of Him.²⁵ Another Qur'anic verse, "Everything perisheth but His Face,"²⁶ reveals how God remains the only thing existent in a universe of things that are not Him. God's 'face' in this sense is the way in which each object in the universe displays his attributes at all times. Since nothing would exist had God not created it and given it attributes of Himself, there is nothing in the existence of an object except God's own existence.

After Shaykh Munawwar had convinced me that I would not get any answers from him about the interactions he and his father have had with the government, he told me that studying Sufism was not something I could do in a half hour. He said that the subject was better suited to a much longer paper, like the doctoral thesis written by Dr. Salah Khelifa of Ksibet. Dr. Khelifa had spent a year living in the *zawiyyah*, he told me, and written all about the Madaniyya and its parent *tariqah*, the 'Alawiyya. I pressed him again, and he agreed to answer some questions, but he seemed to think I was wasting my time.

I found it very difficult to continue from this point. The strong, although subtle opposition that Shaykh Munawwar gave me disoriented me and left me at a loss for where to start. He had, in five minutes, told me that he would not answer half of my questions, and that the other half were too difficult to answer and fit into a 20-page paper. There was also something very uncomfortable about the whole situation. Shaykh Munawwar is a large man, about 6 feet tall and heavy set. He was wearing a red *shashiyya* (a brimless, felt hat, also called a fez) and a gray *jalabiyya* (a very long, collar-less shirt worn by some Tunisian men over other clothing) that came down almost to his leather sandals. He sat across the table from me with his back to the bookshelf and his arms folded across his torso. His stature, and the way that he told me he could not answer my questions,

²⁴ Qur'an 2:115 from Lings, 121.

²⁵ Chittick, 10.

²⁶ Qur'an 28:88 from Lings, 121.

seemed very defensive to me, although I could not think of a reason for this at the time.

I stared at my notes and after a long silence, began to ask him about the *tariqah* as it is today. From this point on, the *shaykh* adopted a more accommodating air. He took pleasure in answering my questions, and seemed satisfied with every answer he gave. Everything he said was short and simple, and could be traced back to the idea of *Wahdat al-Wujud* above. After almost every answer, he smiled, shook his head, and used the Tunisian phrase "akahaou," the literal meaning of which is 'only,' but is used to mean 'that's all' at the end of an anecdote. In this way, he cut me off after every question and forced me to move on to a different topic. Even if he didn't say "akahaou," he found another way to answer every question in very few words, and leave me without any questions to follow up with.

I asked him who comes to visit the *zawiyyah* now, and all he could tell me was that people from Ksibet and people from other places around Tunis come, mostly during the *Mulad*, or the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. I asked about the many rooms he has below filled with chairs, and he told me that they are for visitors, but the celebration is only for one night. I was surprised to hear that based on my previous visits to *zawiyyat* (plural of *zawiyyah*). The *shuruf* (plural of *sharifah*) of the shrines of Sidi 'Ali al-Makki and Sidi al-Hajj Ambarak told me that they get visitors throughout the year, both Sufi and non, coming for multiple nights to pray, and share in the blessing (*baraka*) the saints have from being near to God.

Before he told me that most of his visitors now are from Ksibet, he was more vague. He said that anyone who wants to come can. First, he said that Sufis from any *tariqah* may come and pray, and to explain why, he likened the various *turuq* to the states of America. He said that in speaking to Americans, you may find that one is from Chicago, one is from Texas, one is from Washington, and another is from New York, but they are all American. I admitted that as an American, I felt a sense of community with other Americans, even if they are from another state. In his view (and this is not true of all Sufis) he shares a bond with other Sufis in their mutual love of God and desire to draw nearer to Him, so he would welcome a Sufi from the Sanussiyya or 'Isawwiyya to the *zawiyyah* as if

he were a Madani.

