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The Public Spheres in Medieval Islamic Societies: A Case Study of Marshall Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam*

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Abstract

In his book The Venture of Islam*, Marshall Hodgson (d. 1968) draws our attention to distinctive religious institutions—i.e., the* sharīʿah *law,* waqf*, and Sufi orders—that played a significant role in the social and civic life of medieval Islamicate society. This paper discusses how medieval Muslims, elite as well as non-elite, used their social agency in the public sphere. It evaluates the effectiveness of these civic institutions for the public good. It attempts to identify how these religious institutions served peoples' religious, spiritual, social, political, and material needs.* ʿUlamāʾ*, Sufis, rulers, the wealthy elite, and the commoners used their religious, social, and political agency in this sphere for the betterment of the common people. While challenging the medieval despotism thesis, this paper attempts to defend the argument that medieval Islamic society had public spaces in the form of* waqf*,* sharīʿah *law,* khānqāh*, and* madrasah *in which the whole social strata participated. Significantly, this paper argues that medieval Islamic societies did not merely have a single authoritarian sphere of social activity in which only the elite had agency; rather, there were multiple public spheres where people, recruited from a range of private spheres, expressed different modes of social agency.*

Keywords

Marshall Hodgson, public sphere, medieval Islamic society, *sharīʿah*, *ummah*, *waqf*, *khānqāh*.

Introduction

Marshall Hodgson (d. 1968), the author of *The Venture of Islam*, was a visionary historian of Islamic history, culture, and civilization. He argues

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that the disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258 CE) after the tenth century CE helped to restructure the social and political life during the Earlier Middle Islamic Period. This period saw great "political inventiveness" and the emergence of many social and religious institutions.[1] Hodgson draws our attention to distinctive religious institutions—i.e., *sharīʿah* law, *waqf*, and Sufi orders—that played a crucial role in medieval Islamic society's social and civic life.[2] He discusses the central role of distinctive Islamic religious traditions in developing these institutions and bequeathing a social system to the ordinary people, free of private interests.[3] In this regard, the role of *ʿulamāʾ* (sing. *ʿālim*; a religious scholar), Sufis (exponents of Sufism or *taṣawwuf*, the commonest term for Islamic tradition of mysticism), and other educated classes was of vital import. They transformed religious institutions such as *madrasah*s (a college for learning) and *khānqāh*s (sing. *khānqāh*; a Sufi lodge, *ribāṭ*, *zāwiyah*), endowed by the wealthy and ruling elite, into "public spaces" beneficial for the whole social strata.

Shmuel Eisenstadt defines the public sphere as a space of activity between the official and private spheres for the public good. In this sphere, actors are recruited from the private sphere. Another significant aspect of the public sphere is that the ruling authorities do not control it and this allows it to remain open for various sections of society.[4] The conception of the public sphere in medieval Islamic societies is different from the Western model of civil society and the public sphere. The public sphere is also defined "as a zone of autonomous social activity between the family and the ruling authorities."[5] According to Hoexter, the importance of this concept "lies largely in that it goes beyond appeals to the formal institutions of the Western civil society model, to address the entire realm of societal and cultural life that has relevance to

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[1] Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. (Lahore: Vanguard, 2004), 2:12.

[2] Ibid., 2:119. Hodgson defines "Islamicate" society as the society, with particular social political, and cultural characteristics associated with Islam and Muslims, including non-Muslims, their traditions, cultures, and social practices. In that society, Muslims were socially and politically dominant. see ibid., 1:57-60.

[3] Ibid., 1:71-98.

[4] Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Civil Society and Public Spheres in a Comparative Perspective," *Polish Sociological Review* 154 (2006): 144; Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter, "Introduction: Paths to Early Modernities: A Comparative View," *Daedalus* 127 (1998): 10.

[5] Miriam Hoexter, "The Waqf and the Public Sphere," in *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, ed. Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Nehemia Levtzion (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 119.

the social and political order."[6] In simple words, Hoexter provides a useful account of this concept and activity; she believes that the public sphere pursues the general well-being of the people and is open to discussing all kinds of issues and problems. It has been broadened to include whole social strata in the processes and actions in the public sphere.[7]

Some Orientalists such as Karl Wittfogel, Bryan Turner, and Michael Curtis believe that medieval Islamic society had been devoid of such civic spheres through which individuals and groups independently worked for the public good. They argue that medieval Muslim rulers—caliphs, *sulṭān*s, and *amīr*s—were despotic, did not have a cooperative relationship with society except through hegemonic means, and did not take any interest in the public good. Moreover, Islamic societies were stagnant and thus there was no public sphere therein. These ideas are expressed in various ways in orientalists' scholarship.[8] This study assesses the ideas of these orientalists and evaluates the *sharīʿah* law, *waqf*, and Sufism as significant elements of the medieval Islamic public sphere. These expressions of the public sphere played an important role in creating and maintaining social order and stability without state

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[6] Ibid.

[7] The idea was first given by Jurgen Habermas who argues that it is a modern Western concept, according to which the public sphere is a sphere between state and civil society where common people critically and rationally discuss and debate matters of common good, form their opinion, and influence state policies. This West-centred model of the public sphere is criticized by scholars such as Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Armando Salvatore, and Nancy Fraser. Eisenstadt, "Civil Society and Public Spheres in a Comparative Perspective," 143-66; Armando Salvatore, *The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25-26 (1990): 56-80.

