

The History of the Epithet *al-Ghawth al-A‘zam* in South Asian Islamic Discourse

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Abstract

In South Asia, many of the ‘ulamā’ refer to the medieval Ḥanbalī Sufi ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī by the popular epithet al-ghawth al-a‘zam, meaning “the supreme helper.” This article surveys the various ways in which subcontinental ‘ulamā’ have interpreted al-ghawth al-a‘zam in their religious discourse. When, where, and how did this term originate? How did it come to be accepted in Sunni circles in the Indian subcontinent? Do the Deobandi and the Bareilvi traditions interpret the epithet in the same manner? These are some of the questions that shall be addressed in the following article.

Keywords

Sufism, Sunni, Ghawth, South Asia, Qādiriyyah, Baghdad.

Introduction

One of the most revered *awliyā*¹ in the Indian subcontinent is the Baghdad-based Ḥanbalī scholar ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 561/1077 or 1078).² This famous figure—who is honoured by virtually all Sunni

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¹ Sing., *walī*. The term is often rendered as “saints.” However, translating it as such comes with a host of problems; hence, it shall be left untranslated in the present article. See John Renard, *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment and Servanthood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), xviii.

² For information on al-Jīlānī in historical and biographical compendiums penned by ‘ulamā’, see Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī, *Mir’āt al-Zamān* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907), 164-66; ‘Abd Allāh al-Yāfi‘ī, *Mir’āt al-Janān* (Hyderabad, Deccan: Oriental Publication, 1919), 1:347-66; Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā’* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risālah, 1985), 20:439-41; Ismā‘īl b. ‘Umar b. Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa ‘l-Nihāyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1988), 1:270; Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī, *al-Muntazam fī Ta’rīkh al-Mulūk wa ‘l-Umam* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1992), 17:173; Khalīl al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi bi ‘l-Wafayāt* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2000), 19:26-28; Ibn Rajab, *al-Dhayl ‘alā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-‘Ubaykān, 2004) 2:187-212. For traditional Qādirī hagiographies, see ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kīlānī, *al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī: Al-Imām al-Zāhid al-Qudwah* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1994); ‘Alī b. Yūsuf al-Shaṭṭanawfī, *Bahjat*

Muslims globally—is also the eponym of the Qādirī Sufi order, which remains the most widespread *ṭarīqah* in the Muslim world.³ Within contemporary South Asia, all self-identifying Sunnis—including the scholars of the Deobandi, Barelvi, and Ahl-i Ḥadīth movements⁴—hold the shaykh in high esteem. Many of the ‘ulamā’ of South Asia have historically referred to ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī by popular honorary epithets of either Arabic or Persian origin, including *pīrān-i pīr* (“the pīr of pīrs”),⁵ *shaykh al-mashā’ikh* (“the shaykh of shaykhs”), *baṭṭānī pīr ṣāhib* (lit., “great pīr sir”), *sultān al-awliyā’* (“the king of the awliyā’”), *pīr-i dastgīr* (the pīr “who keeps one’s hand for support”),⁶ *maḥbūb-i Subḥānī* (“the beloved of God”), *quṭb al-awliyā’* (“the pole of the awliyā’”), *al-ghawth* (Urdu *ghauth*, “helper”), *ghawth al-thaqalayn* (Urdu *ghawth-i thaqalain*, “helper of the two weighty things,” i.e., *jinn* and men), *ghawth pāk* (“the pure helper”), and—arguably his most popular title—*al-ghawth al-a’zam* (Urdu *ghawth-i a’zam*, “the

al-Asrār (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1999); Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Tādifi, *Qalā'id al-Jawāhir* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2005). Hamza Malik notes, “There are many other hagiographical works on Jīlānī; Mehmed Ali Aini in his work mentions more than forty, some of which are unfortunately unavailable and perhaps no longer extant. An exact number of how many works must altogether have been written is obviously impossible to judge, but it would surely not be an overestimate to think that they must number in the hundreds.” Malik, *The Grey Falcon: The Life and Teaching of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 16. Also see Mehmet Ali Ayni, *Un Grand Saint de l’Islam: Abd-Al-Qadir Guilani* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1938). While Malik’s work is undoubtedly the best academic study of al-Jīlānī’s life and thought (and most of the above references are taken from his work), for different perspectives, see Walther Braune, *Die Futuh al-Ghaib Des Abd al-Qadir* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1933), 1-47; Braune, “Abd al-Qādir al-Djīlānī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., accessed April 11, 2022, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_0095; Jacqueline Chabbi, “Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī personnage historique: Quelques éléments de biographie,” *Studia Islamica* 38 (1973): 75-106.

³ See Peter Riddel, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 77; Abul-Fazl Ezzati, *The Spread of Islam: The Contributing Factors* (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, 2002), 172; Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, *Historical Dictionary of Somalia* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 163; Moshe Gammer, *The Lone Wolf and the Bear: Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule* (London: C. Hurst, 2006), 73; Malik, *Grey Falcon*, 21.

⁴ For introductions to (1) the Deobandi movement, see Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); (2) the Barelvi movement, see Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelvi and His Movement* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); (3) the Ahl-i Ḥadīth movement, see Claudia Preckel, “Ahl-i Ḥadīth,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., accessed April 11, 2022, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_0107. For more on the history of the conflicts between the Deobandi and Barelvi schools, see SherAli Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

⁵ *Pīr* is a Persian word denoting “elder” and is often used in the Indian subcontinent to refer to a Sufi shaykh.

⁶ See Malik, *Grey Falcon*, 22.

supreme helper”). It is the history of the last term that concerns the current article, wherein I aim to investigate the diverse ways in which subcontinental scholars have employed and interpreted this epithet in their religious discourse. In doing so, I also hope to show the erroneous nature of simplistic assumptions which presume that the usage of *al-ghawth al-a'zam* is largely restricted to the scholars of the Barelvi tradition, when in fact one finds it used in many Deobandi works as well. This mistaken supposition arises out of drawing a facile binary regarding these two intellectual movements: a binary that broadly distinguishes between the “mystical and populist” Barelvis, on the one hand, and the “legalistic and puritan” Deobandis, on the other. In reality, of course, such a distinction is historically and conceptually inaccurate,⁷ for both the Barelvi and the Deobandi schools comprise Ḥanafī scholars who affiliate with the Sufi orders. While it is true that the former is more given to particular expressions of Sufi piety largely absent in Deobandi circles (including, for example, the practice of calling on *awliyā'* for help⁸; or celebrating the *'urs*, the commemoration days for various *awliyā'*),⁹ both groups often publish the same classical and late medieval works of mysticism, venerate the same Sufi masters of the past, defend even controversial spiritual figures such as al-Ḥusayn b. Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922)¹⁰ and Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240),¹¹ and share many identical beliefs pertaining to the importance of following a Sufi shaykh.¹² As was noted already, one of the points of *agreement* between Deobandis and Barelvis is their shared love for 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī and the Qādirī path.

The Doctrine of the *Ghawth*

The Arabic term *ghawth* (“helper,” “succour,” “deliverance”) is used in some Sufi literature to refer to a specific type of *walī* (lit., “friend” [of God],

⁷ See Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity*, 3-4.

⁸ This practice is referred to variously as *istighāthah*, *istimdād*, and *isti'ānah*.

⁹ For more on the complexities regarding the Deobandi rejection of such practices, see Brannon D. Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 56-89.

¹⁰ For a Deobandi defence of al-Ḥallāj, see Zafar Aḥmad 'Uthmānī, *Sīrat-i Manṣūr Ḥallāj* (Karachi: Maktabah-i Dār al-'Ulūm, n.d.); for a Barelvi defence, see “Sayedna Shaykh Mansoor Al Hallaj,” *AlaHazrat.net*, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://alahazrat.net/personalities/sayedna-shaykh-mansoor-al-hallaj/>.

¹¹ As Ingram puts the matter, “It may surprise some readers, therefore, that Deobandis have penned lengthy commentaries on the likes of Jalal al-Din Rumi . . . and Ibn 'Arabi.” Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 12.

¹² See Zakariyyā Kāndhlavī, *The Inseparability of Sharī'a and Ṭarīqa: Islamic Law and Purification of the Heart*, trans. Asim Ahmad (New York: Madania Publications, 2006); Aḥmad Rizā Khān, *Malfūzāt-i Ā'lā Ḥazrat* (Karachi: Maktabat al-Madīnah, 2014), 64-65.

but frequently rendered rather problematically as “saint”) within the spiritual hierarchy of the *awliyā’*.¹³ The texts that mention the *ghawth* also occasionally refer to *ghawthiyyah* (“helper-hood”), a particular mystical rank within *wilāyah* (lit., “friendhood [with God]”) broadly speaking. Oftentimes (but not always), *ghawth* is seen as another name—or, rather, aspect—of the *qutb* (pl. *aqtāb*), the “axis” or “pole” viewed by other Sufis as their superior.¹⁴ Thus, Sufi texts that mention the *ghawth* usually describe him as “the highest ranking [*walī*] . . . [of] his day and age.”¹⁵ In his study of the Shādhilī Sufi order, Elmer Douglas explains, “In Sufi terminology, the *qutb* . . . refers to the highest in the hierarchy of saints . . . a *ghawth* is a helper. It is generally considered that there is no fundamental difference between the *qutb* and the *ghawth*, except that he is called a *ghawth* only when someone seeks refuge in him.”¹⁶ Similarly, Scott Reese notes that many Sufis believe the *ghawth* to be “the most spiritually enlightened individual” among the *awliyā’* living on the earth at any given point in time.¹⁷ In his entry on the topic in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Duncan Macdonald likewise states that the phrase *ghawth* is often taken to be an “epithet of the *Ḳuṭb* or head of the *Ṣūfī* hierarchy of saints” but is used “of him only when he is thought of as one whose help is sought.”¹⁸ The *ghawth*, therefore, is seen as a figure to whom God has given the duty of “helping” the Muslims whenever they may face trouble. In devotional practice, this belief often manifests itself in the form of various types of *istimdād* or *istighāthah* prevalent among some Sufis, wherein they may call on the *ghawth* to aid them in different situations using phrases such as “O *ghawth*, help” (*yā ghawth madad*). The precise nuances of the spiritual beliefs underlying such acts occasionally vary between different Sufi groups. For instance, they may differ on whether the *ghawth* has been

¹³ Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-‘Ārūs min Jawāhir al-Qāmūs* (Kuwait: Wizārat al-Irshād wa ‘l-Anbā’ fī ‘l-Kuwayt, 1965-2001), 5:315-16; Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr al-Rāzī, *Mukhtār al-Ṣiḥāḥ* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-‘Aṣriyyah, 1999), 231; Aḥmad Mukhtār ‘Umar, *Mu‘jam al-Lughah al-‘Arabiyyah al-Mu‘āṣirah* (n.p.: n.p., n.d.), 2:1649.