Continuing, he explained that Muslims who are not currently following a Sufi *tariqah* are also completely welcome to come and pray at the *zawiyyah*. They are, after all, just as much a part of God as he is. Before any of the current brothers began visiting the *zawiyyah*, they were all just the same. Not only may Muslims come to visit and pray, but people of other religions are welcome as well. He referred to Jews and Christians as "friends of the book" (*Ashab al-Kitab*), which is a play on multiple verses of the Qur'an., which refer to Jews, Christians, and a group called the Sabians, the "people of the book." "And do not dispute with the followers of the Book except by what is best, except those of them who act unjustly, and say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our Allah and your Allah is One, and to Him do we submit," and "Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the f [sic] Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve."²⁷ Adherents to other religions are welcome also, because of his idea of what religion is in its basic form. To him, all religions boil down to Prayer (*salah*) and Gathering, or Community (*Ijtima'*). Regardless of the specific ways in which a religious person may worship, he is still worshipping God, and if he desires to pray with the brothers of the *zawiyyah*, he may do so.

I was also surprised to learn that Shaykh Munawwar would welcome anyone to the *zawiyyah*, even non-religious people. Of course, if someone did not believe in God, he would not wish to pray, and so he would be unlikely to seek out and visit a group of people who believe that everything comes from and inevitably returns to God. However, Shaykh Munawwar would not hesitate to welcome any person as a guest. I saw this kind of hospitality at every *zawiyyah* I visited. The people who keep shrines view their guests as guests of God (*dhuyuf Allah*), and will always give food and shelter for God's sake. In my visits to the shrines Khalti Beya and Si Hedi gave me a bed for the night, since I arrived late in the day, and insisted that I eat dinner with them, without expecting anything in

²⁷ The translations of these two verses, 29:46 and 2:62 respectively come from http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/s_earch.html accessed on May 3rd, 2009.

return. Sharifah, of Sidi 'Ali al-Makki's *zawiyyah*, happily talked to me about the shrine, gave me a complete tour, and would not let me leave without eating a big lunch. Both *shuruf* told me that everything they did for me, they actually did for God, who expected them to treat their guests as His.

My presence at the Madani *zawiyyah* was a test of this policy for the *shaykh* and his followers. Early in the interview, the *shaykh* asked me which religion I follow. I explained to him that I was raised without a religion, although I believe in God and am currently learning about many religions in order to find the one I want to follow. Although he expressed a wish that I convert to Islam, he did not insist that Islam was the correct religion like the *shuruf* of the other *zawiyyat* did. He told me that whichever religion I end up in, as long as I believe in one God, I would be on the right track.

It was clear to me that the *shaykh's* policy of welcoming all people held true for the whole group when several small groups of brothers came in. About twenty minutes into our interview, a group of three men walked through the *zawiyyah* and into the office. Shaykh Munawwar stood up to greet them, and when he met them, they each shared a special handshake with him. For the handshake, they would extend their hands almost vertically with the palm facing that of their partner. First they would interlock their thumbs and then wrap their fingers around the base of the other's thumb. After their hands were interlocked, they would each kiss the other's fingers in turn.

I have never heard of Sufi *turuq* using a special handshake between its members, and it seemed to be a simple gesture of confraternity that identified the followers of Shaykh Munawwar. When Si Muldi came back to pick me up, everyone in the room stood up, happily greeted him by name, and wished him peace, but none of them even tried to use the Madani handshake with him. They all knew him from the community, and so knew that he was not a follower of the Madani *tariqah*. I, on the other hand, had quite a few awkward encounters with the brothers as they came in. With blond hair and blue eyes, Tunisians usually guess that I'm German or American, rarely confusing me for Tunisia. Almost all of the Madanis tried to use their handshake on me, accepting me without question. I offered a standard handshake at first, but each time I did, the person greeting me would start the Madani handshake, switch at the last minute, and look at me,

confused. After I caught on, I started returning it, and had no further problems greeting the brothers. From the moment they entered, they accepted me likely as an aspiring Sufi, there to consult the *shaykh* on a spiritual matter, especially since I was there when they had all come to meet.