[8] Bryan S. Turner, "Orientalism and the Problem of Civil Society in Islam," in *Orientalism, Islam, and Islamists*, ed. Asaf Hussain, Robert W. Olson, and Jamil A. Qureshi (Vermont: Amana Books, 1984), 25-27, 33, 35, 39; Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (New York: Verso, 2013), 463-65, 503-06; Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 49, 103; Patricia Springborg, *Western Republicanism and the Oriental Prince* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 19; Springborg, "The Contractual State: Reflections on Orientalism and Despotism," *History of Political Thought* 8, no. 3 (1987): 395-96, 414, 423-43; Michael Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 32, 40; Many early modern Western thinkers considered Muslim, and especially Ottoman, rulers to be "oppressors," "tyrants," and "despots." Malcolm Noel, *Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 201-05.

control.[9] The central question in this paper asks how these spheres were beneficial to the public. Thus, this study examines the extent to which these spaces were open to the public and how these public spaces became sites for continuous interaction between the lower rungs of society and the ruling elite. Moreover, it explores how *waqf* as a charitable space became a vital instrument of the public sphere. At the same time, it examines Sufi lodges that were transformed by Sufis into public spaces where varied types of social, religious, spiritual, and material needs of common people were met.

The primary aim of this study is to ascertain a better understanding of the medieval Islamic public sphere. However, considering the practical constraints, this study focuses on Medieval Middle Eastern Societies, particularly the Earlier Middle Islamic Period. Hodgson divides the Middle Islamic Period into two ages: Earlier Middle Islamic Period from 945 CE to 1258 CE and the Later Middle Islamic Period from 1258 CE to 1503. This study restricts itself to the Earlier Middle Islamic Period when international Islamicate civilization was established; the Islamic society expanded; power and culture were decentralized; and many religious and social institutions developed. This period saw the sophistication of culture.[10]

The Public Spheres in Medieval Islamic Societies

Hodgson notes that during the Earlier Middle Islamic Period, the disintegration of the Abbasid Empire led to the emergence of an international society in which many religious and social groups demonstrated their agency. The disintegration of the Abbasid Empire ushered in a time of "institutional creativity"[11] that gave emergence to varied forms of social institutions that provided spaces for the common people to express their social, religious, and political agency.[12] The *sharīʿah* played the central role as a civic force and helped in the formation of these institutions. According to Hodgson, the *sharīʿah* law, *waqf*, and the Sufi orders were the most crucial institutions. He writes,

> The first was the Sharîʿah law, which was sufficiently standardized that even differences among Ḥanafîs, Shâfiʿîs, and Jaʿfarîs did not make much

[9] Dale F. Eickelman, "Foreword: The Religious Public Sphere in Early Muslim Societies," in *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, ed. Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Nehemia Levtzion (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 3.

[10] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 1:96.

[11] Ibid., 2:8.

[12] Ibid., 2:4.

> basic difference in common expectations from one to another on legally determinable matters; nor did differences of national background. The other two integrative institutions, the waqf foundations and Ṣûfî ṭarîqahs, were themselves finally dependent on the Shar'î norms for their social viability.[13]

The above introduction of these institutions by Hodgson highlights the constitutive role of the *sharī'ah* law in Muslim communities irrespective of their *madhhab*s (schools of law). The religious groups in the forms of schools of law, Shī'ī communities, and Sufi brotherhoods worked for community solidarity, education, law, personal morality, and the preservation of Islamic religious and spiritual traditions, representing the legacy of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him).[14] The *sharī'ah*-based *waqf* was the main social organ of medieval Islamic society. The charitable institution of *waqf* provided space for the *ummah* (the community of believers) to establish religious and social institutions such as *madrasah*s and *khānqāh*s, where *'ulamā'* and Sufis used their agency to work for the common good.

The *Sharī'ah* Law

Hodgson underlines that the *sharī'ah* was the primary source of religious, social, and political guidance for the Muslim community. In his words, "The Sharî'ah was supported by deep-rooted public sentiment. The Islamicate social order presupposed a widespread loyalty to Islam, to the Muslim *Ummah* community—and hence to the obligations imposed by Sharî'ah law. This loyalty was not only a spiritual but a social virtue, in one sense a political virtue. . . ."[15] The community of believers gave much credence to the *sharī'ah* norms in their social sphere. The *sharī'ah*-ordained spiritual, social, and political virtues were highly appreciated by Muslims as members of the *Ummah*.

The *sharī'ah* and *ummah* are important concepts in Islamic religious and political thought. The *sharī'ah* attached central importance to the *ummah*, the community of believers. It guided in setting religious and social norms of the community.[16] According to Hoexter,

[13] Ibid., 2:119.

[14] Ira M. Lapidus, "The Golden Age: The Political Concepts of Islam," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 524 (1992): 15.

[15] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:119.

[16] Hoexter, "Waqf and the Public Sphere," 120.

> *Umma* and *shari`a* were thus the center of gravity around which all activity in the public sphere revolved. Their central position in the premodern Islamic world created a situation radically different from the one prevalent in Western civilization: it placed the *umma* as the most significant group in the public sphere, and above the ruler. The *shari`a* embodied the norms of public order, and its preservation was the main moral obligation of both the community and the ruler.[17]

The common interests of the Muslims were so essential that the rulers and others belonging to the elite and non-elite, particularly *'ulamā'* strove for their realization.[18] The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) was mainly concerned with the interests of the *ummah* and those norms that guided the lives of the individuals and community. The Qur'ān and *sunnah* (the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muḥammad [peace be on him]) provided those norms and practices of social and public life as guidelines to the community. The *ummah*, particularly, the *'ulamā'*, inherited the task of providing guidance and setting religious and social norms. The *'ulamā'* as literate members of the *ummah* occupied a central position in public life by defining the *sharī'ah* after the demise of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him).[19] Thus, the *sharī'ah* provided the *'ulamā'* with a space between the rulers and society to interpret the *sharī'ah* law beyond the rulers' control. This privilege of defining the *sharī'ah* helped the *'ulamā'* to establish institutions for the common good.