¹⁴ Some Sufi ‘*ulamā’*, however, distinguish between the *ghawth* and the *qutb*. See Faiz Aḥmad Uvaisī, *Sabīl al-Rashād fī Taḥqīq al-Awtād* (Karachi: Uvaisī Publishers, 1999), 7.

¹⁵ Aḥmad b. al-Mubārak al-Lamaṭī, *Pure Gold from the Words of Sayyidī ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dabbāgh: Al-Dhabab al-Ibrīz min Kalām Sayyidī ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dabbāgh*, trans. John O’Kane and Bernd Radtke (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 3.

¹⁶ Elmer H. Douglas, *The Mystical Teachings of al-Shadhili, including His Life, Prayers, Letters, and Followers: A Translation from the Arabic of Ibn al-Sabbagh’s Durrat al-Asrar wa Tuhfat al-Abrar* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 246nn1-2.

¹⁷ Scott Reese, *Renewers of the Age: Holy Men and Social Discourse in Colonial Benaadir* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 99.

¹⁸ Duncan B. Macdonald, “*Ghawth*,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., accessed April 11, 2022, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_8563.

given the power to hear from afar or whether he is informed of the call via an intermediary in his grave; or, for example, whether calling on him is simply a means of seeking his intercession or whether God has given his soul the ability to come and help the caller wherever he may be. Be that as it may, references to the *ghawth* can certainly be found in the writings of many prominent Sufi-oriented scholars of the pre-modern period, even if these *'ulamā'* may not always agree among themselves on the particulars tied to this spiritual office.

One of the earliest references to the *ghawth* appears in a saying attributed to the Baghdad-based ascetic Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Kattānī (d. 322/933), a direct student of the prominent early Sufi teachers Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899), Abū 'l-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (d. 295/907), and al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910). al-Kattānī is reported to have described the order of the spiritual hierarchy as follows:

There are three hundred *nuqabā'* ("chiefs" or "captains"), seventy *nujabā'* ("illustrious" or "noble" ones), forty *abdāl* ("substitutes"), seven *akhyār* ("virtuous" or "excellent" ones), four *'umud* ("supports"), and one *ghawth*.¹⁹

According to this schema, the *ghawth* is seen as occupying the preeminent position among those friends of God alive on earth. A little over a century later, we find the *ghawth* being mentioned in the Persian *Kashf al-Mahjūb* of the Afghan Sufi theorist Sayyid 'Alī b. 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī (d. 464/1072), who, while noting the various levels of *wilāyah*, states,

God . . . has made the *awliyā'* the governors of the world . . . among those who have power to loosen and to bind and are the officers of the Court [of God] there are three hundred called *akhyār*, and forty called *abdāl*, and seven called *abrār*, and four called *awṭād*, and three called *nuqabā'*, and one called *quṭb* or *ghawth*. All these know one another and cannot do anything without mutual agreement.²⁰

The first thing one notices about al-Hujwīrī's formulation of the spiritual hierarchy is that it differs in precise details from the one allegedly articulated by al-Kattānī.²¹ While al-Kattānī holds there to be three hundred *nuqabā'*, al-Hujwīrī says there are only three. Moreover, the latter appears to place the *akhyār* where the former had placed the *nuqabā'*

¹⁹ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Ta'riḫ Baghdad* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1417 AH), 3:289; Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'riḫ Madīnat Dimashq* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 1:300.

²⁰ 'Alī b. 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, trans. Faḏl al-Dīn Gōhar (Karachi: Ḍiyā' al-Qur'ān, 2010), 290.

²¹ I say "allegedly" as some later authors cast doubt on whether al-Kattānī's saying could reliably be traced back to its purported author. For example, see the critique of the quote by Muḥammad 'Uzayr Shams in Ibn Taymiyyah, *Jāmi' al-Masā'il*, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2019), 2:11n1.

and the *abrār* where al-Kattānī had placed the *akhyār*. On the other hand, one can convincingly argue that al-Kattānī's mention of the *'umud* is equivalent to al-Hujwīrī's mention of the *awṭād*. Be all that as it may, what is certainly apparent is that both authors agree on the preeminence of the *ghawth* in the great chain of God's friends living upon the earth. However, where al-Hujwīrī adds an important additional detail is in his mention of *quṭb* as another name for the *ghawth*. Furthermore, the author's statement that "all these know one another" shows us that, according to him, the other major categories of *awliyā'* are *aware* of who the *ghawth* of their particular age is.

Over time, the notion of the *ghawth* gained currency among Sufi-leaning scholars throughout the Sunni world. Some of the prominent later *'ulamā'* who explicitly or tacitly accepted the existence of the *ghawth* were Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), Aḥmad al-Qaṣṭallānī, Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974/1567), al-Ḥusayn al-Diyārbakrī (d. c. 982/1574), Nūr al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī (d. 1044/1635), Muḥammad al-Zurqānī (d. 1122/1710), Ismā'īl al-'Ajlūnī (d. 1162/1749), and Ibn 'Ābidīn (d. 1252/1856).²² Those scholars who defended the *ghawth* doctrine often linked the idea to particular related mystical concepts. For example, many Sufis felt that there had to be a *ghawth* in every generation (*al-ghawth al-waqt*, "*ghawth* of the age"). Other thinkers strongly emphasized the belief that the cosmos could not endure without a *ghawth*; in their view, God had made the existence of the *ghawth* a necessary component of the fabric of creation.²³ Such ideas, however, were not without their detractors. Hence, there also arose significant voices criticizing the *ghawth* doctrine. For instance, the aforementioned revered traditionist Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī noted that no authentic or reliable report about the *ghawth* could be found,²⁴ while the iconoclastic

²² See Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī, *al-Maqāṣid al-Ḥasanah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1985), 46; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Ḥawāli li 'l-Fatāwī*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2004), 2:302; Aḥmad al-Qaṣṭallānī, *al-Mawāhib al-Laduniyyah fī 'l-Minaḥ al-Muḥammadiyyah*, 3 vols. (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Tawfiqiyyah, n.d.), 2:418; Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *Fatāwā Ḥadīthiyyah* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 232; al-Ḥusayn al-Diyārbakrī, *Ta'rīkh al-Khamīs fī Aḥwāl Anfas Nafīs*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, n.d.), 2:289; Nūr al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī, *al-Sīrah al-Ḥalabiyyah*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2006?), 3:430; Muḥammad al-Zurqānī, *Sharḥ al-Zurqānī 'alā 'l-Mawāhib al-Laduniyyah*, 12 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1996), 7:487; Ismā'īl al-'Ajlūnī, *Kashf al-Khafā' wa Muzīl al-Ilbās* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qudsī, 1932?), 1:27; Ibn 'Ābidīn, *Majmū'at Rasā'il*, 2 vols. (Damascus: Maktabat al-Hāshimiyyah, 1907), 2:263-81.

²³ For example, Aḥmad Rizā says, "The earth and skies cannot exist without a *ghawth*." Khān, *Malfūzāt*, 178.

²⁴ See Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Durar al-Kāminah fī A'yān al-Mi'ah al-Thāminah*, 6 vols. (Hyderabad, Deccan: Majlis Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyyah, 1972), 3:170-71.

Damascene theologian Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328) argued that this spiritual concept was indisputably fabricated and akin to Christian teachings.²⁵ Despite the presence of such important critiques of the *ghawth* concept, the idea continued to remain popular among many of the later scholars deeply involved with the formal Sufi orders, wherein claims of attaining *ghawth*-hood began to become increasingly prevalent in some parts of the world during the early modern period.