This was the first contradiction I saw between what the *shaykh* told me about the order, and what was written on its website. At the beginning of the meeting, he told me that they had no set time to meet and do *dhikr*, and within twenty minutes, 15 people had arrived in small groups, one bringing enough cookies for 25. He claimed everyone had dropped by for a visit, but once people started arriving, he seemed more anxious to finish the meeting. I realized that when he said I couldn't study Sufism in half an hour, he had meant it literally, and it was clear that I was intruding on a planned meeting. I continued to ask the *shaykh* questions as people arrived, and once everyone was seated, I introduced myself to the group and explained what I was studying. They all gave me affirming nods and sat listening, seeming quite interested in the questions I had for them.

For most of the rest of the interview, I still spoke solely with Shaykh Munawwar, although I sometimes addressed the group as a whole, and in doing so, I noticed a very strong group adherence to four of the website's principles. The fifth principle says that one of the Madani Sufi's main goals is to erase the ego and be completely humble. It says that he should consider himself always a beginner. The fourth and the sixteenth principles encourage love and respect for the *shaykh* and for all the brothers of the Madani *tariqah*. The third principle goes further and says that brothers should have absolute respect for the *shaykh*, because, after the prophet Muhammad, he is the "Lord" (Maître) guiding them on the path to God. Although it forbids simple disrespect, like talking out of turn and laughing during meetings, it also says that brothers must comply fully with all of his decisions, and calls his knowledge "a priceless treasure that deserves our full devotion."²⁸

Before the group of brothers arrived, I expected that these principles were more guidelines than rules, since many of the things Shaykh Munawwar told me about the group's current practice only loosely followed the principles

²⁸ <http://www.madaniyya.com/Principes-de-bonne-conduite-de-la,155>

outlined on the website. However, all of the brothers showed extreme deference to the *shaykh* to the point that they were almost absent from the meeting in their passivity. They listened to my questions, and occasionally nodded in understanding, but it was clear that the only person who would answer was Shaykh Munawwar. Only once did someone else answer one of my questions, on the topic of meeting times and occasions. First the *shaykh* answered, and then called on the man next to me, who had made a gesture to Munawwar requesting to speak. Instead of expanding on the *shaykh's* answer, he merely repeated it to me, but in English. I had asked about meeting times already, and he wanted to allay my confusion once and for all by using my language, not to offer an answer different from the *shaykh's*, which would have shown him disrespect.

At the end of the meeting, I asked, addressing the whole group, how they all felt they fit into society in their town, because of what I had read in Kenneth Brown's articles about some of the people of Ksibet disliking the *tariqah's* presence and practices. I explained that since I arrived in Tunisia, I had spoken to many people about Sufism, although most did not know more than the names of a few local saints, and many had low opinions of the spiritual practices of the *туруq*. I had very much trouble communicating my thoughts on this question, especially to Shaykh Munawwar, who didn't seem to understand, or perhaps did not want to understand, considering the question was irrelevant to the topic of Sufism. It took me quite a bit of time and energy to say everything I had said, and I did not want to start from the beginning. I had noticed that one man, at the far end of the room, had been nodding vigorously throughout my explanation, so I turned to him to ask if he understood, and to ask him to help me. He remained silent, and Shaykh Munawwar, with a furrowed brow, called my attention back to him and made me repeat my question from the beginning. The man who had nodded made no more gestures, and let me repeat my question without offering to help. The principle of humility on the website goes so far as to say that a brother should not offer explanation to another's question, for fear of losing that humility, and what I observed lead me to believe that the Madaniyya follow this injunction to the point of timidity.