The *sharī'ah* was the "common instrument of social action" available to the *ummah*. Thus, the *sharī'ah* law provided social agency to the rulers as well as to those who belonged to the non-governmental spheres and thus played the role of a linkage point (the point that helped the rulers and commoners to work in collaboration for the public good).[20] The rulers not only guaranteed public order as rulers but also worked for the common good as endowers and members of the community of believers.[21] The religious leadership, as the interpreter of the *sharī'ah* law, had the main responsibility for constructing and shaping spaces for

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[17] Ibid., 121.

[18] Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Concluding Remarks: Public Sphere, Civil Society, and Political Dynamics in Islamic Societies," in *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, ed. Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Nehemia Levtzion (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 147-48.

[19] Roy P. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 7.

[20] Said Amir Arjomand, "The Law, Agency, and Policy in Medieval Islamic Society: Development of the Institutions of Learning from the Tenth to the Fifteenth Century," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41 (1999): 264.

[21] Salvatore, *Public Sphere*, 154.

promulgation and regularization of the Islamic moral and ethical vision. The propagation of the Islamic vision in the community provided a space for everyone in the community as a member of the *ummah.*[22] The *'ulamā'* as the interpreters of the *sharī'ah* law played a vital role in this propagation.

'Ulamā' in the Public Sphere

Hodgson maintains that among both the Sunni[23] and Shī'ī[24] piety-minded populace,[25] the *'ulamā'* "worked out what we may call the Sharî'ah law."[26] The *'ulamā'* not only interpreted the *sharī'ah* law but also presided over various social and religious institutions and criticized the ruling elite for not fulfilling their duties properly. During the early period of the Abbasid Caliphate, the *'ulamā'* played their role in the public sphere by challenging the action of Caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833 CE) when he enforced the religious ideology of Mu'tazilah, a group of the rationalist theologians, on others, in case of the *miḥnah*.[27] Through this challenge, the *'ulamā'* significantly played their role in the public sphere by criticizing the state-sponsored religious ideology of one section of the *'ulamā'*.[28] Thus, they, on the one hand, disseminated religious education; on the other hand, they played the role of a bridge between the rulers and society by running charitable institutions. For instance, during the Seljuk rule (1055-1194 CE), in Baghdad, the *'ulamā'* worked in the

[22] Eisenstadt, "Concluding Remarks," 147-50.

[23] A follower of Sunni Islam, one of the two major branches of Islam. The Sunnis accept the first four caliphs as the rightful successors of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him). An orthodox Sunni would be defined by his or her being either Asharite or Maturidite in theology—some latter-day scholars include the Salafi variant as Sunni as well—either Shāfi'ī, Ḥanafī, Mālikī, or Ḥanbalī in jurisprudence; and Ṣūfī of any of the mainstream orders—sober rather than the "drunken" variety, e.g., Naqshbandiyyah, Shaṭṭāriyyah, Sammāniyyah, Chishtiyyah, etc.

[24] A follower of Shī'ī Islam, the second largest branch of Islam. The Shī'īs acknowledge that the succession belonged to 'Alī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him), and to his descendants.

[25] Piety-minded has been defined by Hodgson as the "religious specialists" later called *'ulamā'*, who were critical of the current Muslim life style. Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 1:248-50.

[26] Ibid., 1:238.

[27] See M. Hinds, "Miḥna," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al., 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), 7:2-6.

[28] Nimrod Hurvitz, "The *Mihna* (Inquisition) and the Public Sphere," in *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, ed. Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Nehemia Levtzion (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 17-29.

Baghdadi public spheres as pious and charismatic leaders, as spokesmen for the community towards the rulers, and in a charitable role towards the people.[29] Many *'ulamā'* supported the poor not only from the collection of *zakāh* (the mandatory payment by Muslims of a fixed portion of specified categories of their lawful property for the benefits of the poor) and *ṣadaqah* (voluntary charity) but also from their personal income.[30] For example, Ṣadr al-Dīn b. Naṣr (d. 1256 CE), the Shāfi'ī judge in Baalbek, was very charitable and careful towards the poor and the travellers. Once he went to the mosque with lavish food and served three poor and hungry people.[31] Moreover, they worked as channels of authority for expressing the civic interests of the townspeople.[32] For instance, al-Sharīf Abū Ja'far (d. 1077 CE), the head of the Ḥanbalī school of law, and Abū Isḥāq al-Shīrāzī (d. 1083 CE), the leader of the Shāfi'ī school of law, cooperated to protest against the spread of immorality; the Ḥanbalī community protested under the leadership of these *'ulamā'* against prostitution, interest, and drinking wine in the capital city of Baghdad. These shaykhs demanded from the caliph that brothels should be destroyed and wine should be banned.[33] These roles of the *'ulamā'* were significant aspects of the public sphere as their actions were in the best interests of the community not for their private interests.

The *'ulamā'* also played various roles such as *qāḍī*s (judges), *imām*s (prayer leaders; religious, spiritual, and political heads in Shī'ī Islam; Sunni religious scholars), and *muftī*s (who give a legal decision or opinion). These roles brought them into daily contact with the common people and thus "made them natural leaders of public opinion and informal representatives of the community."[34] The *qāḍī* or judge, though

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[29] Daphna Ephrat, *A Learned Society in a Period of Transition: The Sunni 'Ulama' of Eleventh-Century Baghdad* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 125-47.

[30] Ephrat, "Religious Leadership and Associations in the Public Sphere of Seljuk Baghdad," in *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, ed. Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Nehemia Levtzion (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 33.

[31] Quṭb al-Dīn Mūsā al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl Mir'āt al-Zamān* (Hyderabad-Deccan: Osmania Publications Bureau, 1954), 1:244-45.

[32] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:110.

[33] Ismā'īl b. 'Umar b. Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa 'l-Nihāyah fī 'l-Ta'rīkh* (Lahore: al-Maktabah al-Qudusiyyah, 1984), 12:105; 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Alī b. Muḥammad Abū 'l-Farash b. al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī Ta'rīkh al-Mulūk wa 'l-Umam* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1992), 16:139.