An example of a late Sunni Sufi environment heavily infused with a belief in the *ghawth* is early eighteenth-century Morocco, where we find the idea referenced repeatedly in key works of regional period mysticism like the enigmatic 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Dabbāgh's (d. 1132/1719) famous discourses titled *al-Dhahab al-Ibrīz*. Compiled by his faithful disciple Aḥmad b. al-Mubārak al-Lamaṭī (d. 1146/1743), the shaykh's utterances reveal some of the beliefs tied to the *ghawth* prevalent in Moroccan Sufi circles at that particular point in time. According to al-Dabbāgh, the *ghawth* plays a crucial role in the mystical "council of the righteous" (*dīwān al-ṣālihīn*) that gathers in the sacred cave of Ḥirā' close to Mecca from time to time.²⁶ The shaykh tells al-Lamaṭī:

The *ghawth* sits outside the cave. Mecca is behind his right shoulder and Medina is in front of his left knee. On his right are four poles (*aqṭāb*) who are Mālikīs, adherents of the school of jurisprudence of the Imām Mālik b. Anas, God be pleased with him! Three poles are on his left, each one an adherent of the [other] three schools of jurisprudence. Then in front of him is the Wakīl who is called the judge (*qāḍī*) of the council.²⁷

Interestingly, al-Dabbāgh's spiritual schema differentiates between the *ghawth* and the *quṭb*; this is, of course, evidenced by how the Moroccan mystic refers to various *aqṭāb* (plural of *quṭb*) on either side of the *ghawth*. Be that as it may, what al-Dabbāgh shares with many earlier scholars is a belief in the supreme authority of the *ghawth*, evidenced by the author's reference to this figure being singular in number and alone in sitting *outside* the cave. According to John O'Kane and Bernd Radtke, al-Dabbāgh viewed the *ghawth* as "the highest living spiritual authority of his day and age."²⁸ This general perception is elaborated upon throughout al-Dabbāgh's discourses. Thus, we find him referring to the *ghawth* as the only figure who receives a special type of spiritual illumination unknown to many other *awliyā'*.²⁹ In another place, the mystic refers to the *ghawth*

²⁵ See Ibn Taymiyyah, *Jāmi' al-Masā'il*, 2:60.

²⁶ See al-Lamaṭī, *Pure Gold*, 577-610.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 579, with slight changes in translation.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 930.

²⁹ See *ibid.*, 417.

as being the only one who may “drink” of the Supreme Name of God, something which other shaykhs are unable to sustain. Elsewhere, al-Dabbāgh teaches that the *ghawth* is gifted with the power of “free disposal” (*taṣarruf*) and possesses vast “knowledge of the unseen” (*‘ilm al-ghayb*).³⁰ As we shall see, some of these ideas also exercised considerable influence upon many scholars in the Indian subcontinent, where *al-Dhahab al-Ibrīz* continues to be published by different groups of ‘ulamā’ until the present day.

Reception of the *Ghawth* Doctrine in South Asia

The concept of the *ghawth* is found in the works of scholars belonging to both the Deobandī and the Barelvi intellectual traditions within contemporary South Asian Islam. The acceptance of this idea by major ‘ulamā’ of both schools was a natural consequence of their shared endorsement of much of the late medieval Sufi tradition, which heavily permeated the thought of both Aḥmad Riḏā Khān of Bareilly (d. 1340/1921) and the elders of Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband.³¹ Thus, as was noted above, works like ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dabbāgh’s *al-Dhahab al-Ibrīz* have been translated and published by both groups.³² Notwithstanding such ideological overlaps between the two movements, Deobandī Sufism is nevertheless often more restrained than what one finds among Barelvis, and there exists considerable divergence among contemporary Deobandīs on the question of how to properly live out the Sufi path today.³³ Be that as it may, the vast majority of present-day Deobandī scholars continue to proudly affiliate with the various Sufi orders,³⁴ for attachment to the *ṭuruq* has been a key component of Deobandī piety from the beginning of the movement.³⁵ As for the Barelvis, they too are closely linked to the various orders prevalent in South Asia. Although Aḥmad Riḏā Khān himself was a

³⁰ See *ibid.*, 853.

³¹ The latter tradition’s stance on Sufism was definitively outlined by their school’s elder Khalīl Aḥmad Sahāranpūrī (d. 1346/1927): “It should be known firstly, before we begin to answer, that we and our teachers [i.e., the Deobandī school] . . . [are] affiliates, from amongst the paths of the Sufis, to the lofty path ascribed to the Naqshbandī masters and to the pure path ascribed to the Chishtī masters and to the glorious path ascribed to the Qādirī masters and to the approved path ascribed to the Suhrawardī masters, God be pleased with them all.” Khalīl Aḥmad Sahāranpūrī, *al-Muhannad ‘alā ‘l-Mufannad* (Lahore: al-Mīzān, 2005), 23.

³² See the following two renderings of the text: *Tabrīz Tarjumah-i Ibrīz*, trans. Muḥammad ‘Ashiq Ilāhī Bulandshahrī (Karachi: Madīnah Publications, n.d.) [Deobandī]; *Khazīnah-i Ma‘ārīf*, trans. Pīr Muḥammad Ḥasan (Lahore: ‘Ilmī Kutub Khānah, n.d.) [Barelvi].

³³ See Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 11-14.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, 116-37.

³⁵ See Sahāranpūrī, *al-Muhannad ‘alā ‘l-Mufannad*, 23.

Qādirī, one can find prominent Barelvi scholars belonging to the other major *ṭuruq* as well.³⁶

As was noted previously, Sufi-oriented scholars had begun to popularly accept the notion of the *ghawth* in the late medieval period. Although some deemed the report attributed to Abū Bakr al-Kattānī spurious, this mattered little to scholars like al-Hujwīrī, who defended their acceptance of the *ghawth* doctrine on the basis of it being a matter of *kashf* or private spiritual unveiling given to God's elect friends.³⁷ Early Deobandi Sufism heavily drew on figures like al-Hujwīrī—and on many strands of regional Sunni Sufism broadly speaking³⁸—whence their scholars saw no issue in using the word *ghawth* to refer to different spiritual personalities of the past. Thus, Zakariyyā Kāndhlavī (d. 1402/1982), one of the leaders of the Deobandi missionary organization Tablīghī Jamā'at, described the medieval Chishtī Sufi master “Bābā” Farīd al-Dīn Mas'ūd Ganj-i Shakar (d. 664/1266) as the *ghawth* of his age.³⁹ Similarly, the prominent Deobandi anti-colonial activist and apologist “Shaykh al-Hind” Maḥmūd Ḥasan (d. 1339/1920) even used the term *al-ghawth al-a'zam* for his own teacher Rashīd Aḥmad Gangōhī (d. 1323/1905), one of the original elders of Deoband.⁴⁰ In the present day, however, some Deobandi voices deliberately downplay the use of *ghawth* (though they still do not reject many other Sufi customs). This is partially due to the subtle influence of Salafism in certain contemporary Deobandi circles, a gradual shift in perspective that has developed over the last fifty years.⁴¹ It can also be seen as a deliberate attempt by Deobandis to distinguish themselves from the Barelvis, whose spiritual tradition is heavily permeated with a belief in the *ghawth*. Nevertheless, contemporary Deobandism is not uniform on such matters. Thus, one can still find prominent '*ulamā'*' of the tradition continuing to employ the term. Be that as it may, it is precisely this Sufi-Salafi blend among some Deobandis—along with their original campaign to reform particular aspects of subcontinental Sufism—which remains one of the primary reasons behind the Barelvis polemically charging them with espousing a type of “hidden Wahhabism.”⁴² In contrast to the Deobandis, it is impossible to find a *single*

³⁶ See Sanyal, *Devotional Islam*, 42. For Khān's own attachment to 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, see *ibid.*, 144–51. For Khān's relationship with the Chishtī order, see Ghulām Muṣṭafā Rīzvī, *Ā'lā Ḥazrat aur Mashā'ikh-i Chishtī* (Malegaon: Madīnah Kutub Ghar, 2020).

³⁷ See al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 290.

³⁸ For an introduction to Deobandi Sufism, see Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 116–37.

³⁹ Zakariyyā Kāndhlavī, *Tārīkh-i Mashā'ikh-i Chishtī* (Karachi: Maktabat al-Shaykh, n.d.), 179.

⁴⁰ Cited in Faiz Aḥmad Uvaisī, *Ghawth-i A'zam ṣirf Jīlānī kā Laqab* (n.p.: n.p., 2016), 10.

⁴¹ See Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 11–14.

⁴² See Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity*, 247.

Barelvi scholar who downplays or rejects the use of the phrase *ghawth*. Rather, the Barelvis use terms such as *ghawth* in plentiful measure and with great fervour as a means of asserting their self-identification with a Sufi Sunnism devoid of any attachment, implicit or explicit, to Salafism or other reformist trends. For the Barelvis, therefore, emphasizing terms like *ghawth* is also an important component of maintaining their own sectarian identity, as it is used to remind their opponents of the Barelvi conviction that it is they alone who continue to follow the path of the medieval Sufi shaykhs without any perceived “puritan” distortion.⁴³ We will come to explore these overlaps and divergences between the Deobandi and Barelvi uses of *ghawth* in greater depth later on in the article.

But what of the use of *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* for ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī? As was mentioned at the outset of this article, one finds the epithet used in the works of the elders of both the Deobandi and Barelvi persuasions. Nevertheless, what is also obvious is that this term predates both intellectual movements. When and where did it originate? It is these questions that I now address.

Al-Ghawth al-A‘zam

It is generally accepted by contemporary academics that ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī did not use the epithet *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* (“the mighty helper”) for himself.⁴⁴ They base their assumption on the fact that the phrase does not appear in al-Jīlānī’s famous *al-Ghunyah li Ṭālibī Ṭarīq al-Ḥaqq*, a standard work of Ḥanbalī jurisprudence and creed.⁴⁵ Likewise, it is absent from the influential collection of Sufi discourses attributed to al-Jīlānī titled *Futūḥ al-Ghayb*. Although references to the spiritual rank of *ghawthiyyah* are present in *Futūḥ al-Ghayb*⁴⁶—thereby showing us that the shaykh’s early followers certainly accepted some notion of the *ghawth*—the specific use of *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* for al-Jīlānī is nowhere to be found. However, as Hamza Malik notes, the Sufi came to be “venerated all over the Muslim

⁴³ See Sanyal, *Devotional Islam*, 144–51.