As for the answer to my question about the community, the *shaykh* understood the second time and repeated what he had told me at the beginning

of the interview. He said that his interactions with the people of Ksibet al-Mediouni were always good. Since they and he are all the creations of God, he has no reason to have any problem with them. When he had finished his answer, he looked to his left along the row of brothers sitting next to him. From this look, a few of them felt comfortable enough to chime in, although they all repeated what Shaykh Munawwar had said; they all felt perfectly accepted by their community. The next day, I attended performance by some of the children of Ksibet, in which they acted out plays, and recited many chapters of the Qur'an. At the performance, I saw a wide range of people: parents and children, as well as men of the community who had come just to watch. One of the men from the Madani meeting the day before walked in ahead of me, greeting and shaking hands with everyone he met.

When I came to the *zawiyyah*, I was especially interested in asking the *shaykh* about the practices of *dhikr* they follow in the Madaniyya *tariqah*. *Dhikr*, or *dhikrullah*, is the remembrance of God through the mention of His name, and is the primary practice that separates Sufis from non-Sufis.²⁹ The Qur'an commands the reader in many verses to remember God, usually combined with an injunction to mention his name,³⁰ because humans are by nature forgetful.³¹

One of the primary reasons for practicing *dhikr* is to help the person remember God to manifest His attributes more fully. Because each of God's names is one of his attributes, practicing *dhikr* with it, by meditating on it and continually mentioning it, one may gain an understanding of it and bring it out in his own life.³² The form of *dhikr* that Sufis of a specific *tariqah* practice comes from the recommendation of its *shaykh*,³³ and so many diverse forms have developed within the *turuq*. Groups practice both 'loud' and 'quiet' *dhikr*, the former in groups and the latter in private based on the instructions of the *shaykh*. Forms of 'loud' *dhikr* are by far the most diverse, and range from the dancing to music and poetry of the Mawlawiyya of Turkey (commonly known as the Whirling Dervishes), to very tame recitation of the Qur'an with no

²⁹ Chittick, 16, 57.

³⁰ Ibid. 54.

³¹ Ibid. 16.

³² Ibid. 56-57.

³³ Ibid. 57.

accompaniment.³⁴

So I asked Munawwar how they remember (yudhakkirun, or yadhkuru in Tunisian dialect) God in the *tariqah*. He told me that whenever they get together, they are remembering God, convincing me further that my presence was interrupting a regular meeting. They gather and talk about him, although he maintained that they have no set time to do it. I told him that I wanted to know the methods they used to practice *dhikr*, and gave him an example to explain. I told him about a class on Sufism that I took at my university, in which the teacher gathered us around in a circle, and had us hold hands. We began repeating the first of the two *shahadas*, part of the Islamic testament of faith, "*La illaha illa Allah*," or "there is no God but God,"³⁵ and turning our bodies in rhythm. For the "*la*," we would all be facing left, and during the "*illa*," we would be facing to the right. Each time we said the word "*allah*," we would be facing the center of the circle. Many Sufi *turuq*, including the Madaniyya, incorporate chanting, breathing heavily, and movement of the body into *dhikr*. I couldn't quite get my point across, so I demonstrated for everyone. Shaykh al-Madani laughed at my display and shook his head.

He told me that they don't do anything like that in his *zawiyyah*. To demonstrate their practice, he asked me, in Arabic, since he speaks very little English, "What University do you attend?" I didn't understand the point of the question, so I asked him to repeat. "What University do you go to? Do you like it?" Perplexed, I answered, "I study at Brandeis University, and yes, I like it." Shaykh Munawwar held out his hands and grinned, as if to say, "I believe I've proven my point," and the brothers in the room began laughing heartily and clapping. I sat perplexed for a moment, and then realized that by making me express my feelings for my university, he had made me 'remember' it the way they remember God during *dhikr*. He explained it to me as well; They take *dhikr* literally, in that it is enough for them to invoke God's name by talking about Him and their love for Him. They don't read poetry or play instruments, they simply read the Qur'an (which refers to itself as *dhikr*)³⁶ and discuss God.

³⁴ Ibid. 59

³⁵ Chittick, 57.

³⁶ Chittick, 52.