[34] Miriam Hoexter and Nehemia Levtzion, "Introduction," in *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, ed. Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Nehemia Levtzion (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 11.

technically appointed by the caliph or *sulṭān* (a Muslim term for the ruler), mostly acted independently and was hardly under the orders of the ruler or the *amīr*.[35] For instance, Qāḍī Abū Ya'lā (d. 1066 CE), in Baghdad, accepted the post of *qāḍī* of *Dār al-Khilāfah* after the caliph agreed to certain conditions. The first condition was that the *qāḍī* would not be obliged to be present in ceremonial processions. Secondly, *qāḍī* would not be forced to attend the caliph or *sulṭān*'s residence. In the same way, Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Muẓffar al-Shāmī (d. 1095 CE) posed the following conditions: "He would not receive any remuneration for judicial rulings; there would be no intervention in the favour of the disputants, and he would not be obliged to alter his dress."[36] However, in the Abbasid Caliphate, some *qāḍī*s misused the power and issued decisions that were in the best interests of the rulers.

Waqf a Charitable Public Space

Hodgson claims that the w*aqf* was the main institution or backbone of public good in medieval Islamic society. He holds that "most public institutions . . . came to be maintained through income from pious donations and legacies. . . . Through the waqfs, the various civic essentials and even amenities were provided for on a private yet dependable basis without need or fear of the intervention of political power."[37] The *waqf*, in simple words, was a charitable and pious foundation established under the *sharī'ah* law by a living man or woman for the provision of various types of social services such as education, provision of food to the poor, prisoners' freedom, health services, care of animals, and the construction of bridges, roads, and fountains for the public use.[38] Ibn Baṭṭūṭah (d. 1368/69 CE) tells us about the various works for the public good done through *waqf* in medieval Damascus. These include helping pilgrims, providing funds to the poor people for their children's marriages, constructing roads for the travellers, giving funds for the construction of footpaths in the streets of Damascus, etc.[39] Ibn

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[35] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:110; Eickelman, "Foreword," 5.

[36] Ephrat, *Learned Society in a Period of Transition*, 133-34.

[37] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:124.

[38] Timur Kuran, "The Provision of Public Goods under Islamic Law: Origins, Impact, and Limitations of the Waqf System," *Law & Society Review* 35 (2001): 842; R. Peters et al., "Waḳf," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman et al., 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 11:59-99; and Monzer Kahf, "Waqf," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0844, accessed April 12, 2011.

[39] Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭah al-Musammāh Tuḥfat al-Nuẓẓār fī Gharā'ib al-Amṣār*, ed. Ṭalāl Ḥarb, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2002), 122.

Baṭṭūṭah also relates the story of a slave boy, belonging to medieval Damascus, who stumbled and broke the precious vase of his master. People gathered there and took him to the person who was in charge of the *waqf* of the utensils. The boy was provided money from a *waqf* to buy a new one. He bought the new one and went home safely.[40] This story tells that the institution of *waqf* helped in fulfilling the various types of human needs.

As discussed earlier, people from the ruling elite and the rich contributed significantly through this space to the public good. For instance, Qāḍī al-Fāḍil ʻAbd al-Raḥīm (d. 1200 CE), a prominent court secretary in Cairo and a pious and charitable person established many charitable trusts to provide alms to ransom captives.[41] This example suggests that people belonging to the ruling elite helped those who were at the bottom of the social ladder to meet essential human needs. While endowing these trusts, they were engaged in the public sphere as private individuals, not as rulers. Their public good activities were not confined to the provision of food and shelter to the poor, but they also endowed the institutions that were good for society in the long run such as libraries. *Dār al-ʻIlm* (house of learning) founded on the west side of Baghdad was endowed by the Buyid vizier Abū Naṣr Sābūr b. Ardashīr (d. 993 CE).[42] Thus, through the institution of the *waqf*, the elite contributed to various types of material, religious, and educational public services.

Hodgson maintains that many of the institutions, such as *madrasah*, aimed to maintain social services and regulate life patterns and were run by the *waqf*. Rulers endowed institutions, such as *madrasah*, mosque, *khānqāh*, and caravanserai among others, for their religious, spiritual, and political benefits.[43] A range of motivational elements were involved

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[40] Ibid.

[41] ʻAlī b. al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī ʼl-Taʼrīkh* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1979), 12:159.

[42] Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, 14:366.

[43] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:35; Daniella Talmon-Heller discusses Ayyubid rulers (r. 1171-1250 CE) and their endowed institutions such as schools for children (*makātib*), Sufi lodges, shrines, mosques, public assemblies of exhortation (*majālis al-waʻẓ*) and gatherings of *ḥadīth* recitation. See Daniella Talmon-Heller, "Religion in the Public Sphere: Rulers, Scholars, and Commoners in Syria under Zangid and Ayyubid Rule (1150-1260)," in *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*, ed. Miriam Hoexter, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Nehemia Levtzion (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 54. The Fatimid ruler al-Ḥākim (r. 996-1021 CE) endowed many urban and rural properties in 1014 CE to support the Qur'ān reciters and *mu'adhdhins* (prayer-callers) at the congregational mosque of Fustat and Cairo, run a hospital, fill cisterns, and provide shrouds for the dead. See Yaacov Lev, "The Ethics and Practice of Islamic Medieval Charity," *History Compass* 5, no. 2 (2007): 611. In Mamluk Cairo (1250-1517 CE), *waqf*s