⁴⁴ For example, see Jacqueline Chabbi, “‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_22592.

⁴⁵ For more on the spiritual aspect of the work, see Malik, *Grey Falcon*, 150–65. Although some Muslim scholars (e.g., Shāh ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Muḥaddith Dihlavī [d. 1052/1642]) cast doubt on the full authenticity of *al-Ghunyah*, a great number accept it as one of the few books reliably transmitted from al-Jīlānī. See *ibid.*, 5, 13. In her entry on al-Jīlānī in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., Jacqueline Chabbi accepts its authenticity. Likewise, Malik deems it one of the shaykh’s legitimate works. See Malik, *Grey Falcon*, 13.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, 195.

world” as *al-ghawth al-a'zam* only a few centuries later.⁴⁷ It appears that the popular Qādirī literature attributed by the Sufi order to al-Jīlānī played a crucial role in popularizing the use of this epithet. For instance, one finds such texts often bearing the phrase *ghawthiyyah* in their titles, with an example of such a work being the famous mystical poem *al-Qaṣīdah al-Ghawthiyyah* (also called *al-Khamariyyah*, which received commentaries from prominent scholars like the Afghan-Meccan polymath Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī and the influential Iraqi exegete Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī [d. 1270/1854]),⁴⁸ which has al-Jīlānī describe his own mighty rank in the first person. It is, therefore, highly probable that the use of *al-ghawth al-a'zam* spread so widely throughout the Islamic world on account of the popularity of specifically Qādirī literature such as this *qaṣīdah* and the various significant hagiographies of the shaykh, such as the *Bahjat al-Asrār* of the Egyptian Shāfi‘ī scholar ‘Alī b. Yūsuf al-Shaṭṭanawfī (d. 713/1314), a work “put together . . . just over a hundred or so years after Jīlānī’s death.”⁴⁹ Although such texts were not unanimously (or wholly) accepted by Sunni scholars,⁵⁰ they nevertheless proved to be tremendously popular both within and outside Qādirī Sufi circles. Thus, as the Qādirī order came to be a universal rather than a regional *ṭarīqah*, so did the popular acceptance of al-Jīlānī’s stature as *al-ghawth al-a'zam* spread across the entire Muslim world.

Although *al-Qaṣīdah al-Ghawthiyyah* does not directly use the term *al-ghawth al-a'zam*, it nevertheless has the shaykh utter statements such as: “Though all your [i.e., the other *awliyā*] stations are high, mine is higher still,”⁵¹ “I am singularly near to the Presence [of the Lord],”⁵² “Who is there among the men [of God] so gifted as me?”⁵³ “He [i.e., God] made me a ruler over all the *aqṭāb*, and made my orders effective under all circumstances,”⁵⁴ and “My feet are on the neck of all the men [of God]”

⁴⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁸ See Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī, *al-Ṭirāz al-Mudhahhab fī Sharḥ Qaṣīdat al-Bāz al-Ashhab* (Riyadh: Aḍwā’ al-Salaf, 2010).

⁴⁹ Malik, *Grey Falcon*, 15.

⁵⁰ al-Dhahabī stated the following regarding the work: “The Shaykh Nūr al-Dīn al-Shaṭṭanawfī has put together a lengthy work in three volumes on his (Jīlānī’s) life and work, where he has produced milk and cud in equal quantities, so to say, mixing true statements with false ones, these being given on the authority of persons with no standing or worth. . . . In general, however, his miracles are recorded by completely sound chains of narration (*tawātur*). . . .” Cited in Malik, *Grey Falcon*, 15.

⁵¹ Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Mālik Khōrvī, *al-Jawāhir al-Muḍī‘ah fī Sharḥ al-Qaṣīdah Ghawthiyyah* (Lahore: Nūrī Kutub Khānah, 2003), 71.

⁵² Ibid., 72.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 74.

(*wa aqdamī ‘alā ‘unuq al-rijāl*).⁵⁵ The last of these declarations became a very popular attribution to al-Jīlānī and can be found in several different wordings.⁵⁶ Interestingly, it was even accepted as a legitimate statement of the shaykh by Ibn Taymiyyah.⁵⁷ Such utterances—the authenticity of which remained and remains an issue of dispute between various groups of ‘ulamā’—reflect the popular Qādirī belief in the immensity of supernatural power bestowed upon al-Jīlānī. Indeed, it seems that the singular nature of many of the claims found in works like *al-Qaṣīdah al-Ghawthiyyah* naturally led Qādirīs and others who accepted such texts to the doctrinal conviction that the shaykh was not just a *ghawth* but was, in fact, *al-ghawth al-a’zam*, the greatest of all helpers after the first three generations of the Prophet’s (peace be on him) community.⁵⁸

In addition to poems like *al-Qaṣīdah al-Ghawthiyyah*, Qādirī hagiographical texts like the aforementioned *Bahjat al-Asrār* of al-Shaṭṭanawfī also played an important role in strengthening popular belief

⁵⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁶ See ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (attr.), *Tafsīr al-Jīlānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2014), 34 and Aḥmad al-Tijānī, *Ḥall al-Aqfāl li Qurrā’ Jawharat al-Kamāl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2010), 115, where it is mentioned with the popular wording *qadamī hādihā* (or *hādihih*) *‘alā raqabat kull walī Allāh* (this foot of mine is on the neck of every friend of God). For a staunch recent Deobandi cleric’s—i.e., Zar Valī Khān (d. 2020), a jurisconsult of Karachi—approval of this utterance, see Mufti Zarwālī Khan db, “Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani ke waqiat aur halat,” YouTube Video, 7:54, November 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=au6zPFDu1Dw&t=75s>. After quoting the saying in Urdu translation, he remarks, “It can be said that in the ranks of the friends of God, his [i.e., ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī’s] station and position is highest.”

⁵⁷ For a summary of Ibn Taymiyyah’s explanation of the utterance, see The Hanbali School, “My Foot is on the Necks of all the Awliya of Allah - Shaykh Yusuf bin Sadiq al Hanbali,” YouTube Video, October 23, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugX3spiT8Yk&t=37s>.

⁵⁸ It is important to note here that the way the scholars (of either the Deobandi or Barelvi persuasions) use the title *al-ghawth al-a’zam* necessitates that they do not employ it in an unrestricted or absolute sense. It is Sunni doctrine that no later non-prophetic *walī* can match the rank of even the least of the Companions (*al-ṣaḥābah*) of the Prophet. As such, *al-ghawth al-a’zam* is used in a restricted sense to allude to al-Jīlānī’s rank among the medieval Sufi shaykhs, or the eponyms of the Sufi orders, or other such categories of the *ummah*’s non-prophetic righteous apart from the first three generations and the Imām al-Mahdī. Aḥmad Rizā Khān’s disciple Na‘īm al-Dīn Murādābādī (d. 1367/1948) conclusively remarked, summarizing the Barelvi (and wider Sunni) perspective, “The Companions are righteous people. . . . No person howsoever great in piety, knowledge, and worship—whether a *walī*, *ghawth*, or *quṭb*—can ever equal even those who are deemed as junior or lowest among the Companions.” Na‘īm al-Dīn Murādābādī, *Kitāb al-‘Aqā’id* (Karachi: al-Madīnah al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2004), 47. The Deobandi perspective on this matter is, of course, the same as the Barelvi one, for the preeminence of the Companions is a general Sunni belief.

in the Ḥanbalī shaykh's colossal spiritual rank, a rank certainly befitting the epithet *al-ghawth al-a'zam*. Thus, in the *Bahjat al-Asrār*, we find the author mentioning that al-Jīlānī's gaze is perpetually fixed upon the heavenly "guarded tablet" (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*) on which God has written all that has happened and all that shall be.⁵⁹ In other words, the *walī* is made aware of all events, past and present.⁶⁰ It is, of course, to this spiritual quality that *al-Qaṣīdah al-Ghawthiyyah* refers when it has al-Jīlānī purportedly remark, "There are no months or ages which flow but with my knowledge."⁶¹ Such extraordinary beliefs in al-Jīlānī's "knowledge of the unseen" (*ilm al-ghayb*) spread widely within particular late-medieval Sufi circles throughout the Muslim world, including in South Asia. Thus, we find the influential Delhi-based Naqshbandī shaykh and poet Mirzā Maḥzar Jān-i Jānān (d. 1195/1781) state the following with respect to al-Jīlānī: "Ḥaẓrat *ghauth-i thaqalayn* pays particular attention to his disciples. There is not a single disciple whom Ḥaẓrat *ghauth-i a'zam* is not attentive towards."⁶²

Al-Jīlānī's vast knowledge of the unseen—and his ability to help his spiritual followers by way of his "attention" or *tawajjuh*⁶³—was taken for granted in the prominent Sufi circles Jān-i Jānān frequented, which were not even those formally affiliated with the Qādirī order.⁶⁴

Beliefs such as those espoused by Jān-i Jānān were not, of course, limited to the Indian subcontinent. As was noted above, *al-ghawth al-a'zam* and other similar epithets were far from being region-specific titles. The Ottoman polymath Kātib Jalabī (d. 1057/1657) referred to al-Jīlānī as

⁵⁹ See Khān, *Malfūzāt*, 82, which cites the following utterance from *Bahjat al-Asrār*: "Indeed, the pupil of my eye is fixed on the Guarded Tablet."