As I mentioned before, the Madaniyya have incorporated chanting and breathing into their *dhikr* in the past, and it is likely they still do now. Kenneth L. Brown, an anthropologist who spent a year in Ksibet al-Mediouni between 1975 and 1976, relates the following story about a night he spent in the company of a few men from Ksibet:

"A dramatic performance, the hadra ('seance') of the Madaniyya order follows [they had previously been playing music]: everyone stands in a circle, holding hands, bowing and straightening up in rhythmic motion and at an accelerating pace, all the while increasing the rate of breathing; on bowing one expels - almost grunts - the sound ah, followed by to ah-s on straightening up; the tempo builds to a crescendo, almost a frenzy as A [an unnamed person] chants a Quranic Verse in counterpoint and guides the performance."

Despite the fact that he referred to the performance as a "*hadra*," and not as *dhikr*, there can be no doubt that the men he was with were imitating the practices used by the Madaniyya for the remembrance of God. He goes on to say that the men were using the ah sound, which is comprised of the first and last letters of the Divine Name, Allah, to invoke God. He explains that the invocation, which emptied the men of breath, combined with the rhythm and increasing speed, were a "means of attaining illumination or a direct knowledge of God."³⁷

When I talked to the Shaykh's nephew later that day and part of the next, he also told me about the practices of *dhikr* he had observed, although he has seen it only once or twice because he does not support his uncle's *tariqah*. His story comes from the time when his grandfather was alive, during a *dhikr* session during the month of Ramadan. He said that the Madaniyya would always gather at the *zawiyyah*'s mosque during Ramadan after breaking the fast at night and praying the final prayer until morning. He said his uncle would gather his disciples around him, sitting in a large circle (consisting of about 100 people), and begin to recite some of his own poetry expressing love for the prophet Muhammad and for God. The disciples would repeat the poetry after their master in tempo. Shaykh al-Madani would gradually increase the tempo, and as he did, the whole group would rise and continue the *dhikr* standing. They would proceed in this way until the *Fajr* prayer, the first (although not obligatory) of

³⁷ Gellner, 146.

the morning, eat before sunrise, pray the *Subah*, the first obligatory prayer, and go to sleep.

Shaykh Munawwar was reluctant to tell me about the specific practices the Madaniyya use for *dhikr*, because they are usually kept secret from people who have are not following the *tariqah*. Trying to practice *dhikr* without the guidance of *shaykh* can be dangerous to the spiritual development of a person, and so it is guarded very carefully and only prescribed to followers who are ready to practice it. Shaykh Muhammad al-Buzidi did not even talk to Shaykh al-'Alawi about *dhikr* until about a week after he joined the Darqawi *tariqah*, and only after he had been reciting the *wird*. He also told al-'Alawi to keep everything he learned a secret from everyone until the *shaykh* told him he was ready to speak of the *tariqah's* practices to others.³⁸ While Shaykh Munawwar would have accepted me if he had thought me fit to learn about the *tariqah*, he could not tell me anything unless I was a follower on his path.

Shaykh Munawwar's silence on the Madaniyya's relationship with the government, however, was simply to protect the group. His father's run-ins with the government were by no means the last ones the group would have in its history. The *shaykh's* nephew told me a story about a problem the Madaniyya had in the last years of Habib Bourguiba's term as president. He told me that in about 1985, Shaykh Munawwar had a personal conflict with a minister in the government, who shut down the *zawiyah* that year during the *Mulad* celebration, and would not allow people to come. He said it was the only year a problem like that happened, and by the next *Mulad*, the argument had been smoothed over. However, it shows the importance of keeping up a rapport with the government for the sake of the *zawiyah*. Shaykh Munawwar's only comment on the government was that he does not, and cannot have a problem with the fine people who work in it, because he does not want to give it any reason to abuse the *tariqah*.

Toward the end of the interview, I asked Shaykh Munawwar about the Madaniyya's website, because I had noticed discrepancies between what it said and what he told me. I also asked him about the newsletter the website published for the first time in March, and why they had started to publish it. He

³⁸ Lings, 53.

asked me what the discrepancies I saw were, but also told me straightforwardly that he does not write or publish anything on the website. It is run by one of his sons in Paris, and he had no knowledge of the newsletter previously, though I could not give him any information on it, since I could not download it before my meeting with him.