in endowing properties via *waqf*; sometimes the founder of a *waqf* endowed his or her property to protect it from confiscation by the government. Sometimes the endower engaged in charity towards the poor to win the spiritual blessing. Sometimes the wealthy elite gifted property to demonstrate piety and win public support.[44] Medieval sources shed light on such acts of the ruling elite. Muẓaffar al-Dīn Kūkbūrī (d. 1233 CE), the ruler of Arbela (present-day Erbil), was famous for his charity. He regularly distributed a large sum of money in different parts of the city to the needy. He established four asylums for the blind and persons suffering from chronic diseases.[45] Abū 'l-Ḥārith b. Mas'ūd b. Mawdūd b. Zangī, called al-Malik al-'Ādil (the ruler in Mosul of the Zangid line of Atabegs) (r. 1193-1211 CE) endowed a beautiful college for the Shāfi'īs in Mosul.[46] These examples show the involvement of the ruling elite in patronizing works which were beneficial for the public at large, or sections thereof. Emphasizing the crucial role of *waqf* in medieval public wellbeing, Salvatore argues that while *sharī'ah*-based "jurisprudence provided the normative ideal to Muslim society, and Sufi orders supplied it with moral leadership, the *waqf* represented the structural and even fiscal infrastructure that secured the public weal, especially in the two fields that we today define as 'educational' and 'charitable.'"[47]

The rulers played a significant role in the *waqf*-financed public sphere through various charitable activities. In their public and private capacity, members of the ruling elite were involved in charitable works that were deeply beneficial for people from various strata of society. All

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provided various public services such as education, medical care, food, water, clothing, housing, and burial of the dead. See Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt 1250-1517* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 69-100. Said Amir Arjomand proposes that charitable institutions with multiple purposes flowered in the medieval Islamic world after the tenth century CE. The educational-charitable complexes were established through the *waqf* after the middle of the thirteenth century which typically included a mosque, a *madrasah* with a library, a teaching hospital, a Sufi lodge, and a hostel for travellers. See Arjomand, "The Law, Agency, and Policy in Medieval Islamic Society," 272.

[44] Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam*, 5, 69; Yaacov Lev, *Charity, Endowments, and Charitable Institutions in Medieval Islam* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 1-3.

[45] Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yān wa Anbā' Abnā' al-Zamān* (Ibn Khallikan's Biographical Dictionary), trans. by Mac Guckin De Slane (Beirut: Librairie Du Liban, 1970), 2:535-42.

[46] Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yān*, 1:174.

[47] Salvatore, *Public Sphere*, 153.

in all, a plethora of evidence makes it abundantly clear that medieval rulers were not aloof from activities that would augment the public good; rather, they were profoundly involved in public works that were demonstrably useful to urban communities at large.

Hodgson argues that among the institutions that developed through *waqf*, *madrasah* played a vital role in civic life. Though *madrasah* was first established as a means of disseminating the doctrines of a particular *madhhab* (legal school of thought). However, over time, the *madrasah* graduates participated in the various social, political, intellectual, and religious patterns of life equipped with religious knowledge. Hodgson records that they "had sufficient prestige to have a large part in setting the intellectual tone for beyond the realm of the details of fiqh."[48] After the tenth century CE, the *madrasah* with teachers, students, and libraries became a significant religious public space in medieval Islamic societies.

The *madrasah* contributed significantly to the public good not only in terms of the provision of religious education but also in terms of some other significant services including the provision of boarding to poor students, wayfarers, and pious men.[49] These *madrasah*s, for example in Syria and Egypt, were often accessible to orphans and children from poor families; they were provided free education, food, clothes, and sometimes a small stipend as well.[50] While the *madrasah* was utilized by rulers to exploit the religious class, it helped people in various ways by providing in-transit shelter to merchants, pilgrims, and other travellers. It provided spaces for employment and business opportunities. It also became the site of legal courts.[51] The famous Muslim traveller Ibn

[48] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:47.

[49] J. Pedersen et al., "Madrasa," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. C. E. Bosworth et al., 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 5:1123-54.

[50] Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Words in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 99-100.

[51] Gary Leiser, "Notes on the Madrasa in Medieval Islamic Society," *The Muslim World* 76 (1986): 23. Leiser has done an excellent study of medieval *madrasah* and its various religious and public roles. For instance, Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd al-Jabbār, who was born in Alexandria in 1150, was a cloth merchant and was involved in the trade between India and Egypt, attended classes in the *Ḥāfiẓiyyah Madrasah* in Alexandria. Ibid., 20. *Ḥāfiẓiyyah Madrasah* was established on the orders of the Fatimid Caliph al-Ḥāfiẓ li Dīn Allāh (r. 1132-1149 CE) where travellers could also reside besides students. See ibid. Significantly, besides the ruling elite, there were common people who established *madrasah*s for various purposes. For example, around 1242-1243 CE the people of Bilād al-Takrūr, the region along the Senegal River in West Africa, gave the judge ʿAlam al-Dīn b. Rashīq money to build a college in Fustat when they were on their way to Mecca for pilgrimage. This *madrasah* provided lodging to merchants and pilgrims besides students. See ibid., 21. Some *madrasah*s also played the role of a kind of

Baṭṭūṭah frequently resided in *madrasah*s on his journeys. For example, when he was in Damietta in Egypt on his way to the holy cities in 1326-1327 CE, he resided in a *madrasah*.[52]

It is important to note that the *madrasah* system provided a social space where people could manage social mobility after attaining knowledge.[53] Through the *madrasah* system, "at least some of the commoners were able to climb the social ladder and become sufficiently wealthy and educated themselves."[54] We can find ample examples in history showing that the poor even slaves who, through participation in scholarly practices, achieved upward social mobility and likely eventual manumission. For example, Sunqur b. ʻAbd Allāh al-Turkī (d. 1292 CE) was a slave who, after obtaining education and scholarly knowledge in Damascus, became a scholar, and, following his manumission travelled to Baghdad and Egypt.[55] In a sense, it can be argued that somebody like al-Turkī, who came from a humble background, went to a *madrasah*, and became a scholar, was probably more likely to think about the uneducated and poor people compared to someone who belonged to the elite. In short, the *madrasah* was a significant instrument available to the public for their betterment in respect of attaining education, religious knowledge, and wealth and thus upward social mobility.