⁶⁰ For Deobandī refutations of such beliefs, see "Ḥadīths Barelwīs Use to Justify Deviant Belief of 'Ilm Jamī Mā Kāna wa Mā Yakūn – Explained," *Barelwis: A Critical Review*, accessed September 6, 2020, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2020/09/06/%e1%b8%a5adiths-barelwis-use-to-argue-for-the-deviant-belief-of-ilm-jami-ma-kana-wa-ma-yakun-explained/>; "Classical Mālikī Scholars: Doctrine of 'Ilm Jamī Mā Kāna wa Mā Yakūn for Prophets is Kufr," *Barelwis: A Critical Review*, accessed July 18, 2021, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2021/07/18/classical-maliki-scholars-doctrine-of-ilm-jami-ma-kana-wa-ma-yakun-for-prophets-is-kufr/>.

⁶¹ Khōrvī, *al-Jawāhir al-Muḍīah*.

⁶² Cited in Aḥmad Riḍā Khān, *al-Amn wa 'l-'Ulā li Nā'itī 'l-Muṣṭafā bi Dāfi 'l-Balā'*, ed. and trans. Akhtar Riḍā Khān (Damascus: Dār al-Nu'mān al-'Ulūmī, 2009), 25. Commenting upon this, Khān remarks, "Consider the words in his statement, and particularly the phrase *ghawth al-thaqalayn*—does not this word mean 'the helper of men and jinn'?" Ibid.

⁶³ For references to similar beliefs with respect to other *awliyā'*, see *ibid.*, 25-26.

⁶⁴ For more on Jān-i Jānān, see Shāh Ghulām 'Alī 'Abd Allāh al-Mujaddidī, *Maqāmāt-i Maḥzarī* (Istanbul: Hakikat Kitābevi, 1990); Muhammad Umar, "Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan: A Religious Reformer of the Eighteenth Century," *Studies in Islam* 6 (1969): 118-54.

ghawth al-thaqalayn.⁶⁵ Similarly, Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī used the term *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* for the shaykh.⁶⁶ Likewise, the influential Kurdish Naqshbandī shaykh Khālīd al-Baghdādī (d. 1242/1827)—who had studied under scholars from Lahore and Delhi—described al-Jīlānī as “*al-ghawth al-a‘zam* . . . [and] my master (*sayyidī*).”⁶⁷ In the next century, the term was approvingly employed by Middle Eastern voices as diverse as the prominent Palestinian Sufi reviver (and Ottoman defender) Yūsuf al-Nabahānī (d. 1350/1932)⁶⁸ and the Salafi-influenced reformer ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bīṭār (d. 1335 or 1336/1917).⁶⁹ Similarly, the celebrated Kurdish spiritual writer Badī‘ al-Zamān Sa‘īd Nursī (d. 1379/1960) used the term for al-Jīlānī and is even reported to have practised *istighāthah* with the shaykh from a young age.⁷⁰ Evidently, *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* had become a very popular epithet by this point in time. As for the present day, we find it used within Qādirī circles in places ranging from Morocco and Mauritania to Senegal and Iraq.⁷¹ Despite its continuing presence in all of these locales, the term enjoys exceptional currency in contemporary South Asia, where many scholars employ it with a special sense of devotion.⁷²

***Al-Ghawth al-A‘zam* in South Asia**

The use of *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* is extremely popular throughout Islamic South Asia. In this connection, the prolific Barelvi scholar Faiḏ Aḥmad Uwaisī (d. 1431/2010) remarked, “All of the scholars (*sab ‘ulamā’*) . . . have traditionally used the epithets *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* and *ghawth al-thaqalayn*

⁶⁵ Kātīb Jalabī, *Sullam al-Wuṣūl ilā Ṭabaqāt al-Fuḥūl* (Istanbul: al-Maktabah al-Irsikā, 2010), 5:287.

⁶⁶ Cited in Uwaisī, *Ghawth-i A‘zam*, 5.

⁶⁷ Khālīd al-Baghdādī, “Risālah fī Taḥqīq,” in *‘Ulamā’ al-Muslimīn wa Jahālat al-Wahhābiyyah* (Istanbul: Hakikat Kitābevi, 2014), 214.

⁶⁸ Yūsuf al-Nabahānī, *al-Asālīb al-Badī‘ah fī Faḍl al-Ṣaḥābah* (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Maymūniyyah, n.d.), 8.

⁶⁹ ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Bīṭār, *Ḥilyat al-Bashar fī Ta’rīkh al-Qarn al-Thālith ‘Ashar* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1993), 580, 1017, 1315, 1591.

⁷⁰ See Şükran Vahide, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: Author of the Risale-i Nur* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2011), 5, 156.

⁷¹ For example, see al-Shaykh Nihād al-Shar‘abī al-Ḥaḍrah al-Ṣūfiyyah al-Rifā‘iyyah, “Karāmāt Sayyidinā al-Quṭb al-Ghawth al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī,” YouTube Video, 2:40, April 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5Kxb4jAHu4&t=47s>; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Sāwūrī, “Fī Ḥaḍrat al-Ghawth al-A‘zam Mawlānā Sayyidī ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī Raḍīya Allāh ‘anh,” YouTube Video, 7:41, accessed January 12, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYv3N925Q_c&t=147s.

⁷² When one searches the phrase *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* on YouTube, most videos that appear originate from the Indian subcontinent.

for Ḥaẓrat *ghauth pāk* [i.e., ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī].”⁷³ While his statement is hyperbolic, it is nevertheless true that one encounters the epithet very frequently in regional Sunni Sufi works of both poetry and prose from the end of the sixteenth century onwards. Thus, the celebrated reviver of *ḥadīth* study ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Muḥaddith Dihlavī (d. 1052/1642)—who came to influence practically all South Asian Sunni scholars in the ensuing centuries—described the medieval Sufi as “*quṭb al-aqtāb* [“spiritual pole of spiritual poles”], *al-ghawth al-a’zam*, the shaykh of shaykhs of the world, *ghawth al-thaqalayn*.”⁷⁴ Similarly, his famous contemporary, the revered zealous Naqshbandī reformer Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1034/1624)—who was lauded as the “reviver of the second [hijrī] millennium” (*mujaddid-i alf-i thānī*) by the Sunnis of the region—also spoke of the preeminence of al-Jīlānī among the *awliyā’* of his age.⁷⁵ A little over a century later, the renowned polymath Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlavī (d. 1176/1762) mentioned al-Jīlānī’s purported power of *taṣarruf* (previously encountered in the work of Walī Allāh’s Moroccan contemporary al-Dabbāgh) and even described him as *ghawth al-thaqalayn*.⁷⁶ In the realm of poetry, a particularly devoted supporter of al-Jīlānī’s *ghawthiyyah* during this period was the prominent Punjabi Qādirī mystical versifier Sulṭān Bāhū (d. 1102/1691),⁷⁷ whose works remain popular among many in South Asia until today.

In subsequent centuries, *al-ghawth al-a’zam* or similar phrases continued to be used by many prominent religious scholars throughout the subcontinent. Even figures such as the iconoclastic reformer Shāh Ismā’īl Dihlavī (d. 1246/1831)—reviled by the Barelvis as a “Wahhābī-influenced” heretic⁷⁸ though praised by the Deobandis as a precursor to their own revivalist efforts⁷⁹—used the term.⁸⁰ Although Ismā’īl Dihlavī certainly criticized many aspects of contemporary Sufi practice in his controversial work *Taqwiyat al-Īmān*⁸¹—including *istighāthah* and

⁷³ Uvaisī, *Ghauth-i A’zam*, 4.

⁷⁴ ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Muḥaddith al-Dihlavī, *Lama’āt al-Tanqīh fī Sharḥ Mishkāt al-Maṣābīh*, 10 vols. (Damascus: Dār al-Nawādir, 2010), 4:43.

⁷⁵ See Uvaisī, *Ghauth-i A’zam*, 4.

⁷⁶ See *ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁷ See *ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁸ For more on the negative Barelvi perception of Ismā’īl Dihlavī, see Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity*, 247.

⁷⁹ For more on the ways in which Ismā’īl Dihlavī influenced Deobandis, see Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 58-65.

⁸⁰ See Uvaisī, *Ghauth-i A’zam*, 8.

⁸¹ For more on Ismā’īl’s reformist efforts, see Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity*, 52-104.

*istimdād*⁸²—he did not outright reject referring to al-*Jīlānī* as a *ghawth* in some sense. As we shall now see, many later scholars who held *Ismāʿīl* in high esteem—including those affiliated with the nascent *Dār al-ʿUlūm* Deoband madrasah project—also used the phrase.

Deobandi Use of al-Ghawth al-Aʿzam

The early Deobandi elders had a profound attachment to the spiritual legacy of ʿAbd al-Qādir al-*Jīlānī*. Despite certain reformist and puritan inclinations latent in their madrasah movement,⁸³ its key representatives nevertheless continued to largely adhere to a medieval Sufi worldview. Although it is true that Deobandi Sufism is, as Ingram has mentioned, “largely invisible,”⁸⁴ it nonetheless remains an integral part of the tradition’s religious life till the present day. As for the rift between the Deobandis and the Barelvis, the real roots of the disagreement are the perceived blasphemous statements that the latter believe exist in the works of some of the elders of Deoband⁸⁵; the former’s restrictiveness on popular practices such as celebrating the Prophet’s (peace be on him) birthday; and the Deobandi presumption that the Barelvis harbour some exaggerated or even polytheistic beliefs pertaining to the veneration of prophets and *awliyāʾ*. Be all that as it may, what is clear is that the use of *al-ghawth al-aʿzam* for al-*Jīlānī* is something the elders of both traditions shared, on account of their mutually inheriting it from a common well of spiritual inspiration. However, even here there is a certain divergence, for one finds the Deobandis and Barelvis employ the epithet in a variety of different ways, with some of the Barelvi readings of the *laqab*⁸⁶ being deemed unacceptable by many Deobandis.