As it turns out, *Al-Nibras* is published specifically for the members of the Madani *tariqah*. The first issue's primary focus seemed to be the *Mulad* celebration for 2009, as it listed the dates of the celebration at the various Madani *zawiyyat* in Tunisia and Europe. I was surprised to learn that there were many *zawiyyat* when the *shaykh's* nephew explained that they had come about after the death of his grandfather. When Shaykh Muhammad al-Madani died, many of his followers claimed to be his spiritual heir, and tried to take charge of the group. Instead of choosing one person to continue leading the *tariqah*, many of the followers went to their home towns and set up their own *zawiyyat*, so that now there is now one in Sousse, one in Sfax, one in Monastir, and even one in Paris. Attendance at the *zawiyyah* in Ksibet dropped very much after the group spread out in this manner, although the members of all of the branches of the Madaniyya still go to the *zawiyyah* in Ksibet on the *Mulad* every year.

After leaving the *zawiyyah* the second time, I felt almost bewildered. I had barely made it through the interview, jumping from topic to topic just to keep up with Shaykh Munawwar, who had done everything he could to dodge my questions. I had also learned almost nothing about the *tariqah* itself, except by way of observation. The *shaykh* said goodbye with a smile, inviting me to come back, the next time as a guest to talk more informally about God. He would be more comfortable talking to me about Sufism when I wasn't doing academic research, and when he could judge what I already knew more easily.

My interview with his nephew, which followed my talk with Shaykh Munawwar, provided me with the answers I had been looking for originally. The nephew happily told me all about the history of his uncle's brotherhood, but very methodically checked everything he told me with explanations of how Sufi practices are incorrect, as well as an overview on the basic tenets of Islam. As a scholar of Islamic theology, he considers that Sufis focus too much on the

spiritual aspect of life, and ignore the physical and mental aspects.³⁹ From him, then, I gained a wealth of knowledge on the practices of the *tariqah*, but would have lost out on the little bit of Sufi theology Shaykh Munawwar let me in on.

I also met briefly with Doctor Salah Khelifa, the man who wrote his dissertation on the Madaniyya. Si Muldi and I tracked him down at café in Ksibet, where I told him the topic of my paper and asked him if he could give me any information. He refused, saying that all of his knowledge of the Madaniyya was on the Internet, and so I should find it there. Without him, however, I would not have had the chance to read about Shaykh Muhammad al-Madani and his order before my trip to Ksibet. Without that background knowledge, I would have had a difficult time following the history that Shaykh Munawwar's nephew gave me, and I certainly would not have gotten it from the *shaykh*.

Without all of the sources I found, the information I have gathered on *al-Tariqat al-Madaniyya* would have lacked an essential aspect to it. The difficulty I had beginning my research carried through the rest of my project, especially in finding someone who knew about Sufism and with whom I could discuss the subject. In order to learn anything about the inner workings of a *tariqah* in Tunisia, it was essential for me to find a connection to a *shaykh* through a person, so that I would be trustworthy in the *shaykh's* eyes. Once I did find that connection, it was barely enough to convince the *shaykh* to talk to me since the practices of Sufi *туруq* are secrets, guarded from all except those who are ready to learn them. Despite the fact that Shaykh Munawwar was reluctant to reveal anything about the Madaniyya to me, I learned as much from my observations at the interview as I did from the biography on the Madaniyya website, and I consider meeting the *shaykh* and talking with him an integral part of studying a Sufi *tariqah*. However, I would have had to spend a year at the *zawiyyah* to learn the history of the Madaniyya like Dr. Khelifa learned it, and so I found people close to the *tariqah*, like the *shaykh's* nephew, to be an equally important source of information.

³⁹ These three levels of human life are also discussed on Chittick, 4-5.