According to Hodgson, the openness of social structure and a high degree of social mobility were very important aspects of medieval Islamic society. For him, it meant "not merely the social mobility in economic life presupposed by economic expansion, but a specifically cultural openness—based on the possibility that a man of spirit or of special gifts could rise in the social scale without the advantages of family or of communal connections. . . ."[56] In this respect, religious education played a significant role: "A religious education could allow

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legal court as many professors were *muftī*s who issued *fatwā*s and managed marriage contracts. The thirteenth-century historian Abū Shāmmah mentions a person who was in charge of marriage contracts in the *Taqwiyah Madrasah* in Damascus. Ibid.

[52] Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭah*, 52.

[53] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 92; Caterina Bori, "Religious Knowledge between Scholarly Conservatism and Commoners' Agency," in *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam*, ed. Armando Salvatore (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 296; Armando Salvatore, *The Sociology of Islam: Knowledge, Power and Civility* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 18, 114, 137.

[54] Bori, "Religious Knowledge between Scholarly Conservatism and Commoners' Agency," 296.

[55] Hirschler, *Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands*, 43.

[56] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 1:303. Also see ibid., 2:64-65, 116-17.

the gifted man to rise not only to such ranks as qâḍî or judge and muftî but even to mingle in administration or have a career of less specialized learning."[57] In the case of the Mamluk Cairo, the *madrasah* education helped raise social boundaries and became a tool for the less privileged for their upward social mobility and for becoming more or less wealthy and educated.[58]

The pieces of evidence reviewed here seem to suggest a pertinent role of the *waqf* in pursuing the public good in medieval Islamic societies. The *waqf* was a major institution via which whole social strata contributed to the public good. The rules of the institution of the *waqf* were an "integral part of the *shari`a*—the sacred law."[59] The civil law of *waqf* "served as an instrument of agency available both to the individuals in the civic community and the rulers and officials of the patrimonial state."[60] Thus, persons belonging to both official and private spheres could use the law of *waqf* for the public good and constitute the public sphere.

Sufism in the Public Sphere

Hodgson notes that Sufism initially was individualistic piety that emerged as an ascetic Sufi tradition in Islam. As Islam became a majority religion under the Abbasids, Sufism moved from individualistic piety into a "social organization," and a complex Sufi religious tradition within public outreach.[61] Sufis through their Sufi lodges and their relationships with the ruling authorities played an important role as actors in the public sphere.

After the tenth century CE, Sufism changed routine human life to a great extent by transforming *khānqāh*s into public spaces and incorporating social strata into the Sufi way of life. Sufis of medieval Palestine played significant roles in the social and cultural life of the cities in medieval Palestine. They transformed *khānqāh*s and the tombs of *Shaykh*s into public spaces, centres of devotional life, open to all

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[57] Ibid., 2:118.

[58] Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 217; Thomas Herzog, "Social Milieus and Worldviews in Mamluk *Adab*-Encyclopedias: The Example of Poverty and Wealth," *Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg, History and Society during the Mamluk Era (1250-1517)*, ASK Working Paper (2013): 2, 4-5, https://boris.unibe.ch/48543/.

[59] Hoexter, "Waqf and the Public Sphere, 120.

[60] Arjomand, "Law, Agency, and Policy in Medieval Islamic Society," 289.

[61] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:203-04, 209.

segments of Muslim society for receiving Sufi guidance and blessings.[62] In Sufi lodges, not only spiritual needs of the people were met but their other economic, social, and political needs were also fulfilled. The food provided at some of the *khānqāh*s was a great help to the poor. At some *khānqāh*s, the Qur'ān recitation was held and those who recited the Qur'ān prayed for the founder. For instance, Ibn Jubayr tells us that he noticed, at the *Sumaysāṭī Khānqāh* in Damascus, that the loaves of bread were distributed among those who participated in the Qur'ān reading and prayers.[63] The following example demonstrates the role of the *khānqāh* in the public domain: During the late twelfth century CE in Baghdad, the *khānqāh* of one of the colleagues of the Ḥanbalī Shaykh Ibn al-Mannī (d. 1187 CE), Abu 'l-Thanā Maḥmūd b. 'Uthmān al-Ni'āl (d. 1212 CE), was a popular destination for scholars and the needy. Al-Ni'āl was a preacher and well-reputed ascetic in Baghdad who was noted for his friendly and kind behaviour towards people. His *khānqāh* was filled with both mendicants and jurists, many of whom came to Baghdad to see Ibn al-Mannī.[64] Ibn al-Mannī was so well reputed that students from all over the Middle Eastern Islamic world visited his *khānqāh* for learning and blessings.[65] He deliberately chose a life of ascetic piety.[66] Though he lived a life of asceticism, he was so beneficial to the people that visitors came from far-off lands for knowledge and blessings.

According to Hodgson, the great Sufis' *khānqāh*s and shrines were turned into pilgrimage sites and provided shelter and asylum to those "who must flee their homes on account of a crime committed, or suspected, or of a great man offended. Society could be cruel, but it provided points of escape from its worst cruelties for those fortunate enough to find them. And under the protection of religion, a man could retain his dignity as a Muslim even when, in desperation, he must take refuge with God's saints at their tombs."[67] From the selected period of study, we have evidence that Sufis' lodges welcomed those who were in dire need of protection and shelter. Ibn al-Athīr relates that the *Shaykh*

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[62] Daphna Ephrat, *Spiritual Wayfarers, Leaders in Piety: Sufis and the Dissemination of Islam in Medieval Palestine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 1-3.