Deobandi scholars have forwarded several different interpretations of *al-ghawth al-aʿzam*. Of course, all of the movement’s elders accepted it in the traditional sense of its connoting al-*Jīlānī*’s rank of *ghawthiyyah*.

⁸² Thus, *Ismāʿīl*, condemned calling “for aid on pīrs, apostles, imāms, martyrs, angels, and fairies” in “the time of difficulty.” Mir Shahmat ʿAli, “Translation of the *Takwiyat-ul-Imān*, preceded by a Notice of the Author, Maulavi Ismaʿil Hajji,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 13 (1852): 319; slightly modified.

⁸³ For more on these tendencies, see Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 92-116.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁵ As the Barelvi scholar Sayyid Aḥmad Saʿīd Kāzmī explained, “I have here mentioned that the primary difference and reasons for the dispute between Deobandis and Sunnis [*ahl al-sunnah*, i.e., the Barelvis] are those passages [in Deobandi works] wherein is clear blasphemy against God Most Exalted and His Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him. Deobandis say that these statements are not disrespectful or insulting, whereas we Sunnis say that the insult and denigration in them is explicit.” Sayyid Aḥmad Saʿīd Kāzmī, *al-Ḥaqq al-Mubīn* (Lahore: Muslim Kitābvī, 2004), 15.

⁸⁶ Pl., *alqāb*; the Arabic word for title or epithet.

However, other Deobandis add that the *laqab* also has an allegorical significance, whereby it is believed to signify al-Jīlānī's exceptional efforts in serving the religion. In the Deobandi literature, we find *al-ghawth al-a'zam* and other similar titles (including references to the general spiritual category of *ghawth*) employed by some of the school's most prominent early scholars, including Muḥammad Qāsim Nānōtvī (d. 1297/1880), Rashīd Aḥmad Gangōhī, Khalīl Aḥmad Sahāranpūrī, Ashraf 'Alī Thānavī (d. 1362/1943), and others. However, prior to these *akābirīn*, some of the key influences upon the Deobandis had already been strong proponents of using the phraseology of *ghawth*-hood in their religious discourse. Thus, the spiritual master of all four Deobandi elders, the influential Chishtī shaykh Ḥājī Imdād Allāh Muḥājir Makkī (d. 1317/1899)—a figure also honoured by the Barelvīs⁸⁷—referred to al-Jīlānī as both *ghawth al-thaqalayn* and *al-ghawth al-a'zam*.⁸⁸ Similarly, the puritan reformer Ismā'īl Dihlavī, who wielded great influence on the Deobandis, spoke of “the holy soul of the honoured *ghawth-i thaqalain*.”⁸⁹ As for the formerly mentioned elders themselves, Gangōhī, Sahāranpūrī, and Thānavī, all asserted that al-Jīlānī was indeed *al-ghawth al-a'zam*.⁹⁰ Moreover, Thānavī's student Zafar Aḥmad 'Usmānī (d. 1394/1974) made mention of al-Jīlānī's attainment of *ghawth*-hood,⁹¹ all while the revered Deobandi Qur'ānic exegete Aḥmad 'Alī Lāhōrī (d. 1381/1962) also referred to the shaykh as *al-ghawth al-a'zam*.⁹² As for Nānōtvī, he used the phrase *ghawth* in his poetry on more than one occasion, and also described al-Jīlānī as *ghawth al-*

⁸⁷ For a Barelvi defence of Ḥājī Imdād Allāh—wherein the author also attempts to demonstrate how he feels Makkī's Deobandi admirers reject his true teachings—see al-Ḥājī Ṣūfī Muḥammad 'Abd al-Rashīd Rīzavī, *Maslak-i Ḥājī Imdād Allāh Muḥājir Makkī* (Gujranwala: Maktabah-i Ghauthiyyah, 2008). Barelvīs have also repeatedly published the Shaykh's works. For example, see Ḥājī Imdād Allāh Muḥājir Makkī, *Faiṣalah-i Haft Mas'alah* (Lahore: Muslim Kitābvī, 1999) and sometimes done commentaries upon them. For example, see Khalīl Khān Barakātī, *Sharḥ Faiṣalah-i Haft Mas'alah* (Lahore: Rūmī Publications, 1986). For an overview of the rifts in Imdād Allāh's own circle, see Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity*, 352-72.

⁸⁸ See Ḥājī Imdād Allāh Muḥājir Makkī, *Kulliyāt-i Imdādiyyah* (Karachi: Dār al-Ishā'at, 1977), 75. It is to be noted here that many other South Asian Sunni scholars not strictly affiliated with either the Deobandis or the Barelvīs or who pre-dated the schism—as did Ḥājī Imdād Allāh—also used epithets such as *al-ghawth al-a'zam* and *ghawth al-thaqalayn* for al-Jīlānī. See, for example, Anwār Allāh Fārūqī, *Maqāsid al-Islām* (Hyderabad, Deccan: Majlis-i Ishā'at-i 'Ulūm-i Jāmi'ah Nizāmiyyah, 1995), 8:116; 'Abd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī, *al-Raf' wa 'l-Takmil fī 'l-Jarḥ wa 'l-Ta'dīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyyah, 1388 AH), 236; Mihr 'Alī Shāh, *Malfūzāt-i Mihriyyah* (Golra: Maktabah-i Golrā Sharīf, 1997), 9.

⁸⁹ Cited in Uvaisī, *Ghawth-i A'zam*, 6.

⁹⁰ See *ibid.*, 7, 15.

⁹¹ See *ibid.*, 9.

⁹² See *ibid.*, 7.

thaqalayn.⁹³ Furthermore, many leading Deobandis also ascribed the rank of *ghawthiyyah* to other historical figures. Thus, as we saw above, the movement's influential activist and theologian "Shaykh al-Hind" Maḥmūd Ḥasan used the term *al-ghawth al-a'zam* for none other than his teacher Gangōhī,⁹⁴ describing him as "the guide of the nation (*rashīd-i millat*) and supreme helper (*ghauth-i a'zam*)."⁹⁵ Similarly, the respected Deobandi Sufi scholar 'Āshiq Ilāhī Bulandshahrī (d. 1420/2002) honoured Gangōhī as "the pole of the world (*quṭb-i 'ālam*) [and] . . . *ghauth-i a'zam*."⁹⁶ Likewise, Thānavī referred to his shaykh (Ḥājī Imdād Allāh) as *ghauth-i kāmīlīn*, the "helper of the perfected ones."⁹⁷ Quotes such as these can be multiplied many times over, but these are enough to demonstrate the ubiquity of such phraseology in early Deobandi discourse.

Despite, however, the wealth of references to *ghawth*-hood in the Deobandi literature, some of the movement's contemporary voices take a different view on using such *alqāb*. Thus, we find the prominent present-day Deobandi scholar Makkī Ḥijāzī (b. 1935) ruling that it is "impermissible to use *ghauth pāk*" with reference to al-Jīlānī.⁹⁸ Similarly, the popular Pakistani scholar Ṭāriq Mas'ūd (b. 1975) has said that it is "impermissible to use" the term *al-ghawth al-a'zam*. The existence of such views in contemporary Deobandi circles shows us that some of the movement's latter-day scholars deliberately choose to downplay some of the more "mystical" aspects of their elders' teachings. There are several reasons for this change in perspective. One reason is that some present-day Deobandis clearly feel the term *ghawth* is too liable to be misinterpreted in unlawful ways, whence they opine that it should be restricted entirely. In Islamic legal terms, stopping the use of *ghawth* in this manner would come under the principle of *sadd al-dharā'i'* (lit., "blocking the means"), viz., of restricting what is permitted for the sake of the greater good. Mas'ūd clearly explains his position in this manner:

As for the use of the term *al-ghawth al-a'zam*, one can derive either a true interpretation of this [epithet] or an erroneous one. So, one is not permitted to apply a judgement of idolatry (*shirk kā fatvā*) upon the one saying *al-ghawth al-a'zam* until one asks the person what he means by it. However, this much can be said: in our age—when [some] people are asking [al-Jīlānī] for

⁹³ See *ibid.*, 11.

⁹⁴ See *ibid.*, 10.

⁹⁵ See *ibid.*

⁹⁶ See *ibid.*

⁹⁷ Ashraf 'Alī Thānavī, *Imdād al-Mushtāq* (Deoband: Maktabat Imdād Allāh Muhājir Makkī, 2014), 194. See also Uvaisī, *Ghauth-i A'zam*, 15n29.

⁹⁸ "Ya Ghaus Al Madad Kehna Kaisa Hai By Maulana Makki Al Hijazi," YouTube Video, 3:06, November 20, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7POYRmiUiE>.

help . . . and are truly engaged in some idolatry—using such a term, which may lead to a strengthening of idolatry, is impermissible. So, at the least, in this day and age, using *al-ghawth al-a'zam* is unlawful, for the scent of idolatry (*shirk kī bū*) is present in this epithet and it can become a stepping-stone to idolatry. Nevertheless, I am not saying that anyone who calls al-Jīlānī *al-ghawth al-a'zam* is an unbeliever (*kāfir*) and idolater (*mushrik*). . . . However, if anyone uses this epithet today, we will stop him . . . for idolatry spreads due to it.⁹⁹

Interestingly, Mas'ūd's conservative juristic approach pertaining to this matter is similar to the manner in which many of the Deobandi elders restricted the practice of *mawlid* in their own day on the same pretext of *sadd al-dharā'i'* on account of the “corruption of the age” or *fasād al-zamān*.¹⁰⁰ Apart from this, the eschewing of epithets like *al-ghawth al-a'zam* can also be seen as a deliberate attempt by some contemporary Deobandis to distinguish themselves from the Barelvis, whose spiritual tradition is heavily imbued with the use of such phraseology. Furthermore, Deobandis are generally opposed to *istighāthah* and *istimdād* with the *awliyā'* in the manner many Barelvis engage in such practices,¹⁰¹ whence the present-day rejection of ambiguous terms like *ghawth* may also be tied to their self-conscious effort to distinguish themselves from those who do support calling upon the pious for help. Finally, it cannot be denied that there has been a distinctly Salafi influence in some Deobandi circles in the last half a century. Hence, some contemporary Deobandis do break from many of

⁹⁹ “Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani Ko Ghous e Azam Keh Sakte Hain? Ask Mufti Tariq Masood,” YouTube Video, 1:25, July 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PMmsriCJCA>.