[63] Ibn Jubayr, *Rihlah*, ed. W. Wright and M. J. De Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1907), 289-90.

[64] 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Aḥmad b. Rajab, *Kitāb al-Dhayl 'alā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1981), 2:63-64.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:151.

al- Shuyūkh[68] Abū Saʻd (d. 1084 CE) "was a man of lofty aspiration, full of supportive zeal for anyone who sought protection with him."[69] According to Abū Naṣr al-Subkī, the *khānqāh* of Abū ʼl-Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d. 1168 CE) was a highly effective place of protection for ordinary people; many achieved worldly success and upward mobility while residing in that *khānqāh*.[70] Though these Sufi lodges were visited by the people for "spiritual guidance and consolidation" from Sufi saints,[71] these spaces also provided other non-spiritual needs to the people.

The tombs of some Sufis became a place for social integration and a place to acquire food for the needy and the poor and had countless visitors from all walks of life. When Aḥmad al-ʻArabī (d. 1118 CE), who was a pious man and saintly figure, died, his tomb in Baghdad became a site of pilgrimage for many.[72] When *Shaykh al-Shuyūkh* Abū ʼl-Barakāt Ismāʻīl b. Aḥmad (d. 1146 CE) died, his death anniversary was celebrated on the 10th of Jumādā al-Ukhrā. The directors, *shaykh*s, and students of the *khānqāh* and the *ʻulamāʼ* attended the death anniversary in large numbers; meals and sweets were presented to the attendees on this occasion.[73] People used to visit these places for the food and money distributed by pious and wealthy individuals as acts of charity. When the mother of caliph al-Nāṣir (r. 1180-1225 CE), Zumurrud Khātūn, died in 1202-03 CE, the caliph gave alms and distributed a large amount of money to the *khānqāh*s, *zāwiyah*s, and *madrasah*s of the city.[74] The Sufi tomb emerged as a sacred place which people visited for sanctity and simultaneously developed into a public space central to the life of the

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[68] It seems that it was an honorific title given to Baghdadi Sufis of particular locality. According to Daphna Ephrat, the first-ever Sufis given the title of *shaykh al-Ṣūfiyyah* or *shaykh al-shuyūkh* of a specific locality were the Ḥanbalī Sufi ʻAlī b. Ibrāhīm al-Ḥuṣrī (d. 371/981) and his disciple Abū ʼl-Ḥasan al-Zawzanī (d. 451/1059). However, when Ashʻarī Sufi Abū Saʻd Aḥmad b. Muḥammad (d. 477/1084) became the *shaykh al-shuyūkh*, the title was officially recognized, and the title holder became the director of the *awqāf*, overseeing the foundation of Sufi lodges in Baghdad. Ephrat, *Learned Society in a Period of Transition*, 167-68.

[69] Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī ʼl-Taʼrīkh*, 10:159. For translation, see *The Annals of the Saljuk Turks: Selections from al-Kāmil fī ʼl-Taʼrīkh of ʻIzz al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr*, trans. D. S. Richards (London: Routledge, 2002), 230.

[70] Tāj al-Dīn Abū ʼl-Naṣr ʻAbd al-Wahhāb al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfiʻīyyah al-Kubrā* (Cairo: Dār Iḥyā al-Kutub al-ʻArabiyyah, 1992), 173-75.

[71] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:221.

[72] Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī ʼl-Ttaʼrīkh*, 10:532.

[73] Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, 18:50.

[74] Eric S. Ohlander, *Sufism in an Age of Transition: ʻUmar al-Suhrawardī and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 92.

community, as Daphna Ephrat and Hatim Mahamid stress in the context of the Damascene Sufis of the eleventh and thirteenth centuries CE.[75] Thus, Sufi lodges and tombs emerged as sites for pilgrimage, social integration, and the charitable distribution of food.

Significantly, during the Earlier Middle Islamic Period, *khānqāh* libraries emerged in the Middle Eastern Islamic World. These libraries were open to the *ʻulamā'*, Sufis, and commoners. For instance, the *Sumaysāṭī Khānqāh* in Damascus had many books endowed by a Sufi Abū ʻAbd Allāh Muḥammad al-Masʻūdī al-Banjadīhī (d. 1188 CE).[76] Al-Banjadīhī also delivered lessons free of cost there. There are examples from other areas of the Islamic world where *khānqāh*s were founded and equipped with libraries. Abū 'l-Maʻālī ʻAbd Allāh b. Aḥmad al-Marwazī (d. 1145 CE) was a charitable person and a man of devotion. He built a *khānqāh* in the city of Marv (in present-day Turkmenistan) and endowed many books to the *khānqāh* as a permanent *waqf*.[77] The autonomous role of Sufis such as that of al-Banjadīhī in the *khānqāh* shows that Sufis used their agency in transforming the Sufi lodges into public spaces for religious and ethical training of the people, thereby constituting a significant part of the common good in medieval Islamic societies. At the same time, caliph al-Nāṣir founded the *Khānqāh Marzubāniyyah/Khānqāh Nāṣirī*, one of the most beautiful *khānqāh*s in Baghdad in respect of its architecture as Ibn al-Athīr tells us. It was endowed with many valuable books.[78] At the time of the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258 CE, there were 36 public libraries in Baghdad. These were attached to mosques, *madrasah*s, Sufi

[75] Daphna Ephrat and Hatim Mahamid, "The Creation of Sufi Spheres in Medieval Damascus (mid-6th/12th to mid-8th/14th centuries)," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* 25 (2015): 196.