¹⁰⁰ For more on this aspect of early Deobandi reformism, see Ingram, *Revival from Below*, 78.

¹⁰¹ For Deobandi criticisms of *istighāthah*, *istimdād*, and *isti'ānah* see “Majālis al-Abrār by Shaykh Aḥmad Rūmī (d. 1041 H) – Endorsements of Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz Dehlawī and ‘Allāmah ‘Abdul Ḥayy al-Laknawī,” *Barelwism*, May 10, 2020, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2020/05/10/majalis-al-abrar-by-shaykh-a%e1%b8%a5mad-rumi-d-1041-h-endorsements-of-shah-abdul-aziz-dehlawi-and-allamah-abdul-%e1%b8%a5ayy-al-laknawi/>; “Istighathah: Seeking Aid from other than Allah,” *Barelwism*, October 1, 2012, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2012/10/01/istighathah-seeking-aid-from-other-than-allah/>; “Calling Others than Allah – Ml. Idris Kandhlawi,” *Barelwism*, November 30, 2012, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2012/11/30/calling-others-than-allah-ml-idris-kandhlawi/>; “The Hadith of ‘Uthman b Hunayf (Radiyahallahu Anhu) Does not Support the Practice of Istighathah,” *Barelwism*, November 24, 2018, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2018/11/24/the-hadith-of-uthman-b-hunayf-radiyahallahu-anhu-does-not-support-the-practice-of-istighathah/>; “Istighāthah: The Importance of Definition,” *Barelwism*, November 26, 2018, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2018/11/26/istighathah-the-importance-of-definition/>.

the more Sufi-oriented teachings of their own elders in various matters.¹⁰² Indeed, this split in various portions of modern Deobandi thought is precisely what, from the Barelvi point of view, lends credence to the latter's suspicion that the former are, in fact, "closet Wahhābīs."¹⁰³

Returning to the matter of *istighāthah* and *istimdād*, it is to be noted that even many of the early Deobandi elders were firmly opposed to such practices. Thus, when Thānavī was informed that some devotional statements of the Sufi scholar Ilāhī Bakhsh Kāndhlavī (d. 1245) were being used to support *istighāthah*, he firmly stated:

[Uttering such statements] with the intention of *isti'ānah* and *istighāthah* or with the belief of *ḥādir* and *nāzir* is impermissible. If, however, they are uttered without any of these [above-mentioned] beliefs—and the intention behind using them is only to express one's desire and delight—then it is permissible. This permissibility is granted [in the second case] because the purpose behind reading poetry is usually to express one's desire and delight. However, in places where one sees anything contrary to this, then such a permissibility will be null and void.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, the prominent Deobandi jurisconsult Muḥammad Shafī' (d. 1396/1976) said, "If a person calls on anyone else besides God for help, it is as though he is prostrating to him which must be avoided." This strong aversion to calling upon the pious is something the Deobandis share with many Salafi strands. Hence, any references to *ghawthiyyah* in the movement's literature must be understood in a way that precludes any belief in *istighāthah*, *isti'ānah*, or *istimdād*. In other words, for the Deobandis, accepting al-Jīlānī's supreme *ghawth*-hood has no inherent connection to the act of calling upon the *walī* for help. The Deobandis, therefore, do not deny the traditional spiritual classifications and ranks of *awliyā'*, but certainly do reject any reading of *ghawth* that may suggest any type of *istighāthah*. By contrast, the Barelvis believe the notion of *ghawthiyyah* to be fundamentally tied to the previously mentioned spiritual practices, which they passionately defend against any charges of

¹⁰² The Barelvis see figures like Makkī Ḥijāzī as inconsistent and intellectually dishonest on account of their outright condemnation of phrases like *ghawth*, on the one hand, and their simultaneous acceptance of the Deobandi elders who used precisely such Sufi terminology, on the other.

¹⁰³ For more on the Barelvi labelling of Deobandis as "Wahhābīs," see Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity*, 247, where the author remarks, "Khān strategically attempted to brand his Deoband opponents as 'Indian Wahhābīs.' Despite their purported loyalty to the Ḥanafī tradition, Khān claimed, Deobandī scholars were actively assaulting the normative practices and beliefs sanctioned by that tradition, in the same vein as the eighteenth-century Arab reformer Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb."

¹⁰⁴ Cited in "Istighathah: Seeking Aid from other than Allah."

“idolatry” put upon them by the Deobandis or various Salafi strands. It is to the Barelvi interpretation of *al-ghawth al-a'zam* that we now turn.

Barelvi Readings

The Barelvis see themselves as the only true representatives of traditional Sunnism in the Indian subcontinent today. Deeming all puritan and modernist reformist trends heretical, the Barelvis hold that it is they alone who properly represent the teaching of the *ahl al-sunnah wa 'l-jamā'ah* as it has been practised within South Asia for centuries. In the writings of Aḥmad Rizā Khān and his partisans—as well as intellectual forebears like Faẓl-i Ḥaqq Khairābādī¹⁰⁵ (d. 1278/1861), Shāh Faẓl-i Rasūl Badāyūnī (d. 1298/1872),¹⁰⁶ Naqī 'Alī Khān Barelvi (d. 1297/1880),¹⁰⁷ 'Abd al-Samī' “Bēdil” Ḥanafī (d. 1318/1900),¹⁰⁸ and others—Ismā'īl Dihlavī is portrayed as the founder of “Wahhabism”¹⁰⁹ in the Indian subcontinent and his contentious work *Taqwiyat al-Īmān* is described as a South Asian counterpart to Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*.¹¹⁰ The following polemic by the aforementioned Barelvi scholar Faiz Aḥmad Uvaisī against Deobandis and the Ahl-i Ḥadīth demonstrates their school's approach in this regard:

The Deobandi Wahhābī sect's . . . elders also refer to [al-Jlānī] as *al-ghawth al-a'zam*. . . They say [to us, i.e., the Barelvis, that using] *al-ghawth al-a'zam* is idolatrous. . . [However,] the founder of the Deobandis and the Ahl-i Ḥadīth—Maulvī Ismā'īl Dihlavī—[uses similar language for him and] . . .

¹⁰⁵ As Tareen says, “The Barelvi school was in many ways the intellectual heir of the nineteenth-century scholar Faẓl-i Ḥaqq Khairābādī (d. 1861), who had vigorously opposed Shāh Muḥammad Ismā'īl.” Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity*, 8. Also see *ibid.*, 176-78.

¹⁰⁶ For more on Badāyūnī, see *ibid.*, 135-37.

¹⁰⁷ For more on Naqī 'Alī Khān, see Sanyal, *Devotional Islam*, 12, 55-56, 236n15; Muḥammad Ḥusain Qādirī, *Allāmah Maulānā Naqī 'Alī Khān* (Karachi: Idārah- Taḥqīqāt-i Imām Aḥmad Rizā International, 2005).

¹⁰⁸ For more on 'Abd al-Samī', see Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity*, 245-46.

¹⁰⁹ Hence, Barelvi literature often refers to Ismā'īl Dihlavī as “the Najdī old man” (*bābā-i Najdiyyat*) and to his followers as “Ismā'īlī Wahhābīs” (*Wahhābiyyah Ismā'īliyyah*). See *ibid.*, 64, 83.

¹¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 406n31. Also see Zaid Abū 'l-Ḥasan Fārūqī, *Maulānā Ismā'īl aur Taqwiyat al-Īmān* (Lahore: Shair Rabbānī Publications, 2001). For Deobandi responses to such accusations, see “Fabricating to Wahhābify *Taqwiyat al-Īmān* – The Case of Faḍl-e-Rasūl Badāyūnī and *Sayful Jabbar*,” *Barelwism*, December 18, 2019, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2019/12/18/fabricating-to-wahhabify-taqwiyat-al-iman-the-case-of-fa%1%B8%8Dl-e-rasul-badayuni-and-sayful-jabbar/>; “Entrenched Barelvi Myth: ‘*Taqwiyat al-Īmān* is a Translation of *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*,’” *Barelwism*, August 6, 2020, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2020/08/06/entrenched-barelvi-myth-taqwiyat-al-iman-is-a-translation-of-kitab-al-taw%1%b8%a5id/>.

various elders and scholars [of their persuasion] refer to Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī as both *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* and *ghawth al-thaqalayn*—are they all idolaters or Muslims? . . . Did these elders not know that one cannot use *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* for anyone except God [as you claim]?¹¹¹

The Barelvi understanding of *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* is far broader—both in theory and practice—than that proposed by those Deobandis who do use the term. As the Barelvis are firm believers in the permissibility of *istighāthah* and *istimdād*, their interpretation of *ghawth*-hood naturally accepts a definite link between this concept and the act of calling upon the *awliyā’* for help. Hence, referring to ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī as a helper has a very practical implication for Barelvis, who see no harm in petitioning the *walī* to intercede with God on their behalf or even in imploring him to directly come to their aid on account of what they believe to be his divinely bestowed ability of *taṣarruf*.¹¹² On one occasion, someone asked Aḥmad Rizā Khān if it was permitted to call upon the medieval Maghrebi mystic Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 899/1494) for help and whether Aḥmad Zarrūq truly said, “If anyone experiences any difficulty, says: ‘O Zarrūq’ (*yā Zarrūq*), and calls out to me, I will come to his assistance.” Khān forthrightly responded, “Yes! he did say this, but personally I have never pursued such assistance, for I have always sought help from *al-ghawth al-a‘zam*: our master (*sayyidunā*) Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, because I am a Qādirī and very firm on my distinguished order.”¹¹³ Here we clearly see how Barelvis frequently link their understanding of *ghawthiyyah* and the belief in al-Jīlānī as *al-ghawth al-a‘zam* with the practice of calling upon the *awliyā’*. Again, it must be emphasized that such acts did not originate with Aḥmad Rizā Khān. Rather, as Khān explains in important works like *al-Amn wa ‘l-‘Ulā li Nā‘iti ‘l-Muṣṭafā bi Dāfi ‘l-Balā’*, practices of this variety are part and parcel of the accepted deposit of spiritual tradition handed down by many great mainstream Sunni scholars from generation to generation.¹¹⁴ The Barelvi

¹¹¹ Uvaisī, *Ghauth-i A‘zam*, 6, 9-10. The last statement refers to a polemic often directed at Barelvis today from detractors of the epithet: that none but God should be called “the supreme helper.”

¹¹² For the Barelvi understanding of this spiritual concept, see Muḥammad Ilyās ‘Aṭṭār Qādirī Rizāvī, *Sānp Numā Jinn?* (Karachi: Maktabat al-Madīnah, n.d.), 22. For the Deobandi reading of *taṣarruf*, see Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 173-75.

¹¹³ Khān, *Malfūzāt*, 394-95.

¹¹⁴ To bolster his arguments, Khān often cites from many previous scholars in encyclopedic fashion. As Tareen has noted, “[Khān’s works embody] a normatively sanctioned ‘chain of ontological belonging.’ Indeed, reading any of Khān’s writings feels much like taking a trip through the arcade of tradition. Khān was a master of citation. Almost all his works follow a common discursive pattern: fortifying an argument by overwhelming the reader with a deluge of successive quotations from varied authorities

defence of *istighāthah*, therefore, has a rich history of scholarly support behind it.¹¹⁵ Although it is not the purpose of the present article to look into this history, suffice it to say that such ideas had great acceptance among many Indian Sunni scholars prior to Aḥmad Rizā Khān.¹¹⁶ As for some of the later regional figures whom Deobandis and Barelvis mutually honour—such as Shāh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Dihlavī, Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlavī, Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Dihlavī, and Qāzī Thanā’ Allāh Pānīpatī (d. 1225/1810)—the two groups have often vied with one another over which intellectual tradition legitimately represents the beliefs and practices of such ‘*ulamā*’.¹¹⁷

In summary, then, the Barelvis believe al-Jīlānī to be the most eminent of medieval Sufi shaykhs, a perpetual *ghawth* in a very real

and sources across time, space, and disciplines of knowledge.” Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity*, 254. In *al-Amn wa l-‘Ulā*, for example, Khān quotes from or refers to Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), al-Ṭahāwī (d. 321/933), al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122), al-Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ (d. 544/1149), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), Sharaf al-Dīn al-Būshīrī (d. ca. 696/1297), al-Shaṭṭanawfī, al-Bayḍāwī (d. 719/1319), Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī (d. 855/1453), al-Suyūṭī, al-Qaṣṭallānī, Muḥammad Ghauth Gavāliyyārī (d. 970/1562), ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha’rānī (d. 973/1565), Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Khafājī (d. 1069/1615), ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Dihlavī, al-Zurqānī, Shāh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, Shāh Walī Allāh, Shams al-Dīn al-Ḥafnī (d. 1181/1767), Mirzā Mazhar Jān-i Jānān, Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, Qāzī Thanā’ Allāh Pānīpatī, Khurram ‘Alī Balhūrī (d. 1271/1854 or 1855), Ḥājji Imdād Allāh Muḥājir Makkī, Naqī ‘Alī Khān Barailvī, and Shāh Abū ‘l-Khair ‘Abd Allāh Muḥyī ‘l-Dīn Fārūqī Dihlavī (d. 1341/1923).

¹¹⁵ For Barelvi defenses of *istighāthah* and *istimdād* with the prophets and *awliyā*, see Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Naqshbandī, *al-Istimdād wa l-Tawassul* (Sialkot: n.p., 1957); Faiz Aḥmad Uvaisī, *Tahqīq al-Wasīlah* (Karachi: ‘Aṭṭārī Publishers, 2002); Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn Qādirī, *al-Anwār al-Bahiyyah* (Hyderabad: Majlis-i Ishā‘at al-‘Ulūm, 2015); Aḥmad Rizā Khān, *Nidā-i Rasūl Allāh, ṣallā Allāh ‘alayhi wa sallam* (Lahore: Markazī Majlis-i Rizā, n.d.); Barkat ‘Alī Qādirī, *Istimdād* (Lahore: Ghauthiyyah Kutub Khānah, n.d.). All these works also provide citations from many previous Sunni scholars, both from within and outside South Asia.

¹¹⁶ See Khān, *al-Amn wa l-‘Ulā*, 23-28.

¹¹⁷ For Deobandi criticisms of the Barelvi use of Shāh Walī Allāh and his immediate progeny, see “Barelwī Opponents of Shāh Waliyyullāh Dehlawī Raḥimahullāh,” *Barelwism*, February 13, 2019, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2019/02/13/barelwi-opponents-of-shah-waliyyullah-dehlawi-ra%e1%b8%a5imahullah/>; “Shāh Waliyyullāh Dehlawī: Asking Needs (*Istighāthah*) from the Dead is Impermissible and *Kufr*,” *Barelwism*, February 19, 2019, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2019/02/19/shah-waliyyullah-dehlawi-asking-needs-istighathah-from-the-dead-is-impermissible-and-kufr/>; “Shah ‘Abdul ‘Aziz Dehlawi on *Istighathah*,” *Barelwism*, October 16, 2019, <https://barelwism.wordpress.com/2019/10/16/shah-abdul-aziz-dehlawi-on-istighathah/>. Barelvis, however, maintain that Deobandis are rejectors of the true teachings of Shāh Walī Allāh and his sons. Hence, Barelvi scholars have penned whole works devoted to “cleansing” Shāh Walī Allāh’s legacy from purported Wahhābī and Deobandi distortion. For example, see Faiz Aḥmad Uvaisī, *al-Qawl al-Jalī fī Maslak-i Shāh Walī* (Multan: Maktabah Uvaisiyyah Rizaviyyah, n.d.).

sense—that is to say, one who can be called upon for help at any time on account of God’s having given him this ability—and a *walī* who has been given the knowledge of all that is on the preserved tablet.¹¹⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can see that the phrase *al-ghawth al-a’zam* and other related epithets have enjoyed great currency in the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, the doctrine of the *ghawth* permeated much of the Sunni religious establishment—closely connected as it was with mainstream Sufism—during the late medieval period. Among the numerous revivalist movements that arose in the latter days of British rule in India, neither the Deobandi trend nor the “counter-reformist” traditionalist party of Aḥmad Riḏā Khān eschewed the use of such Sufi terminology. On the contrary, elders of both groups continued to employ it on account of their wider acceptance of much of the medieval Sufi tradition (including the spiritual legacy of the Qādirī order). However, while both groups accept the use of *ghawthiyyah* as both a specific state of *wilāyah* and a symbolic or allegorical term, they strongly differ from one another in the practical application of the epithet in relation to the ubiquitous practice of *istighāthah* or calling on the *awliyā’* for help. While the Deobandis reject all such acts, the Barelvis passionately support them and hence believe *ghawth* (“helper”) to have a very literal meaning as well.¹¹⁹ In the last analysis, whatever differences exist between the two intellectual traditions, the scholars of both persuasions will certainly agree on this most important point: that the “grand shaykh of the Sufis” of late Abbasid Baghdad truly “left no one after him like himself.”¹²⁰

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¹¹⁸ The last of these is known as *‘ilm mā kāna wa mā yakūn*. For more on the Barelvi belief in al-Jīlānī’s extensive knowledge of the unseen, see Khān, *Malfūzāt*, 81-82.

¹¹⁹ The Barelvis (and many Deobandis, including Thānavī) only deem such acts polytheistic if the practitioner believes the righteous souls possess *independent* and *intrinsic* (*dhātī*) power unbestowed by God; for such a belief would amount to deifying that personality and asserting the existence of a self-sufficient source of power outside God. Be that as it may, the key difference between the two groups is that this nuance had little *practical* import for a man like Thānavī, who felt the act of *istighāthah* was “forbidden by consensus” irrespective of how one understood it. According to the Deobandi elder, “calling to [a creature] and seeking his help in the manner of the idolaters—this is *ḥarām* by consensus. As for whether it is manifest *shirk* or not, its criterion is that if he believes in his independence in bringing about an effect, it is *shirk* in creed, of a blasphemous nature. . . . [and otherwise, it is not].” Cited in “Istighathah: Seeking Aid from other than Allah”: translation slightly modified.

¹²⁰ Cited in Malik, *Grey Falcon*, 15.