[76] Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-Aʻyān*, 3:99-100. It was called *al-Khānqāh al-Sumaysāṭiyyah*, which was formerly the palace of the Umayyad Caliph ʻUmar b. ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz b. Marwān (r. 717-720) and was bought by a Sufi, *ḥadīth* scholar, and astronomer ʻAlī al-Sumaysāṭī (d. 453/1061), who left it as an endowment for his disciples. It subsequently emerged as the most important Sufi lodge in Syria during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods when its head was known as *shaykh al-shuyūkh*. See Ephrat and Mahamid, "The Creation of Sufi Spheres in Medieval Damascus," 197.

[77] Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī 'l-Ta'rīkh*, 11:103.

[78] Ibid., 12:104.

lodges, and mausoleums.[79] These libraries "made scholarship more accessible to the masses."[80]

Sufis, through their cooperative and oppositional relationships with the ruling elite, played a significant role in the constitution of the public sphere. Some Sufis provided ethical, moral, and spiritual guidance to the rulers while having good relations with them. For instance, Abū Ḥafṣ ʻUmar al-Suhrawardī (d. 1234 CE) acted as a spiritual advisor to the Caliph al-Nāṣir and played an influential role though not always successful.[81] Through their collaborative relationship with the ruling elite, some Sufis of later Abbasid Baghdad were involved in social activities that were outside of their prescribed spiritual roles. For example, the Sufi ʻUmar al-Qazwīnī (d. 1050 CE) had good relations with the caliphs and helped those who were treated unjustly by them. For instance, Caliph al-Qā'im visited al-Qazwīnī every Thursday night and ordinary people brought al-Qazwīnī their petitions so that the caliph might sign them and give them some redress.[82] It can be surmised that most of the followers and visitors of al-Qazwīnī belonged to the lower and middle classes as they were generally more exposed to injustices than members of the upper classes who had greater financial and social clout.

Some Sufis criticized ruling authorities for their injustices towards the common people. They reprimanded and publicly reminded rulers of their duties.[83] For example, the mystic al-Kurdī al-Kawrānī (d. 1246 CE), a Sufi master of Damascus censured the ruling authorities for their "evil" ways when he came to Aleppo. According to a report, "he would have nothing to do with the great ones of the world, taking favours from no prince, speaking to them rudely, fulminating against them in sermons, and he forbade them to commit evil, and reproached them for doing so."[84] In criticizing ruling authorities for their harmful conduct

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[79] Such as the Umm al-Khalīfah Mausoleum mentioned above. In Baghdad, the Umm al-Khalīfah Mausoleum may have had such a space for reading, as we have an example of an officer ʻIzz al-Dīn endowing 500 volumes to the Umm al-Khalīfah Mausoleum. See Hirschler, *Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands*, 136.

[80] Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: How Classical Ideas Were Lost and Found: A History in Seven Cities* (London: Picador, 2019), 79.

[81] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:360.

[82] Khidr Jasmin al-Duri, "Society and Economy of Iraq under the Seljuqs (1055-1160 A.D.) with Special Reference to Baghdad" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1970), 291-92; Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam*, 15:326-27.

[83] Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:207.

[84] Morray David, *An Ayyubid Notable and His World: Ibn al-Adam and Aleppo as Portrayed in His Biographical Dictionary of People Associated with the City* (London: E. J. Brill, 1994), 61.

concerning the best interest of the public, Sufis contributed to the public sphere as a space of ethical critique.

The evidence presented in the above section suggests that Sufis instituted a space, in the form of *khānqāh*, that permitted and promoted social bonding, learning, and helping the poor. Sufis played a key role in the construction of spaces to influence state policies for pursuing the public good. They mediated between the charity-minded benefactors including members of the ruling elite and common people regarding various social activities aimed at enhancing the public good.

Conclusion

This study, arguing in line with Hodgson by engaging with more examples and shreds of evidence, confirms that the *sharīʿah* law, *waqf*, and Sufism contributed significantly to the public good and thus were crucial elements of the medieval Islamic public sphere. The educated and cultivated class contributed to the public sphere through *waqf*, *madrasah*, and *khānqāh*. These spaces were beneficial to the public at large in various ways: in the form of the provision of ethical and moral guidance, dissemination of religious and spiritual knowledge, provision of food and shelter to the poor, mitigation of economic, political, and social grievances, and provision of religious and social spaces for communal solidarity.

Muslim scholars, Sufis, and rulers were the major actors in the medieval Islamic public sphere. The *ʿulamāʾ* used their religious and social agency to contribute to the public sphere. As interpreters of the *sharīʿah* law, they guided the community of believers. Besides their role of interpreting the *sharīʿah* law and disseminating religious knowledge, the *ʿulamāʾ* provided leadership to the community in times of crisis; they, due to their religious authority, worked as spokespersons for the community towards the rulers. They also became channels through which various types of needs of the lower sections of society were met through charity. The Sufis, having collaborative and oppositional relations with the ruling elite, also contributed to the public sphere. They played the role of mediators between the rulers and society. They also criticized ruling authorities for not alleviating the economic, social, and political grievances of the common people. Significantly, the Sufi lodges have not been closely examined in respect of their more important roles other than their spiritual guidance of the community. During the said period, these lodges not only became the centres where religious and spiritual guidance was provided but also accommodated needy and poor students and those who needed shelter and protection.

The charitable actions of numerous rulers were substantial contributions to the public good, carried out through the mechanisms of *waqf*. The rulers' involvement in the charitable space of *waqf* as community members could have a significant impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the medieval public sphere because the rulers had the power and money to invest. Moreover, *waqf*, *khānqāh*, and *madrasah* became spaces open to all social strata and provided opportunities for continuous interaction between the rulers and the non-elite sections of society. Moreover, these spaces were significant for the public good because through them the rulers, *'ulamā'*, and Sufis worked for the public good, not for their private interests. Thus, the medieval Islamic public sphere was much more inclusive and it provided various types of venues where both elite and non-elite worked for the good of the non-elite.

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